Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers

2019 – 2026

APRIL 2026

UTS CRICOS 00099F
UTS TEQSA PRV12060
60666 MAR 2026

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all 55 participants of the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers*. For over six years they were generous with their time, and open and thoughtful in sharing their volunteer journey. Special thanks to the participants who gave approval to include important detail and context in their case studies.

Thank you also to members of the project steering committee who provided insight and feedback, and especially to Jake Phelan (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Manager) throughout the project and to Farooq Dar (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Advisor) during Phases One and Two.

About UTS

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Glossary

Alumni network	Formal network of past volunteers with the Australian Volunteers Program, managed by Australian Volunteers International
AVI	Australian Volunteers International
AVP	Australian Volunteers Program, referred to in this document as 'the program' unless quoted by respondents
Career Breakers	One of seven categories of participants delineated in this project based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. *Career Breakers* view a volunteer assignment as an interlude to a career that may be returned to after the volunteer assignment is completed, but which – at the time of accepting the assignment - is not fulfilling the individual's needs (taking a temporary and meaningful hiatus from an ongoing career)
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
COVID	Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). "COVID" is used in this report to refer to all interruptions to the program and participants as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic
Enhancers	One of seven categories of participants delineated in this project based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. *Enhancers* view a volunteer assignment as a means to consciously develop or enhance a career through the acquisition of skills, experiences, opportunities, and/or networks (progressing a career through a meaningful and developmental experience)
HCN	Host country national - A local person from the country that hosted participants' volunteer assignment
ICMT	In-country management team
ICOP	In-country orientation program - A formal information and training program undertaken by participants after their arrival in the host country and prior to commencing their volunteer assignment
Imposed Transitioners	One of seven categories of participants delineated in this project based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. For *Imposed Transitioners*, a volunteer assignment occurs in response to a negative career experience (e.g., labour market conditions) that leads the individual to consider a new profession or context (undertaking a meaningful alternative to domestic work with career possibilities)
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
Launchers	One of seven categories of participants delineated in this project based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. *Launchers* view the assignment as a stepping-stone to launch a career, most commonly in a sector or profession that allows them to express their values, such as international development or humanitarian aid (integrating values into a meaningful career)
LQI	Longitudinal qualitative interviews – An approach to longitudinal data collection that involves a series of interviews on a particular topic or experience. LQIs combine identical questions posed at different times to assess change (e.g., engagement with development issues), as well as questions that target particular experiences as indicators of causality
LSAV	Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
Non-working Partner	One of seven categories of participants delineated in the study based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. The participants from this group accompanied a partner on an international volunteer assignment as an approved accompanying dependant (experiencing a vicarious assignment and adventure)
Participant	A volunteer or non-working partner who participated in any part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26)
PD	Position description – a written description outlining the formal duties and responsibilities of the volunteers' role with the partner organisation
PDB	Pre-departure briefing - A formal information and training seminar provided by the program to all participants in Australia before their deployment to the host country and prior to the commencement of their volunteer assignment
PO	Partner organisation – the organisation in the host country with which volunteers worked during their volunteer assignment
Program	Australian Volunteers Program
Repatriated participant	Participants who were repatriated to Australia due to the COVID pandemic prior to completing their planned assignment
Repeat volunteer	A volunteer who had undertaken one or more international volunteer assignments before and/or after their 2019 assignment
Remote volunteering	An international volunteer role that involves the volunteer providing support for a PO online rather than being based in the host country
SDG	The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals
T1-T5	Time periods 1 to 5, denoting the five interviews conducted with participants at different times across the study's duration: T1 = May to August 2019, prior to or soon after participants commenced their assignment, T2 = September 2019 to April 2020, at the completion of the volunteer assignment, T3 = December 2020 to April 2021, 12 months after the assignment, T4 = March to May 2023, T5 = March to May 2025
Transitioners	One of seven categories of participants delineated in this project based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. *Transitioners* view a volunteer assignment as a pathway to enter a new sector or context, most commonly with an international - rather than domestic – focus (entering a new sector or context that provides meaning)
Veterans	One of seven categories of participants delineated in this project based on the participants' motivations for volunteering and how these intersected with their career. *Veterans* view a volunteer assignment as an opportunity to apply professional expertise accumulated through a long career in order to achieve a positive outcome (applying career expertise toward a meaningful purpose)
VIS	*Volunteer Impact Survey* – a survey, based on interim findings from Phase Two of this study and administered to the program's alumni network in 2024, measuring the views of former volunteers about the personal and professional impacts of their past volunteer assignments
VLJ	Volunteer Learning Journey - A series of structured activities provided by the program that is intended to support volunteers' learning and success during the assignment. It includes pre-departure briefing (PDBs), in-country orientation programs (ICOPs), and other organised events

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

» About the Study

The *Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers* (LSAV) was a six-year study investigating the personal and professional impacts of international volunteering on a cohort of 55 participants who commenced assignments through the Australian Volunteers Program in 2019. Conducted by the University of Technology Sydney, the study tracked participants across five waves of interviews from pre-assignment (T1, 2019) through to five years after their return (T5, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic led to the repatriation of participants in March 2020, meaning most assignments were curtailed rather than completed - a disruption that should be considered when interpreting the study's findings. Nonetheless, it is one of the most sustained longitudinal investigations yet conducted into the impacts of international volunteering on volunteers.

The sample comprised seven volunteer categories, differentiated by their career motivations and circumstances at the time of their assignment: *Launchers*, *Enhancers*, *Transitioners*, *Career Breakers, Imposed Transitioners*, *Veterans*, and *Non-working Partners*. The study examined the program's impacts on four main outcome areas: (i) global literacy and connections; (ii) civic participation and international development literacy; (iii) career progression and professional capabilities; and (iv) personal circumstances and capabilities. These align with the program's stated objectives and with the Australian Government's broader goals for international volunteering.

» Key Findings

Involvement in the program created genuine, deep, and lasting impacts across all four outcome areas. In several cases, these impacts grew in significance rather than diminished after the assignment ended. Importantly, these impacts were not confined to the assignment's official duration or destination. Volunteers' contributions, relationships and learning continued to evolve well after their repatriation, often sustained through cross-border ties and networks that enabled ongoing, two-way exchanges of knowledge, support and civic connection across organisational, geographic and sometimes generational boundaries.

In this, participants' program experiences may be best characterised as transnational rather than international. Volunteers were changed by their host countries as much as they sought to contribute to them. For some, their relationships evolved from professional contacts during the assignment into enduring personal and civic bonds in which the flow of benefits has continued to move in both directions across the study's six-year timeframe.

» 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 not professionally or personally rewarding. Around 90% continue to engage cognitively with the host country, though with declining frequency and depth. This engagement continues, primarily via social media and the ongoing relationships volunteers formed in-country. The study found a mutually reinforcing relationship between participants' host-country connections, their ongoing engagement with the country, and their culture-specific knowledge and capabilities - a 'virtuous cycle' that continues to feed participants' host-country awareness and connections.

Culture-general capabilities (e.g., behavioural flexibility, global mindset) were most easily translatable to new settings after the assignment and became increasingly valued as the study progressed. These were applied regularly across diverse professional and personal settings and grew in prominence relative to culture-specific knowledge over time. Some participants continued to function as active bridge-builders between Australian and host-country networks, facilitating collaborations, knowledge exchanges and civic connections that extend the program's reach beyond its official boundaries.

» Civic Participation and International Development Literacy

The program's most significant civic impact was the quality and direction of participants' voluntary service in the years after their assignment, reshaping it towards more internationally-oriented, skills-based and values-driven forms of contribution. Most participants remained civically engaged at T5, and many had commenced substantive civic roles as members of boards, policy contributors, mentors, or leaders of cross-border projects that drew directly on the capabilities, networks, and perspectives developed through their assignments. Volunteers' informal and discretionary contributions to their former partner organisations - sustained by some for three to four years after repatriation - constitute an enduring informal contribution to the program's development outcomes.

Participants' understanding of international development deepened substantially across the study. Many formed a 'positive realist' outlook: combining genuine appreciation of the value of the program's model of development volunteering with a clear-eyed and nuanced critique of the limits and complexities of development practice. This perspective, combined with their hands-on experiences, makes the program's alumni credible advocates, mentors, and advisers whose insights represent a practical resource for the program's continued improvement.

» Career Progression and Professional Capabilities

Professional development outcomes were the most varied and context-dependent of the four outcome areas. The degree of alignment between volunteers' professional expertise and their assignment role was the clearest predictor of professional benefit. Poor role design, inaccurate position descriptions, and weak partner organisation support were the most commonly cited barriers to participants' professional development and subsequent career impacts.

'Soft' and intercultural capabilities were the most consistent and transferable professional outcomes, and were used by participants across professional sectors, roles and settings in the years following their assignments. Domain-specific knowledge and professional networks were less consistently developed and more limited than many volunteers had anticipated. Most participants with career motivations achieved career benefits, although these were frequently delayed, being achieved only after participants progressed to subsequent roles or other professional experiences rather than immediately after repatriation. For many participants, particularly those who transitioned to new roles or sectors, the most enduring career impact was a clarified sense of professional purpose and direction.

» Personal Circumstances and Capabilities

Personal change was among the deepest and most enduring impacts of the assignment, though often the most unexpected and difficult for participants to articulate. Changes in values, worldview, self-awareness and relational orientation were widely reported and, for some, continued to deepen in the years after the assignment ended. The way that participants described the impacts of these changes indicates a form of 'prosocial spillover' effect, where volunteers directed new values, behaviours and orientations outward towards family, friends, communities and the environment. This suggests that the program's personal impacts may produce a multiplier effect that extends the program's reach beyond its direct participants in ways not currently captured by its monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

» Implications for the Program

A number of practical implications and associated suggestions flow from the analysis of each outcome area. These relate to possible changes the program could make across all three phases of the volunteer lifecycle: pre-assignment, during assignment, and post-assignment.

These changes include giving renewed attention to assignment design and role quality to improve the 'fit' (aligning volunteers' expertise, formal role, and partner organisation readiness). Activities associated with the program's Volunteer Learning Journey, particularly pre-departure briefings and in-country orientation programs, were important catalysts for knowledge and relationships whose value extended beyond the assignment. The study's findings also make clear that the program's impact continues to unfold after volunteers return home, and that structured support, alumni engagement and opportunities for reflection in this period are likely to offer benefits for volunteers and the program.

The study also shows that program alumni represent a valuable resource as bridge-builders, mentors, advocates, and/or program reviewers whose ongoing contributions to development outcomes and to the program's own improvement should continue to be recognised and supported.

The contents of this report rely on the sustained generosity of the 55 participants who volunteered their time, reflections and candour across six years and five rounds of interviews, sometimes under difficult circumstances. They shared experiences that were, for many, among the most consequential of their lives and they did so with an openness and trust that the research team does not take lightly. Not all of them reached the end of the study with us. The complexity and honesty of their stories are the centrepiece of this report.

» Report Structure

The report contains eight sections in four parts:

Part I contains Sections 1 and 2. These provide details of the study's background, objectives and design.

Part II contains Section 3, which introduces some of the high-level and cross-cutting findings of the study.

Part III contains Sections 4-7, which detail the study's findings across the four main outcome areas:

Part IV contains a conclusion and a distillation of the study's main recommendations (Section 8).

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Volunteer Stories

PART I

Study Overview

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This report presents final results of Phase Three of the research project, *Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers* (LSAV). The project was undertaken by a research team at UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney, for the Australian Volunteers Program ('the program').

The report contains four parts:

1. Part I: Study Overview – Outline of the LSAV's background, research aims, and Phase Three methodology.
2. Part II: Volunteers' Overall Experiences – Brief summary of participants' main volunteer experiences and impacts, including those whose experiences were largely negative.
3. Part III: Volunteers' Personal and Professional Changes – Key features of changes in volunteers' personal and professional lives from their participation in the program along four outcome areas: international, civic, professional, and personal.
4. Part IV: Conclusion and Distilled Recommendations – Summary of the main recommendations.

The report's contents build on the findings of Phases One and Two (2019-2021) as reported in:

(i) Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019)

(ii) Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers 2019-2021: Final Report (April 2022)

(iii) Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers 2019-2026: Phase Three Interim Report (July 2024)

Additional information was drawn from published academic studies, internal program evaluations, and consultations with several international researchers and program staff, as well as a variety of policy and program documents relating to the program, including the LSAV Terms of Reference, AVP's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Frameworks and the AVP Global Program Strategy.

1.2 Background and Context

The LSAV was a longitudinal research project that commenced in April 2019. It aimed to **establish in a credible and persuasive way whether, why and how participating in the program influences volunteers personally and professionally in ways that are relevant to the program's objectives.** For the purposes of this research:

- *'Participating in the program'* was defined as all aspects of contact and involvement that volunteers have with the program including pre-departure (e.g., recruitment, selection and preparation), during the assignment, and post-assignment (e.g., support from the program). It included all the volunteers' work and non-work experiences that arose from their involvement with the program.
- '*Personally and professionally'* was defined as all volunteers' work and non-work behaviours, capabilities and attitudes that lead to outcomes relevant to the program's objectives.
- '*Outcomes relevant to the program's objectives'* were those relating to or associated with one or more of the following areas of volunteers' lives as identified in the program's *MEL Framework* and objectives, and articulated in the study's operational framework:[1] (i) global literacy and connections (international), (ii) civic participation and international development literacy (civic), (iii) career progression and professional capabilities (professional), and (iv) personal circumstances and capabilities (personal).

The LSAV's results aim to contribute to the program's objectives that 'Australian volunteers gain professionally and personally' and that 'volunteers (current and returned) promote greater cultural awareness and build stronger connections between partner countries and Australia.' Through this, the study's findings seek to support the program to meet the program's objective that Australians be more globally literate and connected.

The findings of the LSAV address the following key evaluation questions relating to the effectiveness of the program (MEL Framework):

1. What have been the outcomes/results (intended and unintended, positive and negative) of the program for volunteers?
2. To what extent has the program contributed to these outcomes?

2 Research Aims and Design

2.1 Objectives and Research Questions

» Research Objectives (LSAV)

1. To identify the nature of personal and professional changes in participants across the study period that are relevant to the program (i.e., civic, international, professional and personal).
2. To offer explanations for these changes, drawing on participants' experiences with and reflections on the program before, during and after their assignments.
3. To identify ways that the program can improve its interactions with and support for volunteers (and accompanying dependants) across the volunteer lifecycle to increase their personal and professional benefits.

» Research Question (LSAV)

(How and why) does volunteers' participation in the program influence them personally and professionally in ways that are relevant to the program's objectives?

2.2 Research Design

The study's research design was primarily inductive. Data collection centred on interpretive longitudinal qualitative interviews (LQIs) with individual participants across multiple waves at five points in time (T1-T5) between 2019 and 2025 that encompassed phases before, during and after the assignment.[2] Each interview addressed both time-specific factors relating to a particular phase of the participants' involvement with the program, as well as replicated questions relating to experiences and outcomes apposite to the program (e.g., level of civic engagement, career status). Through this, the study provided qualitatively rich descriptions of participants' experiences that allowed changes in attitudes, behaviours and capabilities to be unearthed, and possible explanations for these to be explored through interpretive dialogue with research participants. All procedures were pre-approved by *UTS Human Research Ethics Committee* – HREC-ETH 19-3663 (2019), HREC-ETH 19-4445 (2020), and HREC-ETH 23-7954 (2023).

2.3 Sample Recruitment and Composition

Fifty-five participants were initially recruited from pre-departure briefings (PDBs) in 2019 in accordance with an approved recruitment and engagement strategy.[3] This represented 38% of all volunteers attending the PDBs at which recruitment activities occurred.[4] The approved approach ensured participants' identities were not disclosed to the program or in any publication without their prior approval. It also specified protocols to protect the confidentiality of all data collected during the study.

Strategies were used to encourage a diversity of participants (e.g., age, family status, rurality) and assignments (e.g., host country), and to encourage their retention across multiple waves of data collection.

As **Table 1** shows, 47 participants - 42 volunteers and five approved accompanying dependants (AADs) - provided data at five points in time. This represents a retention rate of 85% across six years.[5]

Table 1: Participant retention (2019-2025)

Number of participants	T1 (2019)		T2 (2020)		T3 (2021)		T4 (2023)		T5 (2025)	
	Total	Gender identity F-M-N	**Total**	Gender identity F-M-N	**Total**	Gender identity F-M-N	**Total**	Gender identity F-M-N	**Total**	Gender identity F-M-N
All participants	**55**	35-19-1	**55**	35-19-1	**54**	35-18-1	**50**	33-16-1	**47**	30-16-1
Volunteers	**50**	32-17-1	**50**	32-17-1	**49**	32-16-1	**45**	30-14-1	**42**	27-14-1
AADs	**5**	3-2-0	**5**	3-2-0	**5**	3-2-0	**5**	3-2-0	**5**	3-2-0

Gender identity: 'F' = Female, 'M' = Male, 'N' = Prefer to self-identify.
AAD = approved accompanying dependant.

The 55 participants at T1 undertook assignments ranging from 61 to 293 days, in 16 countries, hosted by 48 different partner organisations (POs). Features of these assignments and the initial sample's demographic characteristics are detailed in the report, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019).

Figure 1 shows the host countries and PO type of the 47 participants who provided data at all five time periods (T1-T5). Table 2 compares the final and initial samples on select features. Numerous statistical comparisons showed the sample to be broadly representative of recent program volunteers.[6]

Figure 1: Location of participants' volunteer assignments (T5)

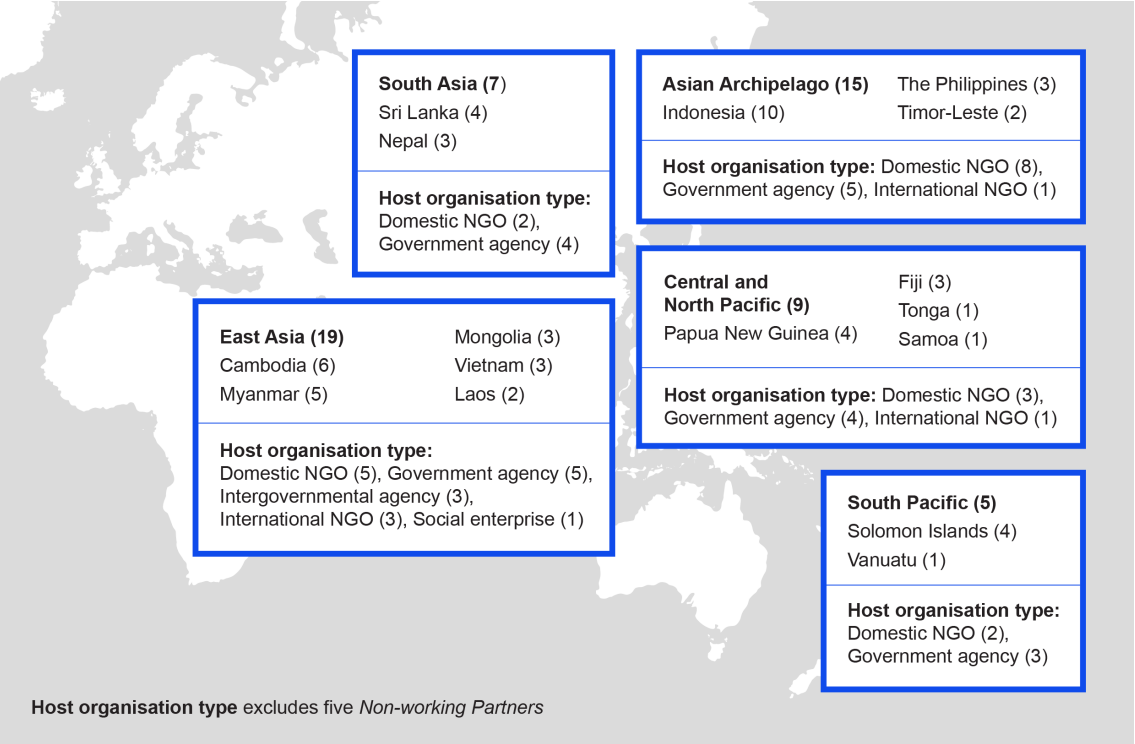


Table 2: Comparison of participants (T1 to T5)

Sample characteristics – number and percentage	Initial sample (T1)	Final sample (T5)	Withdrawing participants
Number of participants	55	47	8
Gender: Number (percentage) female	35 (64%)	33 (70%)	5 (62%)
Age at pre-assignment: Range (mean) in years	22-74 (42.9)	22-74 (43.2)	23-68 (42.6)
Repeat program volunteer: Number (percentage)	29 (53%)	24 (51%)	5 (62%)
Highest education level (post-graduate): Number (percentage)	27 (49%)	23 (49%)	4 (50%)
Disability: Number (percentage)	3 (5%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)

2.3.1 Participants' Motivations for Volunteering

One prominent frame used in the LSAV's analytical procedures is a classification of seven volunteer types based on the way that the volunteering motivations of the study's 55 participants intersected with their careers (career stage and aspirations) at the start of their volunteer assignments (T1).

Table 3 summarises features of the seven volunteer types, arranged from the volunteer type with the youngest mean age (*Launchers*) to oldest (*Veterans* and *Non-working Partners*).[7]

Table 3: Overview of study participants by volunteer 'type'

Volunteer type	Description	n (%) initial sample Participant code**
Launchers 	*Launchers* aimed to use their volunteer assignment as a stepping-stone to commence a career in a sector or profession that allows them to express their values, typically in humanitarian aid and international development (integrating values into a meaningful career).	8 (15%) Bettina, Grace*, Harry*, Keith*, Kevin, Nancy, Petra, Samantha
Enhancers 	*Enhancers* saw their volunteer assignment as a means to consciously develop or enhance a career through the acquisition of skills, experiences, opportunities, and/or networks (progressing a career through a meaningful and developmental experience).	7 (13%) Andrew, Bronwen, Mary, Melissa*, Nick, Norma, Willow
Transitioners 	*Transitioners* viewed their volunteer assignment as a pathway to enter a new sector or context, most commonly with an international rather than domestic focus (entering a new sector or context that provides meaning). Many *Transitioners* used the assignment to 'test' a specific career trajectory, rather than explore possible career options.	12 (22%) Addison, Angela*, Barbara, Christine, Darcy, Dylan, Felicity, Jeffrey, Martha, Olivia, Richard, Stacey
Career Breakers 	For *Career Breakers*, the volunteer assignment was an interlude to a career that they may return to after the assignment is completed, but which – at the time of accepting the assignment - was not fulfilling their needs (taking a temporary and meaningful hiatus from a career).	4 (7%) Beth, Cherie, Rosemary*, Serena
Imposed Transitioners 	*Imposed Transitioners* undertook a volunteer assignment in response to a negative career experience (e.g., redundancy) that led them to consider the assignment as an opportunity to gain experiences in a new profession or context (undertaking a meaningful alternative to domestic work with career possibilities).	7 (13%) Amelia, Barry, Bernard, Catrina, Robin, Susan, Vivienne
Veterans 	Volunteers in this group were undertaking a volunteer assignment as an opportunity to apply professional expertise accumulated through a long career in order to achieve a positive outcome (applying career expertise toward a meaningful purpose).	12 (22%) Brice, Carly, Charlie, Deirdre, Fiona, Gareth, Howard*, Kris, Sarah, Silvio, Wendy*, Willamina
Non-working Partner 	*Non-working Partners* accompanied a partner on the assignment as an approved accompanying dependant. While they attended the program's Volunteer Learning Journey (VLJ) activities, they undertook no structured work or volunteer role (experiencing a vicarious assignment and adventure).	5 (9%) Betty, David, Germaine, Stephanie, William

* The eight participants from T1 who withdrew from the study and so provided partial data are marked with an asterisk. They comprise: 3 x *Launchers*, 1 x *Enhancer*, 1 x *Transitioner*, 1 x *Career Breaker*, 2 x *Veterans*.

** All names are pseudonyms.

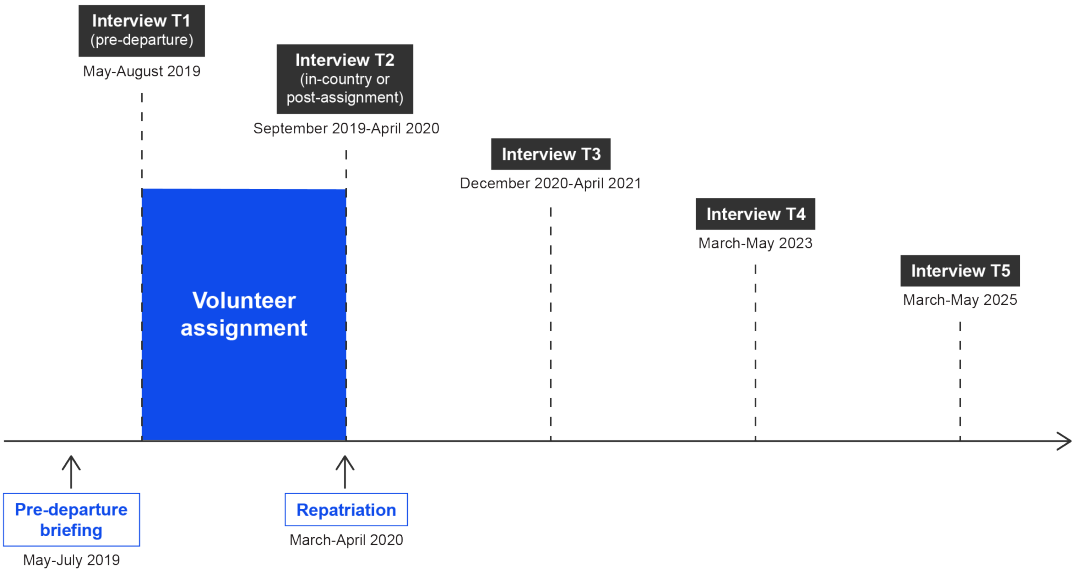
2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

2.4.1 Data Collection

Figure 2 shows the timetable for data collection (2019 to 2025), with interviews at five points across six years and at different stages in the volunteer journey: (i) pre-departure (T1), (ii) at the completion of the volunteer assignment (T2), (iii) one year after the assignment (T3), (iv) three years after the assignment (T4), and (v) five years after the assignment (T5).

T1 interviews were preceded by a brief online survey addressing basic demographic and assignment questions.[8] Participants also consented to their formal volunteer position description (PD) being examined (n = 50). Each wave of interviews was based on a schedule that was approved by the program. **Table 4** summarises key themes of each interview.[9] Prior to being interviewed, participants received information sheets and signed consent forms.

Figure 2: Overview of data collection timeline (2019-2025)



The impact of the COVID pandemic

The global COVID pandemic disrupted some participants' assignments and lives, and thus the way their involvement in the program shaped them personally and professionally. Thirty-eight participants were repatriated prematurely from their assignment in March 2020, leading to a mean reduction in their planned assignment duration of 31%.[1] All participants had their post-assignment experiences impacted by the pandemic to varying degrees. These impacts introduced threats to the reliability and validity of the study's findings that necessitated structural changes to the study's procedures and design.[2] Examples of these impacts included diminished intervention effects due to reduced assignment length, and the potential for the study's main outcome measures to be conflated with other causes, including by the ongoing impact of the pandemic on participants' post-assignment opportunities. For example, international border closures directly affected 15 participants who had extended their current assignments or were in various stages of preparing to commence a follow-up international volunteer assignment or international job. Many participants were forced to relocate to temporary housing for extended periods following repatriation. Almost all those who were professionally active experienced career uncertainty because they had no structured work/income to which to return. A small number also returned to changed family circumstances and/or caring responsibilities.

While most of the threats to the study's reliability from this upheaval could be mitigated to some extent (e.g., by amending interview protocols and timing), they could not be fully negated. For this reason, interpretation of the results must take these atypical factors into account. The potential impacts of COVID conditions on the results were considered during the data collection and analysis that followed the pandemic. Where pertinent, these are noted in the analysis presented in this report.

[1] Across the sample, the forced repatriations led to the average assignment duration being cut by 27% from 317 days (anticipated at T1, as reported by participants) to 230 days at T2 (actual duration, as reported by participants). For just the repatriated participants, this amounted to a reduction in their planned assignment duration of 31% (from 366 days to 251 days).

[2] These changes to the study's design and the basis for each are outlined in the report: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Phase Two Final Report (April 2022) – Section 2.4 and Attachment 6.

Table 4: Summarised interview schedules

Theme	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
Personal details: Demographic and background information including motivations for and expectations of the volunteer assignment	X				
In-country experiences: Anticipated (T1), actual (T2) and reflections on these (T3-T4)	X	X	X	X	X
Current situation, capabilities and attitudes in relation to main study outcomes: Civic, international, professional and personal	X	X	X	X	X
Program contact and support: Contact with program staff and support mechanisms	X	X	X	X	X
Future Plans: Future personal and professional plans (5 years)	X	X	X	X	X
Personal and professional changes: Perceived changes in attitudes, behaviours and capabilities, and the main reasons for these		X	X	X	X
Reflections: Reflections on changes (and impact of program)			X	X	X

2.4.2 Data Management and Analysis

Electronic transcriptions of all interviews were the main empirical materials produced for analysis in the LSAV.[10] Across the study's six years, 280 hours of interviews were conducted, with transcripts totalling 2.42 million words.[11]

A multi-dimensional analytical approach was used that combined longitudinal analysis (comparing changes in individuals and groups across time periods) and cross-sectional analysis (comparing different response patterns between groups based on demographic, professional and assignment characteristics). Detailed descriptions of the analytical procedures at each data collection period are outlined in earlier reports produced in this study. An important feature of the study was the use of interpretative interviews that were structured to encourage participants to identify and reflect on aspects of their experiences before, during and after their volunteer assignment that were most salient to them.

After each interview, the study's participants were provided a summarised draft version of the findings and were invited to provide comment or feedback. This feedback has informed modifications and corrections to each report prepared for this study, including the current report.[12]

The results of Phases One and Two of the study were used to develop the *Volunteer Impact Survey (VIS),* which surveyed alumni volunteers about how their volunteer experiences are influencing different aspects of their current lives (personal and professional). It aimed to support the findings of this study by providing evidence to identify a selection of the residual impacts on alumni volunteers of their experiences volunteering with the program. The VIS was administered by the program in April 2024. Valid responses were received from 432 alumni volunteers who had undertaken 1326 volunteer assignments (868 in-country) totalling 13,000 months of volunteer service. The 2024 VIS sample is broadly representative of the program's volunteer and assignment profiles on indicators available for comparison.[13] Where appropriate, the current report compares the findings of the LSAV study with those in the 2024 VIS.

PART II

Volunteers' Overall Experiences

3 Volunteers' Overall Experiences

This section previews five high-level features of participants' experiences as volunteers:

- Their overall reflections, in 2025, of their 2019-20 volunteer assignment (Section 3.1).
- Their perceptions of the major impacts that the program had on them over this period (Section 3.2).
- Tabulated summaries of the chief changes and outcomes by volunteer category (Section 3.3).
- Features of extreme negative experiences, and what can be learned from these (Section 3.4).
- Broad themes spanning the four outcome areas in Part III (Section 3.5).

3.1 Reflections on the Volunteer Experience

From the vantage point of five years after their volunteer assignment ended, participants' reflections on their involvement with the program are overwhelmingly favourable. Almost all are appreciative of the experience, continue to hold positive feelings towards the program, and view the assignment as worthwhile.

Table 5 shows the five main themes reported by participants and illustrative responses relating to each. These favourable views are counterbalanced by references to challenges experienced during and after the assignment. For some, the abrupt repatriation created a sense of unfinished business, while others expressed mixed feelings about the financial implications of volunteering, structural barriers that limited their ability to make an impact, or isolated negative experiences that coloured their memory of the assignment.[14]

Table 5: Participants' overall reflections on their involvement with the program (T5)

Key themes	Sample response (T5)
» Gratitude for the opportunity provided by the program	• "I left with mixed feelings, mostly grateful that I had the opportunity and a little bit like - what else could I have done to make this better for them in a way? Mostly just grateful for the opportunity, I think, to participate as a volunteer and to have made some kind of positive impact" (#28) • "I feel very privileged and happy that I was able to do these two assignments with the program. I feel very lucky that I could do it" (#40) • "A wonderful impact. Absolutely wonderful. In terms of making a contribution but also in my outlook to life. It makes me realise I'm in such a fortunate position. Probably in the golden age of my life at the moment" (#33) • "I feel incredibly privileged to have had the opportunity to go and volunteer. I should have started younger" (#25)
» The fondness with which they reflect on their time as volunteers	• "I look at it very positively. I look back and I have really fond memories. Maybe I've got rose-coloured glasses on, because there were a lot of difficulties and a lot of challenges and a lot that I didn't understand" (#49) • "I still consider it to be one of the best decisions I've made - in terms of the things I've learned about myself and just the opportunity to volunteer. It's something that I look back on quite fondly" (#11) • "I still remember it as a very fond experience and I suppose potentially a transformative experience. I have very fond memories of my time in […] and I feel like I've benefited greatly from having that experience" (#06)
» The magnitude of impact on them (primarily among young volunteers)	• "It has 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" (#37) • "It was awesome, I loved it. I think it was a massive part of me as a person and I wish it were longer" (#09) • "It's so ingrained now, it's hard to imagine what the alternatives would be. Just because it shaped so much of who I am now, it's hard to imagine what the alternate timeline version of myself would actually be" (#45) • "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" (#08)
» The frequency with which they use or refer to their time as volunteers	• "I think it's still a big chunk of our lives. My life, but also [my partner's] life and our time together. It's something we still look back on fondly. Every once a week or so, there'll be some small reference to it in what we're doing" (#12) • "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" (#23)
» The enjoyment of the experience	• "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" (#26) • "It's still something that's really close to my heart. And I can't believe it's been that long. I certainly miss it all the time" (#08) • "I'm a firm believer that life is about the sum of your experiences. It was a fantastic experience. I loved it. I was so disappointed when I had to come home" (#36)

3.2 Perceptions of Main Impacts and Changes

Most participants see their assignment as a strong reference point in their life story, although the extent differs by life stage and by their initial motivations for volunteering.

Table 6 shows the outcome area that the 47 participants at T5 identified as the main impact of their volunteer assignment on them, presented by category of volunteer.[15] The table shows that the most regularly reported impacts, and most evenly dispersed across volunteer category, are international (comprising 44% of the major impacts participants identified and reported by over half the sample),[16] and personal (26%). The T5 results are generally consistent with earlier time periods.[17]

Table 6: Main impact of the volunteer assignment by volunteer category and outcome area (T5)

Category (n, % sample)	International	Civic	Professional	Personal	Total (% total)
Launchers (5, 11%)	2	-	3	2	7 (13%)
Enhancers (6, 13%)	2	-	5	-	7 (13%)
Transitioners (11, 23%)	5	1	3	3	12 (22%)
Career Breakers (3, 6%)	1	-	-	3	4 (7%)
Imposed Transitioners (7, 15%)	4	-	2	2	8 (15%)
Veterans (10, 21%)	7	2	-	2	11 (20%)
Non-working Partners (5, 11%)	3	-	-	2	5 (9%)
Total	**24 (44%)**	**3 (6%)**	**13 (24%)**	**14 (26%)**	**54 (100%)**

Seven of the 47 participants identified multiple 'main impacts'; these responses have been double-counted in the table, resulting in 54 'main impacts' being recorded.

» Key Features of Participants' Descriptions of Main Impacts and Changes

1. For some outcomes, the assignment's impacts have persisted, but the nature of these has changed across the study's duration. For instance, some of the most specific and tangible elements in the early aftermath – notably host-country language use, regular host-country contact, strong engagement with international development issues (T2-T3) – have tended to fade when these are not reinforced (T4-T5). In contrast, other impacts like culture-general knowledge have persisted and, in many cases, intensified, a finding highlighted in Section 4.4.
2. The most consistently reported long-run impacts are to participants' personal outlook: a broadened global worldview, greater self-efficacy (confidence, independence, resilience), and stronger clarity about what meaningful work and contribution look like in practice. These impacts have strengthened for some participants in the years since their assignment ended.
3. Professional benefits for some participants are real, especially via greater confidence and the ability to use advanced 'soft' skills in subsequent work and civic activities. The assignment clearly shaped the professional direction or capabilities of many volunteers (especially younger volunteers who articulated clear professional goals at T1). It did not, however, reliably translate into secure career gains, particularly where domestic labour-market conditions, institutional recognition, and COVID disruptions constrained post-assignment professional opportunities (Section 6.2.2).
4. On the one hand, the assignment appears to have expanded what participants imagined possible for their futures, most commonly among early- and mid-career groups, in terms of what they could envisage doing professionally and civically (e.g., career sector or role transitions, international roles, further volunteering). On the other hand, the feasibility of some possible futures narrowed over time, diluted by COVID and by the emergence of new life commitments or priorities (caregiving, parenting, health, finances, and workload intensity).
5. At different times throughout the study, participants offered their views about the benefits of regularly discussing their volunteer experiences as part of this study, which provided structured spaces for them to feel heard and validated, make sense of their experiences, and reinterpret particular incidents or outcomes. These impacts are discussed further in Section 7.3.1.
6. These patterns are expanded in Section 3.3, which summarises the chief impacts reported by each category of participant relating to the study's four main outcome areas in **Table 7 (panels 1-7) on pages 21-27**, and in **Part III (pages 30-126)**, which addresses each outcome area separately.

3.3 Main Impacts by Volunteer Category

Table 7 (Panel 1): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Launchers)

Launchers: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Launchers

A stepping-stone to launch a career
(*integrating values into a meaningful career*)

- All *Launchers* viewed their experiences with the program as strongly favourable with positive lasting impacts, despite some having experiences that differed from their expectations prior to entering the program.
- The major impacts for *Launchers* were professional and international, with outcomes like improved personal and professional confidence, career specialisation and advancement, and changed worldview reported by more than half the group. Contributors to these changes included the opportunity to live and work in a challenging environment, relationships with professional contacts (including other volunteers), and hands-on exposure to development work. COVID repatriations had a major short-term impact and contributed to some *Launchers* pursuing different career paths than originally intended.
- *Launchers* identified other volunteers and PO colleagues as the stakeholder groups with whom they had maintained the strongest lasting relationships. These relationships were mainly personal, although most were from within participants' professional field and most *Launchers* were aware of potential professional benefits from these relationships.
- Most have been able to benefit directly and professionally from their volunteer assignment. The main factors limiting this were poor assignment-role fit - in particular, volunteer roles that did not provide opportunities to use and develop their professional expertise, and PO contexts unable to support this.
- *Launchers* had the strongest and clearest career ambitions at T1 and accrued some of the largest career benefits across the study - including in job applications and interviews, and through knowledge and capabilities applied in current work. Their careers continue to benefit from professional networks established during their assignment.
- *Launchers* were more likely than other groups to report the assignment contributing to 'domain-specific knowledge and capabilities', mainly associated with gains in international development literacy. Increased 'professional confidence' was a significant and consistent career outcome. 'Role performance and management capabilities', and 'culture-general capabilities' (particularly behavioural flexibility and global mindset) were the professional skills they reported using most regularly in their current work.
- *Launchers* were quicker than most groups to find employment after repatriation (an average of 4 months) and were among the groups most likely to have achieved a successful transition into internationally-oriented or prosocial roles by T5.
- Civic participation among *Launchers* declined in quantity from T1 to T5, but shifted markedly in quality - towards skilled, internationally-oriented and values-driven forms of service. Those who do volunteer show one of the strongest shifts from unskilled to skilled voluntary service of any group. Most remained open to a future international volunteer assignment.
- *Launchers* generally sustained higher levels of host-country engagement and contact than most groups, with ongoing connections most commonly maintained through professional networks and social media. Culture-general capabilities developed during the assignment were regularly applied in their current work and personal lives.

Table 7 (Panel 2): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Enhancers)

Enhancers: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Enhancers

Consciously developing or enhancing a career

(progressing a career through a meaningful and developmental experience)

- All but one *Enhancer* reported strongly favourable experiences with the program. The main impacts were professionally oriented, including career direction and progression, being better equipped to apply professional skills across a range of contexts, and enhanced interpersonal and soft professional skills. Being able to see the impacts of their work, taking on new and challenging roles, and being exposed to a range of stakeholders were common contributors to these professional benefits.
- As with *Launchers*, the main limitations on *Enhancers* benefiting more from the assignment were associated with the volunteer role and PO context - in particular, roles lacking challenge, inaccurate position descriptions and/or limited opportunities to use and develop professional skills.
- *Enhancers* was the category that appeared to benefit most from relationships formed during the assignment. They reported lasting impacts from a variety of stakeholder groups, with the strongest coming from other volunteers and from expatriates and HCNs met outside the workplace. A majority maintained continuing professional relationships with these contacts after their assignment.
- *Enhancers* reported strong positive professional benefits across a variety of PO sizes and types, from small highly localised domestic NGOs to large multicultural intergovernmental agencies - suggesting that professional development was not contingent on a particular organisational context.
- Most *Enhancers* established career pathways by T5 that provided meaning and built on both their pre-assignment career interests and their in-country experiences. Several experienced career or personal turning points as a direct result of their time on the program, and as a group they experienced some of the strongest positive career impacts of any category.
- Across multiple subsequent years and roles, *Enhancers* continue to benefit from knowledge and capabilities developed during their assignment. This includes using these capabilities in job applications, interviews and their current work. Their assignments were most impactful on ‘intercultural capabilities’ and 'role performance and management capabilities', alongside strong ‘domain-specific knowledge’ gains (primarily in international development) and ‘professional confidence’. Culture-general capabilities, particularly behavioural flexibility, were the skills they reported applying most regularly across professional settings.
- *Enhancers* were more likely than most groups to report improved professional confidence. They remained the group most consistently engaged with international development issues - exceeding even *Launchers* at the latest wave (T5).
- *Enhancers* also showed higher levels of ongoing engagement with their former PO and host country than most groups, and retained above-average contact with HCNs. They were more likely than most groups to be using the host-country language at T5, primarily in professional contexts including follow-up volunteer assignments in countries with a closely related language.
- The sense of meaning arising from what was achieved during and after the assignment was a major personal impact for several *Enhancers*, alongside strong culture-general awareness that has shaped how they relate to others and to communities in domestic and international settings.

Table 7 (Panel 3): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Transitioners)

Transitioners: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Transitioners

Seeking to transition to a new work sector or context

(entering a new sector or context that provides meaning)

- *Transitioners* was the category reporting the largest diversity of overall experiences and the largest proportion of mixed outcomes. Both participants whose assignments led to primarily negative experiences were *Transitioners* (Section 3.4).
- Most *Transitioners* reported favourable overall experiences, and several described their volunteer assignment as a life highlight. However, *Transitioners* experienced challenging repatriations at higher rates than most groups, and their overall assessment of the program has typically been less uniformly positive than other categories.
- COVID repatriations had a major impact on *Transitioners'* capacity to benefit professionally from their assignment, despite the majority entering the program with strong career-related objectives. They generally held the strongest international career orientations at T1; by T5, just one had returned to work overseas as a volunteer, though several others had secured domestic roles with strong international foci across government, corporate and not-for-profit organisations.
- *Transitioners'* main impacts were most commonly international or personal, with 'culture-general capabilities' - such as correcting prior biases, challenging preconceptions, and developing a more empathetic worldview - reported by more than half the category. Deep cultural immersion through living and working in a foreign culture was the primary contributor to these changes.
- The most valued professional development that the assignment provided for *Transitioners* stemmed from 'culture-general capabilities' and 'role performance and management capabilities'. These are also the capabilities they use most regularly in current work, most of which is domestic.
- Career benefits for *Transitioners* took longer to materialise than for most groups. They had the second longest average time to employment after repatriation (behind *Imposed Transitioners*) and showed the weakest career outcomes in the early post-COVID period. However, they demonstrated the strongest improvement between T4 and T5, and by T5 their career benefits appeared broadly comparable to those of other career-oriented groups.
- *Transitioners* found that the benefits of their volunteer experience in job applications and through professional networks established during the assignment grew over time. The group has also seen a substantial rise in the numbers achieving a prosocial career transition since the early post-assignment years, consistent with the delayed but genuine career value that characterises this group's outcomes.
- For *Transitioners* with mixed or unfavourable overall impacts, positive personal relationships were offset by limitations associated with the PO, the nature of the volunteer role, or program management and support. For the two *Transitioners* with the most negative experiences overall, the assignment left lasting professional and personal consequences that extended well beyond the assignment itself (Section 3.4).
- Civic participation among *Transitioners* was relatively low at T5 and showed a general decline from T1 to T5, although a shift towards internationally-oriented civic engagement is apparent - most notably through sustaining ongoing support for former POs. Several *Transitioners* abandoned, at least temporarily, their earlier interest in working in international development: engagement with international development issues declined for this subgroup.
- A clarified sense of professional purpose and direction has been one of the most enduring career impacts for several *Transitioners*, particularly those who subsequently transitioned to new roles or sectors. For this subgroup, the assignment's value was often not immediate and became clearer only in the context of subsequent roles and life experiences.

Table 7 (Panel 4): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Career Breakers)

Career Breakers: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Career Breakers

An interlude to a career that is not fulfilling professional needs

(a temporary and meaningful hiatus from a career)

- The experiences of the *Career Breakers* were mixed but generally favourable. All viewed their time with the program positively in retrospect, taking pride in how they coped and what they were able to achieve despite challenging circumstances.
- Although all *Career Breakers* entered the program with some interest in exploring professional and career opportunities (T1), COVID repatriations meant that all returned to secure work with prior employers, limiting the career experimentation that some had hoped the assignment would enable.
- All *Career Breakers* worked in strongly localised POs, and for two of them the assignment and PO conditions were especially challenging. This shaped the nature of their learning, which centred more on personal and cultural dimensions than professional ones.
- *Career Breakers'* main overall impacts were personal, with multiple participants attributing changes to their self-awareness, cultural values and personal outlook. These changes stemmed from the assignment's cultural novelty, challenge, and the meaning and inspiration drawn from the volunteer experience. Professional confidence improved during the assignment but was not strongly sustained in post-assignment workplaces, where the improvements were not always recognised or reinforced.
- The professional impacts of the volunteer assignment for *Career Breakers* were valued but relatively modest. Professional development centred mainly on 'culture-general capabilities' and 'role performance and management capabilities' - and these were the outcomes they used most often in their workplaces, including in domestic contexts that were not overtly international. *Career Breakers*, like some other groups, were able to transfer improved cross-cultural acumen successfully to domestic work settings.
- A distinctive feature of *Career Breakers* at T5 is the stability of their career pathways: all three re-connected with prior employers following repatriation and have since followed comparatively traditional career trajectories, with less variability than most other groups. Two still working with the same pre-assignment employer reported higher professional satisfaction at T5 than at T1, which they attribute in part to the assignment.
- Colleagues from the PO were the stakeholder group that had the strongest lasting impact on *Career Breakers* - either from ongoing professional and personal relationships, or from the transformational effect of working with and observing different cultural practices.
- *Career Breakers* retain relatively high levels of contact with their former PO, although this support has declined since the early post-assignment period. Their civic participation shifted somewhat away from international development after their assignment. They increased their overall voluntary service more than most groups between T1 and T5, yet were less likely than most to express ongoing interest in remote or in-country volunteer assignments. Engagement with international development issues has declined since repatriation, suggesting the assignment was a personally transformative but professionally limited experience.

Table 7 (Panel 5): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Imposed Transitioners)

Imposed Transitioners: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Imposed Transitioners

Responding to a negative career experience

(a meaningful alternative to domestic work with career possibilities)

- All seven *Imposed Transitioners* reported overall favourable experiences with the program, and most viewed their time as volunteers as having had a significant and positive impact on their lives - a notable outcome given that many entered the program from less favourable professional circumstances than other groups.
- While the impacts reported by *Imposed Transitioners* were less transformational than those of younger groups (especially *Launchers* and *Enhancers*), most focused on international and personal outcomes: awareness of and interest in other cultures and different ways of living, awareness of inequality and privilege, and soft capabilities like resilience, relationship-building and communication. These stemmed primarily from deep immersion in the host culture and close working relationships with host-country colleagues.
- *Imposed Transitioners* expressed genuine gratitude for the experience and took pride in their achievements during their assignment. Most now view the program as a positive turning point, even where their original career objectives were disrupted by COVID repatriations.
- While most have established meaningful post-assignment careers, the direction of these was strongly constrained by COVID. Several had begun forming internationally-oriented career pathways during their assignments, only to have these interrupted by their enforced repatriation.
- *Imposed Transitioners* took longer to find employment after repatriation than all other groups (mean: 8 months), reflecting both the career transition context in which many entered the program and the additional disruption of COVID. Overall, they have achieved fewer favourable career outcomes than other career-oriented groups.
- Notwithstanding this, most *Imposed Transitioners* benefited professionally from their volunteer experience through developing new competencies and improved confidence. Enhanced 'culture-general capabilities' - particularly intercultural competence and behavioural flexibility - were consistently reported across the study and were among the capabilities this group used most regularly in their work. 'Domain-specific knowledge' also improved for several, particularly those whose assignments were well-matched to their professional backgrounds.
- *Imposed Transitioners* who achieved a prosocial career transition were those whose role was well aligned with their expertise. A relatively large proportion were seeking a prosocial career transition at T1. Most had achieved it by T3, and the majority continued to find meaning and purpose in their current work at T5.
- *Imposed Transitioners* were among the groups most likely at T5 to be continuing to use the host-country language across professional, civic and social settings (second only to *Enhancers*) reflecting the deeper immersion in the host culture that many experienced and the ongoing connections they maintained with the host country and its diaspora.
- Interest in future international volunteer assignments among *Imposed Transitioners* has grown since the early post-assignment period, when challenging repatriations made many reluctant to consider returning. Most expressed openness to a future assignment at T5, reflecting greater stability - professionally and personally - than in the early post-assignment period.
- A clarified sense of professional purpose and values was a significant and enduring outcome for several *Imposed Transitioners*, particularly those who wanted to use the assignment to consolidate a shift towards more values-driven work. For this subgroup, the assignment functioned as a valuable catalyst for identity and direction.

Table 7 (Panel 6): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Veterans)

Veterans: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Veterans

Applying professional expertise to achieve a positive outcome
(applying career expertise toward a meaningful purpose)

- *Veterans* consistently reported favourable overall experiences with the program. Most felt fortunate to have had the experience, held fond memories, and regarded their assignment as an important and meaningful chapter in their life.
- All *Veterans* have undertaken further voluntary work since their assignment. Several completed subsequent in-country international volunteer assignments and two completed multiple subsequent assignments. A sense of not having finished what they started, due to COVID repatriations, was a commonly expressed motivation for this at T3-T5.
- *Veterans'* subsequent volunteer assignments were not all favourable. In some cases, these altered their views about development volunteering and the program. Health issues, some associated with ageing, prevented some from accepting assignments they would otherwise have pursued.
- The overall impact of the assignment on *Veterans* was smaller than impacts reported by other categories. They associated their major changes most strongly with the experience of living and working in a foreign culture - particularly 'culture-specific knowledge and capabilities' and 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities.'
- Despite the ongoing involvement of many *Veterans* in development volunteering, their engagement with international development issues and contact with their volunteer peers declined following the early post-assignment period. *Veterans'* contact with former POs also dropped substantially in the period T2 to T5, although local PO colleagues remained the stakeholder group that made the strongest lasting personal impact on them.
- *Veterans* underwent the sharpest decline of any group in host-country engagement and HCN contact since the mid-point of the study. This likely reflected the large uptake by *Veterans* of subsequent assignments in different host countries and with new POs - a pattern that appears to redirect rather than diminish their international engagement.
- The friendships, sense of meaning and personal satisfaction, and intercultural awareness gained through the assignment constitute the biggest impacts reported by *Veterans* across the study. Professional impacts were weaker than for most other groups, consistent with *Veterans* entering the program primarily with personal and altruistic rather than career-related motivations.
- 'Culture-general capabilities' - particularly global mindset - were the proficiencies *Veterans* regarded as most useful in their ongoing paid and voluntary work. While much of their earlier reported learning was culture-specific, culture-general capabilities grew in relative importance at T5, consistent with the broader pattern across the full sample.
- *Veterans* were more enthusiastic than most groups about future volunteer assignments at T5, although considerations such as health and the proposed duration of assignments remained relevant. Their sustained commitment to volunteering across multiple assignments and settings points to a deep and lasting civic identity that the program has reinforced.

Table 7 (Panel 7): Key features of changes and learning outcomes (Non-working Partners)

Non-working Partners: Key features of changes and learning outcomes

Non-working Partners

Accompanying a partner on an international volunteer assignment
(experiencing a vicarious assignment and adventure)

- All five *Non-working Partners* reported generally favourable, though not strongly transformative, consequences of their time in-country and experiences with the program. All felt included in volunteer activities, appreciated the support provided by the program, and spoke favourably about it.
- The major impacts reported by *Non-working Partners* were international and personal - most commonly increased understanding of and comfort with other cultures, greater awareness of global inequality, and a broadened worldview. These stemmed primarily from extended immersion in a new cultural environment rather than from formal work or professional roles.
- It was other volunteers, rather than expatriates or HCNs, who left the strongest impact on *Non-working Partners'* lives. Several have maintained continuing personal relationships with other like-minded volunteers from a variety of age groups. Some of these friendships are now global in scope, with some Non-working Partners travelling abroad to visit volunteers they met through the program.
- *Non-working Partners* have been the least strongly affected by their experiences with the program of any group. Professional development and use of capabilities developed in-country - primarily 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities' - have been relatively modest compared to other groups.
- *Non-working Partners* were more likely than most groups to have discontinued lifestyle changes that were initially prompted by their in-country experiences. Their civic participation has not been substantially reshaped by the program, and interest in formal international volunteer assignments remains low at T5. Collectively, these patterns suggest a general return to pre-assignment routines for most in this group, although the personal and relational gains from the experience are valued.
- *Non-working Partners* had lower levels of ongoing interpersonal relationships with HCNs, other volunteers and expatriates than most other groups at T5. Some - and in some cases their volunteer partners - identified a strengthened relationship with their partner as an important, and for one participant, the primary outcome of the assignment. For others, exposure to a novel cultural setting provided the impetus for the most significant changes, relating to cultural awareness and a broadened outlook.
- Those *Non-working Partners* who have entered or returned to paid work since their assignment reported some benefits from their time in-country, including from civic participation and networks formed while abroad. However, for most, the assignment's professional legacy was limited, and the program's primary value for this group appears to have been personal, relational and broadly enriching rather than professionally formative.
- The 'culture-general capabilities' developed during the assignment - particularly a more empathetic and open outlook on cultural difference - represent the most transferable and sustained outcome for this group, and several reported drawing on these in domestic settings, community life, and personal relationships, even though professional application has been limited.

3.4 Insights from Volunteers' Extreme Negative Experiences

All 47 participants reported some favourable personal or professional outcomes from their assignments at T5. Nonetheless, for several volunteers, parts of the experience fell below expectations. For some, their main purpose for volunteering was left unfilled due to issues they attribute, in part, to structural features of the program (primarily assignment design and in-country support). Others felt that the assignment, while generally positive, set them back financially, professionally or personally. The COVID pandemic's impacts on work opportunities in 2020-2022 amplified many of these effects. Others had 'critical incidents' in-country or following their assignments where they believed poor program oversight, planning, or care left lasting negative impacts.

The experiences of two volunteers – **Addison and Dylan, summarised in the box below** – stand out because their program experiences have left counterproductive impacts that were severe and long-lasting. While their circumstances have improved greatly over the past two years, their experiences, and those of other volunteers, offer important insights into what produces counterproductive (rather than simply neutral or 'less-than-expected') outcomes. Both Addison and Dylan describe what may best be termed a **psychological contract breach**,[18] with the program not fulfilling unwritten expectations about their assignment and the support they would receive during or after it.

The cases, while extreme among participants in this study, underline that the most damaging impacts on volunteers may not stem from difficult roles or hardship locations, but assignments where volunteers perceive: (i) low levels of legitimacy in their roles (being present without meaningful participation), (ii) over-promised and unrealistic work expectations, and/or (iii) insufficient duty-of-care during and after their assignments. Both Dylan and Addison were left feeling that the program prioritised appearance over meaningful engagement, and when the system failed, they were inadequately supported through the consequences.

Volunteer stories: Addison and Dylan - Different experiences with similar underpinnings

Addison and **Dylan** offer two similar yet distinct accounts of what can go wrong when volunteers enter assignments expecting meaningful, developmental work and experience a system that they perceived prioritised appearance over substance. Both *Transitioners*, they entered the program on the understanding that opportunities would be available for them to contribute skills that would assist their PO, that they would learn professionally, and that they would be supported through demanding transitions into and out of the assignment. Yet both came to believe the program normalised situations in which volunteers were present but not able to do legitimate work and that they received limited support when their assignment was faltering.

For **Addison**, the most harmful element was a belief that the PO employed them "*for show*" and not as a legitimate workplace participant (T5). Addison described persistent underutilisation and lack of meaningful work as demoralising ("*to be doing something full-time but to feel like we're not really contributing to anything*", T5) and interpreted this as part of a wider pattern of "*tacit acceptance*" within the program that some volunteers will not be substantively engaged (T5). Addison also experienced a sustained sense of exclusion and purposelessness that undermined their mental health and later contributed to a difficult return, where they felt "*cast adrift at the end of it*" (T5). Crucially, Addison felt unsupported when raising these and other issues with the in-country manager. These experiences can be contrasted sharply with Addison's "*high hopes about going in*" and desire to contribute and learn about work relating to a social cause that they felt strongly about ("*that's what drew me to the role*", T5).

For **Dylan**, the central grievance was not workplace exclusion but a broader critique of "*smoke and mirrors*" international volunteering, which he characterised as tokens of diplomacy ("*you're a token of Australia's international presence … they don't really care what you get up to*", T5). While Dylan initially found his assignment motivating and full of professional opportunities (T2), he has come to view its objectives as "*vague, ambiguous*" and not feasible within local constraints and short timeframes (T5). Like Addison, Dylan still values the human connections he formed, but reports that his professional development outcomes were minimal, and that the deepest negative impact came at the point when the psychological breach became most personally consequential: the program's weak attempts at repair - restoring trust and support - after the COVID crisis ("*the whole trauma of the repatriation … [it's taken] a fair few psychology sessions to get through that*", T5).

Notwithstanding these negative outcomes, both Addison's and Dylan's volunteer assignments were "*mixed bags*" (Addison, T5), with new and valued friendships and cultural exposure adding greatly to their lives. Their experiences make clear that the program's relational and cultural benefits can coexist with severe negative outcomes when expectations, inclusion and support systems fail. Nonetheless, neither Addison nor Dylan view their experiences as atypical. At multiple interviews, both commented that other volunteers they knew shared similar grievances, albeit in less extreme forms, suggesting the effects were not isolated. Both experienced mental health challenges which they attribute to their time as volunteers and which persisted for several years post-return (T2-T5). Although both are now employed and their health has improved greatly, they remain sceptical about the value of development volunteering and the effectiveness of Australia's international development efforts. Neither retains strong connections with their former PO or with the program.

Although every participant's volunteer journey was unique, **Table 8** distils four insights that can be gleaned from the main negative experiences that were reported by participants of the study, including Addison and Dylan.

Table 8: What can be learned from participants' negative experiences

Consideration	Notes
» Being well utilised and productive are important parts of the volunteer experience	• Addison was not alone in feeling under-utilised, and Dylan and Addison were not alone in believing that, for some assignments, development contributions from volunteers are not always expected or valued by the program and PO.
» Benefits are contingent on the partner organisation's commitment	• Despite speaking the host-country language fluently, Addison felt systematically excluded, concluding that the PO simply "*didn't have the intention … to work with me or include me*" (T5). Other participants reported similar experiences of believing that they were not fully involved or that colleagues did not understand or support their roles.
» Support from the program during crisis experiences must be genuine and followed up	• Addison raised concerns with both the PO and in-country management team during the assignment but believed that these were not taken seriously. Other participants had direct or vicarious experiences of crime, conflict or stress that they raised with the program and which they believed were not responded to genuinely or followed up appropriately. According to participants, the most supportive interactions were those when program staff were authentic and proactive.[19]
» Monitoring for mental and physical health impacts should continue for volunteers	• This applies particularly to unusual assignment circumstances, like the cohort in this study who were repatriated suddenly.[20] However, it may be equally relevant to other participants whose assignments are not marked by major crises, but who experience extreme forms of isolation, challenge or difficulties during the assignment.
» Volunteers' negative experiences can cloud how they feel about the program, the host country, and the personal and professional benefits of their assignment	• While Addison and Dylan have drawn on (and taken advantage of) positive features of their assignments, both acknowledged that the personal benefits of the assignment have been diluted and that their attitudes towards the assignment, the program, and even the host country have been diminished because of their experiences.

3.5 Insights from the Study's Cross-cutting Themes

Before turning to the study's core findings in Part III (Sections 4-7), four themes are worth identifying that recur across all outcome areas and that help frame the findings that follow.

1. **The importance of time.** Across every outcome area, the study found that important impacts became more, not less, visible and valuable over the study period. Professional benefits that were uncertain or not recognised soon after repatriation became clearer as volunteers found contexts in which to apply these.[21] Personal changes that were initially difficult to articulate were later described with greater clarity and conviction at T5.[22] Cultural capabilities that seemed to be culture- and assignment-specific proved, over time, to be among the most transferable and valued personal and professional outcomes.[23] This temporal pattern has direct implications for how the program's impacts are recognised, measured and communicated.
2. **The unevenness of many outcomes.** While the overall picture of volunteers' personal and professional development is positive, outcomes varied greatly by volunteer type, by assignment conditions, by career stage, and by the post-assignment contexts to which volunteers returned.[24] The same program produced transformational experiences for some and limited or mixed experiences for others, often for reasons that were structural rather than personal.[25] Understanding this variation and its causes may be as important as the overall picture.
3. **The transnational character of the international volunteering experience.** The volunteer assignments documented here did not end at repatriation. Relationships, capabilities and civic commitments formed during the assignment continued to develop and generate value in the years that followed, flowing across borders and into diverse civic and professional contexts.[26] Volunteers were changed by their host countries as much as they sought to contribute to them,[27] and many continued to contribute to host-country communities, POs, and individuals they met during their assignment long after their formal role had ended.[28] This pattern, evident across all four outcome domains, suggests that the program's impact has strong transnational, not just international, features.
4. **The importance of alignment.** Although this study did not examine the impacts of participants' assignments on host communities and POs, across multiple outcome areas, the conditions most strongly associated with positive outcomes for volunteers (e.g., immersive placements, close collaboration with HCNs, well-designed roles, and sustained post-assignment engagement) are consistent with conditions associated with positive outcomes for POs.[29] The findings suggest that volunteers' personal and professional developmental interests and the program's primary development objectives are complementary - efforts to improve volunteer outcomes are likely to support, rather than compete with, the program's development objectives.[30]

PART III

Volunteers' Personal and Professional Changes

Section 4

Global Literacy and Connections

- The program creates authentic, lasting engagement with host countries. Nearly all participants retain strong positive feelings towards the host country and its people five years after their assignment, an outcome that remained stable across the study, even among those whose assignment was not personally or professionally rewarding.
- Around 90% continue to cognitively engage with their former host country, although for most the regularity and intensity have qualitatively diminished. Engagement is most likely to persist when professional collaborations, repeat assignments, or shared networks are present; otherwise, it declines and becomes sporadic, prompted by news or significant events.
- Most participants are more globally connected after their assignment than before it, although the strength and diversity of these networks vary by volunteer and assignment features. Large numbers retain meaningful connections with host-country nationals (HCNs), expatriates and, most extensively, other volunteers, each serving different functions and carrying different benefits.
- The strongest, most lasting, and most beneficial volunteer-HCN bonds occurred with PO colleagues with whom participants worked closely and intensively. Some of these relationships evolved from bridging to bonding ties and were among the most impactful of the assignment.
- A mutually reinforcing relationship exists between volunteers' ongoing host-country connections, host-country engagement, and their ‘culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.’ Supporting this cycle after the assignment ends benefits volunteers' ongoing learning and engagement, and has value beyond the assignment itself.
- Social media has become the primary medium through which participants sustain host-country engagement and connections, functioning to maintain weak ties. It is used to inform, connect, advocate, and coordinate, but does not replace the depth of exchange fostered in-country.
- Some volunteers continue to function as active bridge-builders between Australian and host-country networks by facilitating collaborations, knowledge exchanges, and civic connections that extend the program's impact and create benefits for volunteers and the program.
- ‘Culture-general capabilities’ have proven to be the most translatable and increasingly valued cross-cultural outcomes of the assignments. These are now regularly applied across diverse professional and personal settings, and their importance to participants has risen over time.
- The assignment conditions most strongly associated with deep volunteer-HCN relationships and culture-general capability development - immersive placements, close HCN collaboration and unstructured intercultural contact - are likely to create the most significant learning and development opportunities for HCNs and PO staff, suggesting mutual benefits from efforts to support volunteers' global literacy.
- The main implications for the program are discussed on pages 48-49.

4 Global Literacy and Connections

4.1 Overview and Background

This section deals with the program's objectives that 'volunteers (current and returned) promote greater cultural awareness and build stronger connections between partner countries and Australia', and the program's objective to foster globally literate and connected Australians. It reports on the impact of involvement in the program on participants':

1. **Host-country engagement** (Section 4.2) as evident through behaviours like monitoring media, viewing content, conducting or planning return visits, informing themselves about host-country issues, and advocating for or promoting the host country (cognitive engagement), and their positive feelings towards the host country (emotional engagement).
2. **Global connections and networks** (Section 4.3), including their connections and networks with host-country nationals (HCNs), volunteers, and expatriates that keep them connected to the host country (Section 4.3.1) and the features that have shaped the nature and sustenance of these (Section 4.3.2).
3. **Cross-cultural knowledge and capabilities** (Section 4.4), comprising their 'culture-specific knowledge and capabilities' which are specific to the participants' host country or region, and which strengthen connections to the country/region (Section 4.4.1) and their 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities' (Section 4.4.2), comprising intercultural and cross-cultural knowledge and skills that have application in settings beyond the host country and so contribute to cultural efficacy outside the host-country context.

The section concludes by considering the implications of the key findings for the program (Section 4.5).

International baseline: Summary of participants' global literacy and connections at T1

At the commencement of their assignments, the sample exhibited high levels of international work, travel and/or study experiences, although their knowledge of and experiences in their host countries were more limited.

Ninety-three percent of the initial sample had lived overseas previously. More than half (28, 52%) had completed prior international volunteer assignments, although in some cases these were relatively brief, group-based (e.g., voluntourism) and/or unstructured experiences. Six (11%) spoke English as a foreign language, and 30 (56%) reported some degree of proficiency in a second language. Although most participants identified as 'Australian (Other)' (34/55), others reported national identities (by ancestry) as Scottish, Chinese, French, Australian Aboriginal, Irish, Malaysian, German, Italian, Welsh and English. At T1, most participants expressed confidence in their ability to cope with expected cross-cultural challenges.

Yet participants' experience in and knowledge of the host country at T1 was more limited. Fewer than a quarter of participants had prior experience living in the host country (13/55, 24%). Eleven (20%) had competence in the host-country language and just 15 (28%) reported existing contacts within the host country. These tended to be younger participants with fewer years of professional experience than others in the study. A further 10 participants (19%) had some first-hand experience in the host country through travel or study visits. Others had friends amongst the host-country diaspora in Australia, although contact was often quite limited. Indeed, the lack of knowledge about the host country was a factor in how some volunteers came to choose their assignment's destination. The majority of participants' understanding of the host-country context came from secondary research after applying for (or being offered) the assignment.

4.2 Host-country Engagement

The evidence across the five waves of interviews shows that **participants' engagement with the country hosting their assignments is authentic and substantially stronger than before their volunteer recruitment process began**.[31]

» Cognitive Engagement

Figure 3 shows the percentage of participants who continue to cognitively engage with their former host country (T1-T5)[32] has remained relatively high and stable across T3-T5[33] (around 90%, 36% at a high level), slightly higher than levels reported in the 2024 VIS.[34] All but a few continue to show an interest in and are cognisant of events in the host country.[35]

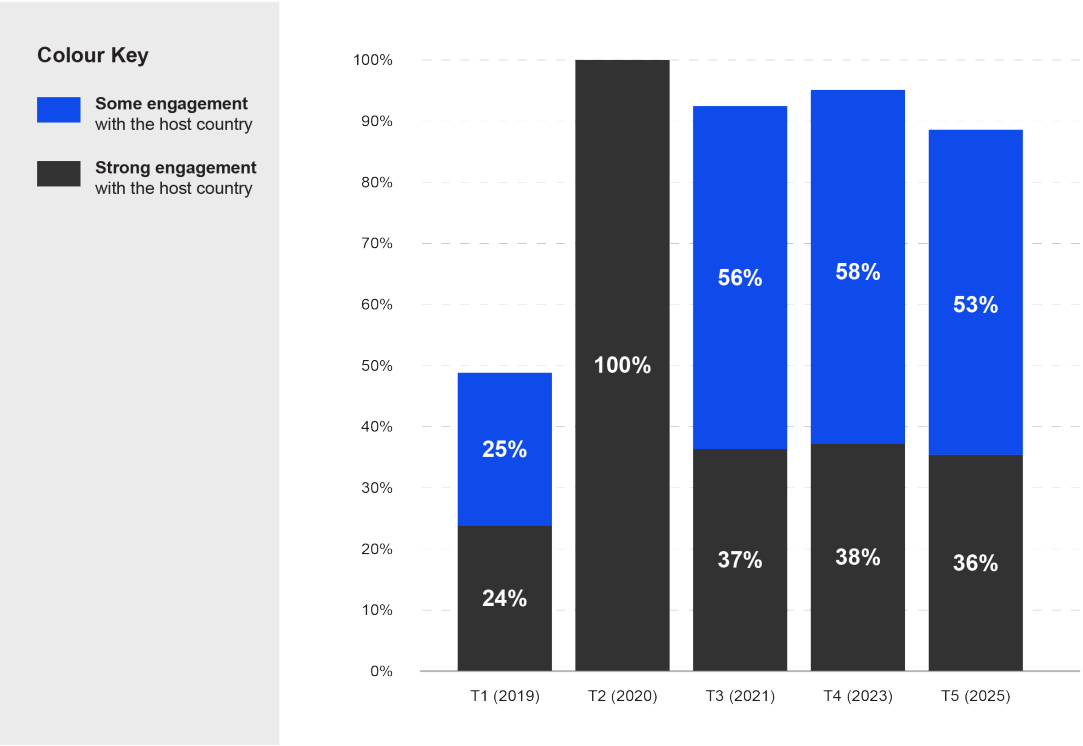
Twelve participants (26%) had returned to visit the host country since international borders re-opened in 2022[36] to work, volunteer, or visit friends. Most social returns were by repatriated volunteers, two of whom were motivated by their premature repatriation and emotional connections. Eleven others (23%) expressed a desire or plan to return in the near future.[37]

» **Engagement with the host country** refers to participants' ongoing psychological and behavioural connection to the country in which they volunteered. It is evident through behaviours such as monitoring news and media, viewing content about or created in the host country, conducting or planning return visits, or informing themselves about host-country issues via study, social media or other sources (cognitive engagement). It also includes emotional engagement, which is evident through expressions of positive affect, warmth towards HCNs, the country, and its culture.

Participants with **high levels of engagement** exhibit practices such as:

- Continuing to monitor events in the host country.
- Reporting positive feelings towards, and/or a shared emotional bond with, the country or its citizens.
- Having regular ongoing contact with one or more HCNs and expressing emotional connection or closeness toward them.
- Expressing a professional or personal identity tied to the host country.

Figure 3: Participants' cognitive engagement with their former host country (pre-post assignment)



In general, while the proportion of participants cognitively engaged remains high,[38] the regularity and intensity of this engagement have qualitatively diminished for two-thirds of the sample, even among some of the highly engaged respondents - a fact that participants are generally conscious of and pragmatic about.[39]

As the box **'Experiences and circumstances influencing host-country engagement'** on page 34 shows, personal, relational, professional, and contextual factors influenced participants' ongoing engagement.[40]

» Emotional Engagement

An overwhelming majority of participants continue to express and demonstrate positive feelings towards the country and its people as a result of their volunteering experiences, a finding that has remained consistently positive across the study:

> "*I still feel incredibly close to [the country], even after all these years. I think about it often. It's such a complex, incredible place. Social media? No. Contact with my colleagues? No. But yes, it's definitely part of me and I try to stay engaged with developments there*" (#07, T5)

Notably, positive affect was equally strong among those with prior volunteer experience and those who went on to undertake subsequent assignments elsewhere, suggesting it is not diminished by repeated exposure, such as #06 (*Transitioner*), who was on another assignment in rural East Asia when interviewed at T5:

> *"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"* (#06, T5)

This positive affect also extended to participants whose cognitive engagement had declined. Illustrative of this is the observation of participant #11, whose assignment was not as professionally rewarding as she had hoped and who had considered an early return before being repatriated:

> "*I'm not monitoring things closely … I'm not in touch with any of the people who are from [the host country] any more sadly … but there's something special about the country. If I went back, it would probably be quite a sentimental experience*" (#11, T5)

Experiences and circumstances influencing host-country engagement

Associated with higher levels of cognitive engagement

- Friends and ongoing contacts within the host country: Having strong connections with and reporting being strongly impacted by one or more HCNs, most common among volunteers who worked closely with an HCN colleague or counterpart.
- Ongoing professional commitments involving the host country via work or voluntary activities: These typically involved ongoing work in the host country, projects involving the host country, or roles that draw on host-country experiences.

Associated with lower levels of cognitive engagement

- Competing demands on respondents' time and attention: New jobs, different priorities, and changing life circumstances (parenthood, illness) all limited the extent to which participants could devote time and energy to remain engaged. This was common among some with commitments directed at *different* host countries ("*Less so, since I've been more focused on the Pacific in the last year, and I've had less time. But if I see something, I'll follow it up and read about it*", #29, T5), especially *Veterans*, who were more likely than other groups to pursue one or more follow-up volunteer assignments in a different host country.
- Reduced access to information: This stemmed from three conditions: (i) decreasing media coverage of events in the host country or region on issues like COVID or political/civil events, or (ii) HCNs' limited use of social media (e.g., expense, staff turnover, PO demise), or (iii) participants' personal decision to discontinue or reduce their use of social media (e.g., "*I was just finding that it was too much time wasted scrolling … so, I went, 'I don't need that'*", #23, T5).
- Negative news about the host country: A range of host-country events, including strongly negative circumstances, initially served as an impetus to engage (T2-T3). However, these became dispiriting for a small number of participants over time. For these participants, negative circumstances or events at the national level (political, environmental) or local level (former colleagues or friends passing away, changes in the PO) led to reduced engagement at T4 and T5 ("*what's happened in [the host country] politically and socially and economically is just so distressing that I really can't. I find it very difficult what to say to them in an email and it's even worse now because of the situation there*", #25, T5; "*I don't think I've been engaged with what's going on in [the host country]. We've had a look occasionally and been absolutely aghast. We're really not following that much. It's a bit grim*", #36, T5).
- Negative or unsatisfying experiences in the host country: Some volunteers with objectively bad experiences during their assignment have continued to exhibit high levels of cognitive and emotional engagement, including return visits. Others, however, have disengaged fully or partially despite having indicated at T1 an interest in sustaining work or social ties. An example of this is participant #16, whose three assignments produced progressively less satisfying experiences. He was blunt that an in-country experience attunes volunteers to stay engaged with host countries ("*once you're there, yeah, you're captured*", #16, T5); however, the depth of engagement mirrors his overall satisfaction with each destination and assignment: he still monitors the host country of his first assignment almost a decade later "*daily*", his second assignment "*monthly*" and his most recent assignment "*less so, I think*" (#16, T5).

4.3 Global Connections and Networks

4.3.1 Connections and Networks with the Host Country

Beyond their cognitive and emotional engagement with the host country, participants are tethered to the host country through their direct and indirect relationships with HCNs, expatriates, and other volunteers they met in-country. Collectively, these comprise the interpersonal bonds that connect participants with the host country, many of which remain strong five years after leaving the host country.[41]

For different participants, relationships with all three groups took on different characteristics and provided different benefits. All three groups, in different ways, were sources of local information and news, civic and professional opportunities, and connections to wider sets of relationships. Although relationships varied considerably across and within the three groups, **Table 9** highlights some common patterns. Networks with other volunteers (discussed further in Section 7.5.1) tended to be the largest, strongest and most beneficial. Those with HCNs and expatriates were more modest in size and, in the case of HCNs, weaker for most, although it was HCNs who most participants believe left the strongest lasting impact on them.

These patterns are discussed in more detail below.

Table 9: Key features of volunteers' networks with HCNs, other volunteers and expatriates

Relationship feature	Host-country nationals	Other volunteers	Other expatriates
Size	Medium	Large	Small
Composition	Professional contacts, PO colleagues (counterparts); local community members	Fellow volunteers; proximal in-country location	Same sector; proximal in-country location
Strength	Weak	Strong	Strong for profession
Most common structure	Bridging ties	Bridging and bonding ties	Bonding ties
Where met	PO, local community, discretionary volunteering activities	Structured in-country events (e.g., ICOP)	Social settings, mutual networks
Benefits to volunteer - During assignment	Informational and logistic support related to the host country; assignment enjoyment and success	Emotional and informational support; assignment enjoyment and success	Emotional, professional and informational support
Benefits to volunteer - Post-assignment	Access to host-country information and news; friendship	Access to host-country information and news; civic opportunities; professional advice; friendship	Access to host-country information and news; professional advice
Changes in relationship across study (T2-T5)	Small decline in numbers and large decline in strength for all but a few	Decline in numbers and dispersal (mainly in Australia) but strong connections with small numbers	Decline in numbers and dispersal globally (post-COVID); a small number retain strong connections
International dimensions of relationship	Anchor to host country; some dispersal to different sectors and organisations (and nations)	Connected through international civic and sector work, and host-country experience	Connected through sharing access to international professional opportunities and sector information
Proportion reporting this group as the most impactful on them (T5)[42]	53%	30%	6%

» Ongoing Connections with Host Country Nationals

Rows one and two in **Table 10** on page 36 show the percentage of participants who had continuing direct connections with one or more HCNs across the period 2021-2025, as well as those whose connections with those HCNs were classified as 'strong'[43] based on the frequency and depth of interaction and using the markers in the box on the right.[44]

Although many HCN relationships have atrophied, 64% retained direct moderate or strong connections with one or more HCNs they met during their assignment at T5. This compares with just 24% (13/55) prior to the assignment (T1). At T5, 12 (26%) held strong and enduring connections, while another 18 continued some contact (moderate or weak).[45]

These HCN connections include: government ministers, counterparts and their families, neighbours, former clients ("*They still message and call at one o'clock in the morning", #08, T5*), business partnerships formed during the assignment, HCN volunteers, social acquaintances that evolved into friendships, former clients, and local volunteers met through their PO.[46] *Veterans* was the group most likely to retain HCN connections, although these were most commonly classified as weak, while *Enhancers* was the group most likely to retain strong connections, all of which centred on professional relationships.[47]

A **social connection** is defined as an active interpersonal relationship between participants and one or more HCNs that exists through some form of direct contact (e.g., telephone, visits, social media). It excludes shared membership of social media groups.

» **Strong connections** ('strong ties') are defined by psychological proximity and the greatest investment of energy and resources in sustaining them. They involve regular direct interpersonal conversations via video, voice or text, with the participant intending to maintain the relationship.

» **Moderate connections** are those that are more than episodic (e.g., occasional exchange of job opportunities or news updates) but irregular and generally of limited depth.

» **Weak connections** ('weak ties') are those characterised by an active but low-intensity connection (e.g., a shared social media platform), with interactions that are less demanding psychologically and in terms of resources – i.e., largely episodic, occurring irregularly or only at special events (e.g., new year).

As **Table 9** indicates, these HCN connections are largely personal, weak ties that reflect bridging relationships (connections across social groups). Despite this, half the sample, mainly *Veterans*, identified HCNs from their former PO[48] or from outside the PO[49] as the stakeholder group that had the strongest enduring impact on their lives.

Table 10: Participants' ongoing contact with partner organisations and host-country nationals

Partner organisation and HCN contact	T3 (2021), n = 54	T4 (2023), n = 50	T5 (2025), n = 47
Personal connection with one or more HCNs (moderate or strong)	91%	74%	64%
Personal connection with one or more HCNs (strong)	41%	18%	26%
Ongoing connection with PO (direct or indirect)[1]	86%	76%	67%

[1] *Excludes Non-working Partners*

The box **'Features supporting strong ongoing connections between participants and HCNs: T2-T5'** expands on the first column of **Table 9** (HCNs) by summarising features of participants, their assignments, and the host country that have influenced participants' ongoing HCN connections most strongly in the years since their assignment.[50] As the box shows, the relationships that have proven to be most regular, deeper and sustained are with former work colleagues, and in particular with designated counterparts from the PO, even though these were relatively infrequent among participants' assignments.

Features supporting strong ongoing connections between participants and HCNs: T2-T5

1. Volunteers working with an HCN counterpart in the PO during the assignment: These relationships were also among the deepest and most diverse in the types of exchanges that participants reported, ranging from deeply personal - involving close connections with family members of both volunteer and counterpart - to primarily professional (e.g., facilitating follow-up visits or connections to other organisations or professional networks).
2. Volunteers who were unaccompanied by a partner during their assignment: With a few exceptions, volunteers accompanied by a partner developed fewer non-work social networks in the host country during their assignments (T2) and have weaker connections with former counterparts and HCNs (T2-T5), although connections with their PO were less affected.
3. Volunteers whose assignment was based in a capital city: Relationships established by volunteers in capital cities have proved to be stronger and to last longer than those established in remote placements, likely due to more common use of English language, greater media coverage of host-country events that prompted participants to reach out, and/or perceived similarity (below).
4. Volunteers with prior experiences in and a strong understanding of the host country at the start of their assignment: Consistent across all waves, volunteers forming the strongest connections had prior experience in and knowledge of the host country.
5. Volunteers' and HCNs' proficiency in a common language: Almost all strong relationships that have sustained involve HCNs with relative fluency in English or volunteers with host-country language proficiency. Some volunteers (especially those whose assignments were rural) expressed dismay at language barriers preventing deeper or continuing connections in the years after their assignment.
6. Volunteer-HCN similarity (e.g., age group, gender, interests): Although exceptions were evident, relationships that have sustained most strongly are with HCNs from similar professional areas, age groups, and interests. Participants' perceptions about the absence of shared experiences have prevented some volunteers from committing more effort to sustain connections ("*we have nothing in common*", #25, T5; "*with time passing, those types of [cross-cultural] friendships can be challenging to maintain*", #14, T5).
7. Access to compatible and affordable enabling technologies: Six participants reported being hampered in their ability to connect with HCNs due to restrictions on travel to the host country, limited Internet and mobile availability or affordability there, or their own decisions to discontinue social media use.

» Ongoing Connections with Partner Organisations

The third row of **Table 10** shows that the number of participants maintaining some connection to their former PO remains high but declined from T3 to T5.[51] Two-thirds[52] reported recent contact. Twenty-two (46%) of these had retained some form of regular contact at every wave of interview since repatriation (T2-T5),[53] most commonly indirectly via social media with no regular, personal contact. This included 10 of the 12 volunteers who had previously lived in the host country.

For most participants still in contact with POs, the frequency and depth of interactions have declined.[54] Twenty-one percent had spoken to a PO colleague in the past month,[55] down from 27% at T4. Five involved professional exchanges (work- or assignment-related). For the majority, though, periodic greetings to commemorate events (e.g., New Year) or ad-hoc exchanges instigated by social media posts, trigger events (e.g., natural disasters) or specific requests for advice were the norm.

Following former POs without contact

"I don't interact with anyone directly, but I still follow [the PO] on Facebook and get updates on where they're at" (#20)

"I don't have any contact with colleagues anymore, unfortunately. I was emailing my contact person [in the PO] but we lost contact after a few years. But I get their social media all the time, so I can sort of know what's going on" (#06)

"I'm liking their posts and that on Facebook all the time. But I haven't had a conversation probably since 2022" (#08)

A consistent finding (T3-T5) is that sustained contact with former POs is strongest among: (i) non-repatriated volunteers,[56] (ii) volunteers who worked in POs classified as 'international' (international NGOs and intergovernmental agencies rather than local organisations like

domestic NGOs or government departments),[57] and (iii) volunteers whose PO was located in a capital city.[58] In the latter two cases, this may suggest that certain PO conditions (e.g., staff language proficiency or their comfort and/or incentives to continue engagement with volunteers) may be pertinent.

Over half of the repeat volunteers also retained contact with some POs from *prior* assignments, suggesting a degree of stickiness to some relationships. Consistent with this, volunteers undertaking subsequent assignments (i.e., 2022-25) with a different PO were slightly more likely to retain contact with their former POs than others, irrespective of the type of assignment (remote, hybrid or in-country) or the number of assignments.[59] That is, **new POs do not necessarily replace ties volunteers develop with prior POs.**

» Ongoing Connections with Expatriates and Other Volunteers

In general, relationships with other volunteers have been strongest, most regularly sustained, and most impactful in terms of both the number reporting them and the value participants place in them. Overwhelmingly, these volunteer relationships were with others based in the same host country and were forged at in-country orientations and other in-country events facilitated by the program. Volunteers were the centrepiece of most participants' in-country social activities, and of emotional support they drew on both during the assignment and in the COVID period post-repatriation.[60] For these reasons, **shared experiences in the host country** that were novel, stressful and/or memorable (including, for some, the intensity of the repatriation process), and which participants felt that other friends or family could not fully appreciate, were important adhesives for these relationships ("*It's so nice to be with somebody who just understands where we're at and what our lives were and what our lives are now and how much has changed",* #37, T3).

> *"One of our closest friends is a volunteer from in-country, even though it was a short assignment … it's a really funny little world, I'm sure you hear this from volunteers all the time"* (#53, T5)
>
> *" … we just clicked … it's deep, like we go a long way, that's [a] profound [outcome]"* (#04, T5)
>
> *"… probably two people that we'd regard as amongst our closest friends. We were together in Myanmar. We spent Christmas with them in Cambodia last year"* (#16, T5)
>
> *"Lifelong best friends"* (#37, T5)

The second and more consequential agent that bonded volunteers was a **sense of shared values** and "*world view"* with other volunteers. One described "*a sense of continuity and connection"* (#15), two spoke of "*people whose values align"* (#12), one *Imposed Transitioner* spoke of finding "*my tribe*"; another of appreciating "*a group of people who are like-minded*" (#42). More details of the ways that volunteers benefited personally from these relationships are in Section 7.5.1.

Other expatriates and expatriate communities were also important to the social and professional lives of many volunteers and *Non-working Partners* during their assignments, especially those whose assignments were in urban areas, where English was not widely spoken by HCNs, and among participants seeking future work in the host country/region or in sectors like international aid and development, where large numbers of expatriates work. As the extract below (and **Table 9**) shows, expatriate communities were important sources of information, emotional support, friendship, and professional camaraderie before and after the assignment:

> *"When I was there, sometimes a group of us would catch up … with the expats, it was good to talk to generally like-minded people who were interested in working in development and going through similar experiences to you. I don't think it was essential, but it was helpful particularly navigating, sometimes the random little bureaucratic things that you're trying to navigate and someone else as an expat has done that. Or just needing to get a driver to get from A to B. That shared experience and a bit of a social support network was valuable"* (#39, T5, *Transitioner*, capital city)

Participants' expatriate networks are less abundant and impactful than other networks (**Table 9**). Just over a third (36%) report benefiting personally or professionally from connections with one or more expatriates whom they met during their assignment, a rise since T4[61] but consistently lower than the proportions reporting benefit from connections with other groups. Six (13%) are characterised as 'strong' connections, mostly former PO colleagues (including other offices or departments), or people with shared professional interests and backgrounds. Social media (e.g., Instagram and LinkedIn) and direct messaging are the main communication channels. Although the nature of these has varied over time, most are anchored by mutual benefit as much as friendship – typically involving exchanging host-country information and professional opportunities or events.

The strongest expatriate relationships are now the most globally dispersed, with contact levels and benefits reported by participants largely stable across the study.[62] As an example of this, **the box on the right** contains interview extracts (#37, T4, T5) from a volunteer now entrenched in an expatriate community in East Asia, illustrating the strength, dispersion, and professional focus of many of these.

> "Some have become best friends. […] is Canadian, she's currently in Argentina but we talk every day. Same with a colleague that I met in [the host country]. He is in Germany now, we talk every other day … it's definitely social but then we also have the career element as well. If they're going for a job, we'll send them jobs or if they're going through a tricky part of their career we'll talk about that" (#37, T4)
>
> "We actually did a big meet up with the Canadian contingent and the Australians. We all met in Australia at the end of the year, which was amazing. My British mate came and stayed with me for Christmas. We're still very much in contact. I think, most importantly, I would say the friends that I met in [host country] are the base of my community here in […] … they basically connected me with what is now a very flourishing group, predominantly people who I actually knew or crossed paths with in [host country] who were over there at the same time. But we have that point of connection and it's a really massive community here. My closest friends are people that were in [host country] at the same time as me, essentially. And that's really formed the foundation of my life here. It's been really instrumental to that" (#37, T5)

In contrast, the case study of **Robin on page 50** is illustrative of how many volunteers' host-country connections (HCNs and expatriates) have attenuated since their assignment ended.[63] It traces how Robin, based in a highly remote area, actively sought out social connection, and how these relationships evolved over time. Robin's case draws attention to the diversity of these ties - that formed quickly and gave her strong support during the assignment - and to their gradual weakening as new work activities and priorities emerged; for Robin, this was a subsequent international volunteer placement in a new host country. The case also highlights the importance of program-led initiatives (organised gatherings and facilitated mobility) in supporting volunteers' social wellbeing in isolated locations – a point expanded in Section 7.5.1.

Thirteen participants (28%) - mainly *Veterans* and *Non-working Partners* - report no ongoing connection with either expatriates or HCN communities from their volunteer assignment, up from 20% at T4.[64] Seven of these were accompanied by a partner during their assignment.

During assignments, both groups (volunteers and expatriates) were important sources of discussions, intercultural experiences, and information that contributed to different forms of global literacy (Section 4.4). Since the assignment, their contributions have been important but largely indirect, primarily through the information they share (mostly host-country specific) and opportunities for re-engagement and connections to the host country that they provide (Section 4.4.1.1), although some continue to be important sources of shared reflections as part of informal communities of practice that can be important for ongoing learning.[65]

4.3.2 Three Features of Participants' Global and Host-country Networks

Three features of participants' new relationships are worth highlighting: (i) the changing dynamics of these relationships, most evident in the strong volunteer-HCN relationships, (ii) the role volunteers play as bridge- and community-builders between others in their social orbit, and (iii) the essential role of social media in sustaining these connections and enabling their reactivation.

4.3.2.1 The Changing Dynamics of Strong (Volunteer-HCN) Relationships

A characteristic of several relationships that participants formed, and especially apparent in some HCN-volunteer relationships, is their dynamic structure. The strongest of these relationships evolved from what began as a *bridging* connection between people from different social groups, that are often less psychologically invested, to take on the features of a close-knit *bonding* tie that furnishes trust, reciprocity, and different forms of exchange extending beyond the original project context.[66] Participants' capacity to maintain these relationships and navigate their changes has been some of the clearest applications of the cross-cultural skills they developed during the assignment.

The **case study of Martha on page 51** illustrates some of these dynamics. Over the course of her 10-month assignment and across the five years that followed, Martha developed a close and enduring relationship with her counterpart, Josie. The case tracks that relationship from early workplace collaboration to a friendship sustained by regular contact, shared help, and a clear emotional attachment that now anchors Martha's ongoing connection to the host country.

While there are different ways to understand the dynamics of Martha and Josie's relationship, three features of it are representative of several strong relationships that volunteers formed in-country.

First, the relationship is mutually beneficial, although those benefits are carried in different 'currencies.' Josie's appear more tangible, revolving around career (it was Martha who helped Josie secure the counterpart role soon after arriving), capabilities (e.g., digital literacy, customer service, public speaking) and confidence. By T5, Josie had become President of the co-op, in part because of the support and exposure that Martha had provided. Josie also gained a mentor and friend who advocated for her, helped her access resources, and supported her emotionally and practically. In return, Martha's benefits, as she describes them, are relational and meaning-based (belonging, attachment to the country, satisfaction from Josie's and the co-op's successes, and a sense of purpose that continues to shape how she relates to the host country). Martha has gained a deep cross-cultural friendship, a renewed professional identity, and a source of valued insight about comings-and-goings in the host community. The relationship has informed Martha's post-assignment career in community engagement and social impact, and she credits the assignment as a "*life highlight* (T5) … "*what I've learnt has been invaluable*" (T3). Josie's support was likely also important to Martha's assignment success, especially in the early period in-country.

Second, Martha's case shows how volunteer-HCN relationships evolve in nature and function over time. In this case, it begins as a mentor-protégé or volunteer-counterpart relationship - created by the structure of the volunteer placement and their roles in the PO - in which Martha supported Josie's professional development. It later shifted during COVID into a sponsorship/brokerage role (e.g., Martha's institutional access helping to progress projects and protect Josie's work continuity) before settling into a friendship sustained more by emotional connection than project work. As part of this, since her repatriation Martha has managed to balance dependence (e.g., her sense of obligation to help Josie and the PO) with mutuality in ways that have allowed the relationship to flourish despite the geographic distance.

Third, Martha and Josie's ongoing connection is reinforced by low-friction communication channels and networks (messaging, Facebook, and social media feeds). This makes the relationship easier to sustain as an everyday practice. It has also provided the continuity that has enabled the relationship to evolve.

4.3.2.2 The Role of Volunteers as Bridge- and Community-Builders

Across the five years of the study, and especially since COVID-era restrictions were lifted in 2022, participants have regularly shared examples of ways that they have drawn HCNs, former colleagues, and other contacts developed during the assignment into broader networks around shared interests. The largest number of these, and the ones exhibiting the clearest benefits, are professionally oriented, although they take an eclectic range of forms, varying in context (e.g., personal, civic, professional), chief purpose (relational or knowledge-sharing), and the people involved. They include:

- Involving a former PO in a new regional consortium of non-profit organisations as part of a multi-million dollar regional aid project funded from Australia and managed by a participant.[67]
- Instigating long-term collaborations between Australians and HCNs that include online community projects and small businesses, aimed at providing economic, justice, and/or equality benefits for both.[68]
- Connecting former POs, colleagues, or other HCN networks to organisations or bodies in Australia that have facilitated formal and informal knowledge exchanges between organisations in Australia and the host country. These have involved long-term residential exchanges of staff between the countries and short-term networking or knowledge exchange visits to organisations or to contribute at conferences.[69]
- Connecting former colleagues or other HCNs for advice or support and/or for professional or educational opportunities through contacts and resources in Australia.[70] This has included volunteers acting as support coordinators for the extended families or friends of these contacts in the years after the assignment. The **case study of Susan on page 52** is a lucid example, showing how language skills developed during an immersive assignment became a resource that enabled her to provide practical and emotional support to a former colleague navigating mental health and visa challenges as a seasonal worker in Australia, coordinating help across a network of volunteers and contacts she had never previously met.
- Continuing to assist HCN colleagues or friends to navigate intercultural interactions in the host country by, for instance, mentoring them on 'Western' norms to help their interactions with donors or clients, giving advice about managing relationships with expatriate colleagues, helping them adjust to living overseas, or assisting them to apply for or enrol in international studies.[71]
- Connecting family members and friends with HCN networks during in-country visits, that have led to ongoing relationships like the examples in Section 7.5.2.

The **case study of Kevin on page 52** offers an example of bridge-building that brings together several of the activities described in the list above. Arriving with prior language skills and cultural familiarity, Kevin developed during his assignment an unusually deep and diverse set of HCN relationships spanning work, community and social settings. Five years on, these have evolved into an informal but substantial network of connections that he actively maintains and deploys across both countries. The case traces how Kevin functions simultaneously as a professional contact broker, a cultural mediator for Australian colleagues, a promoter of the volunteer program to prospective POs, and a support coordinator for diaspora members navigating daily life in Australia, all of which are extensions of the relationships and capabilities formed in-country.

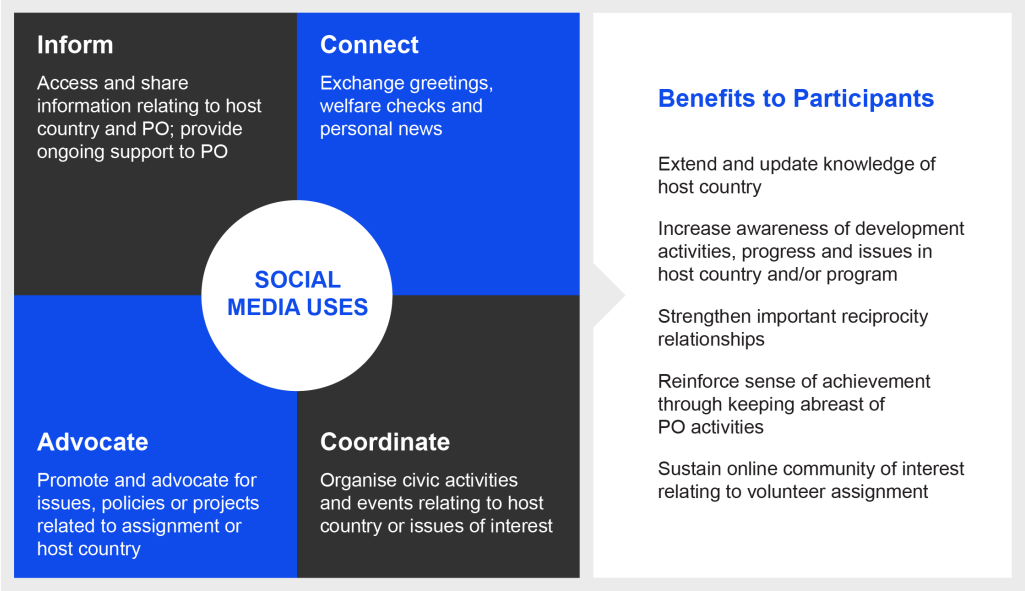
4.3.2.3 The Role of Social Media in Sustaining Connections

A noticeable pattern in participants' ongoing connections with the former host country – and one reason why these connections may have remained relatively robust and valuable to participants – is the way social media[72] has been used to incubate, foster and reactivate these relationships. In the five years since their assignments ended, participants have relied increasingly on social media feeds from contacts that they formed in-country as sources of information. For 20 participants (43%), information passed on by friends or former colleagues in-country is now the sole or primary source of host-country engagement. Over half of these[73] had few or no prior connections with, contacts in, or knowledge of the host-country at T1.[74] In the same period, reliance on 'traditional' media as the primary source of host-country engagement had largely dissipated by T5.

While the use of social media varied across the sample and evolved, it has supported four types of host-country engagement, presented on the left side of **Figure 4**[75] covering informing, connecting, advocating on behalf of, and coordinating activities in relation to the host country. The right side of the figure shows some of the cognitive, social, and psychological benefits that these activities have produced for participants.

The box 'The tentacles of social media: Informing, connecting, advocating, and coordinating networks' on page 41 illustrates these patterns in action. Drawing on data from across the study, it traces how volunteers' social media use served as an 'information umbilical cord' with the host country, simultaneously informing, connecting, advocating, and coordinating, and how even relatively 'weak' online ties can generate meaningful personal, professional, international, and civic outcomes.

Figure 4: Patterns of social media use and benefits



4.4 Cross-cultural Knowledge and Capabilities

The international and intercultural elements of the volunteer experience are among the strongest overall impacts on participants, including *Non-working Partners*.[76]

Almost half of all the in-country learning episodes reported by participants at T2 (45%, 239/522) contributed directly or indirectly to the program's objective that Australians be more 'globally literate and connected'.[77] More than half identified 'international' outcomes as the major impact of their volunteer assignment – the proportion reporting this was largest among older volunteers.[78] These included outcomes relating to developing cross-cultural awareness, understanding of regional/global socio-political issues, establishing international networks, and increasing openness to difference and diversity.[79]

In assessing how participants developed and benefited from these capabilities, the study distinguishes between those relating to the participants' host country during the assignment - culture-specific knowledge and capabilities (Section 4.4.1) - and those that have broader applications to different cultures - culture-general knowledge and capabilities (Section 4.4.2). Each is defined in the **box on the right**.

The study revealed subtle differences between the two sets of competencies in relation to:

- The types of in-country experiences that contributed to developing each.
- The types of post-assignment features that support the ongoing development of each.
- How participants have used each in their lives since the assignment.

» **Culture-specific knowledge and capabilities** relate to the host country or region. They include understanding of cultural practices and values, as well as non-cultural information pertaining to the host country (e.g., understanding political context or legal system, language proficiency, contextual and historical knowledge). These strengthen participants' connections to the host country and contribute to the depth of awareness of and comfort operating in that specific context.

» **Culture-general knowledge and capabilities** relate to participants' cultural awareness and cross-cultural competence more broadly, rather than to a specific culture or country (e.g., sensitivity to cultural differences generally, understanding the impacts of stereotypes or cultural biases, appreciating different ways of life, communicative flexibility). These are more readily transferable across national borders and connect participants to a broader global community.

On the third point, an important finding is how the benefits and prominence that participants attributed to each type of cultural learning shifted at different points across the study.[80] For culture-specific knowledge and capabilities, participants shared quite specific and tangible examples of developing these during their assignment (T2)[81] and their intention to use these.[82] In the first year after the volunteer assignment, culture-specific knowledge and capabilities helped to facilitate - and were consequently refined by - participants' ongoing engagement with the host country and their contact with the HCNs (Section 4.4.1.1 contains an explanation).

The tentacles of social media: Informing, connecting, advocating, and coordinating networks

While social media platforms are convenient and relatively frictionless media to sustain relationships, especially from a distance, the utility of such connections appears, at first glance, limited. Much interaction with HCNs via social media was event-based and episodic - sharing photographs or exchanging pleasantries on particular occasions – and these frequently dissipated across the final 3 years of the study. In some cases, language barriers limited these to quite rudimentary exchanges. In this regard, many of the host-country relationships that social media enabled were relatively 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973).

Notwithstanding this, more substantial personal, professional and program benefits from the widespread use of social media are evident across the six-year span of this study. For relationships that were strong (such as those with HCN counterparts), social media supplemented other richer forms of contact and enabled personal disclosures (e.g., family photographs) – important for nourishing interpersonal trust (Heizmann et al., 2018) - where this might otherwise not be possible ("*I can see their life goes on and what is happening. We share a lot, being women with children. It's interesting to see what's new for them*", #49, T4). In doing this, social media is likely to have sustained reciprocity relationships (e.g., wantok, bubuti) that are valued in some host cultures, that are difficult to maintain from a distance but can be re-activated in the future (Davison et al., 2018).

There is some evidence that the ability to exchange images and videos (not just text) via social media may assist some HCNs to overcome their concerns about language proficiency that fractured some volunteer-HCN relationships, at least in the early stages after the assignment. Emotionally engaging content (e.g., photographs of PO projects or HCNs' families) may be one contributor to the high levels of emotional connection reported by participants (Section 4.2). This contributed to volunteers' knowledge of the PO's ongoing activities, and thus on-the-ground international development practices. It also gave volunteers insight into the impact of their work well after their departure, enabling them to receive reinforcement or feedback about the impact of their volunteering, an important contributor to the "meaningfulness" of their efforts (Rosso et al., 2010) which participants linked to assignment satisfaction. Participant #03 gave a lucid example of this, explaining:

> *"I'm actually attached to their social media Facebook page and I see projects up and running. I've seen that [my counterpart's] involved and the place is flourishing … I'm honestly interested, because the place was almost obliterated before COVID and just that seed funding … I feel proud of that, even though I think AVI likes to quash that - you're not there to change the world and I get that. But this project, it actually launched them quite well into the future with how we planned it, with the website, with how to get donors, the manual that we created, all that sort of groundwork so they can actually go out and get funding a lot easier than what they could have before. It's really, really done well. I'm just sitting back just like a proud parent, in a way, just watching it happen"* (#03, T5)

Social media is now the primary source participants used to monitor political, social, weather, health, and other news from the host country, most often shared by HCNs, expatriates, or former volunteers from the host country. Information about the sector, volunteering, and professional issues are also commonly shared. Through this, social media has proven to be an important support mechanism for dispersed communities of interest centred on activities in the host country. It also serves as a platform for periodic information, advice, and support from volunteers to POs, often on an 'as needed' basis. Consequently, the loose connections that social media helps to preserve also act as valuable portals for ongoing knowledge sharing and capacity development and so remain a valuable conduit connecting volunteers to their former colleagues and friends in the host country, even as the frequency of direct messaging between some volunteers and HCNs has declined.

> *"My Facebook is filled up with news from either [host country 1] or from [host country 2], from people that I knew there, which also helps me to understand [what is happening]. When the recent earthquake in [host country] happened - my understanding of that event, as soon as I first heard about it, was probably a lot deeper than most people would realise. How that would impact people - I think a lot of the news that we get when 3,000 people are dead and they're still finding more people - well, I actually knew some of those people personally, which is different to just these generic numbers"* (#01, T5)

Finally, and especially prominent at T2 and T3, volunteers used social media as an organising, coordinating, and advocacy tool for social and political engagement on issues that were relevant to their assignments. As well as coordinating donations in response to disasters and COVID outbreaks in (former) host countries, this was most apparent when one host country experienced political turmoil soon after participants were repatriated in March 2020. In this case, a social media group was used to share updates from in-country contacts, to coordinate donations of money and resources, to organise submissions to domestic political bodies, and to plan street protests in Australian cities (and to communicate details of these). Every participant who completed an assignment in this host country reported instigating some action of solidarity or support; social media was the platform to coordinate all of these. A *Veteran* of multiple assignments reported being made aware of events by "*contact with people that we knew in [the host country], and a woman who's now living in [Australia] that we got to know at [the PO], sending just SMS or Messenger or Facebook comments to some of the commentary which is coming from people in […]. I'm much more almost aware now*" (#16, T3). This led to him attending a protest march, "*the first real event I've attended like that … that was obviously driven a bit by watching the Facebook entries from friends there, meeting with [an HCN diaspora in Australia] since the coup took place, so there was a real personal sense of all of that. You know, that's fairly meaningful.*" These experiences led him to reflect that, in hindsight, the most important contribution of development volunteering came from "*helping maintain that sort of social fabric, a community and democracy and a better world, if you like, the SDG arena of what are the goals that the country and the world should be focused on. I think philosophically and practically AVP is an important part of that*" (#16, T3). A different volunteer described connecting with "*a lot of AVIs and former [AVIs], we've run the gamut between sharing [host-country] posts on Facebook actively … several members [of the group] have been to the visible protests. And consolidating GoFundMes and various other things like that for actual money*" (#12, T3). He described "*two major Facebook groups that came together*" to coordinate events *"this protest, this fundraising and this and this and this"* (T3). Another used social media exchanges with former volunteers to gauge interest in and feedback on a proposal for an awareness-raising campaign that he had devised relating to the event in question (#48, T3).

Sources

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Granovetter, M.S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360-1380.

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Rosso, B.D., Dekas, K.H. & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *30*, 91-127.

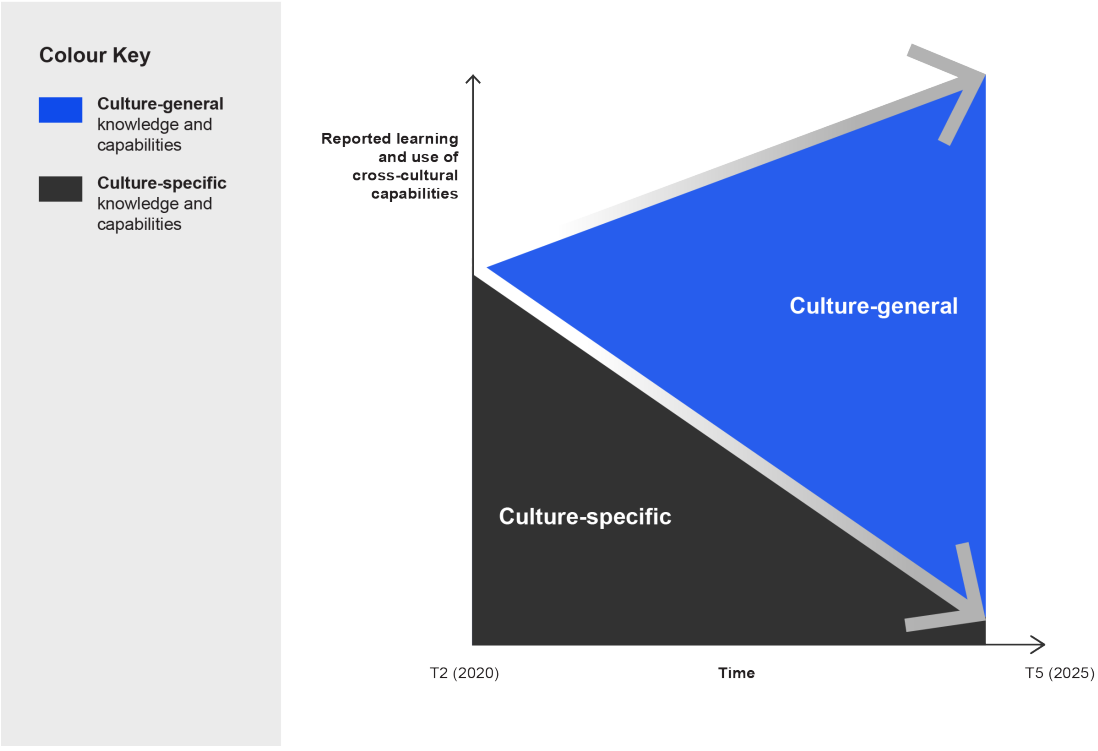
However, reports of participants continuing to use and to develop culture-specific knowledge and capabilities, including host-country language skills, have also been less common in later years. Thus, while all participants improved their culture-specific knowledge and capabilities (T1 to T5), these have offered limited transferable benefits beyond the host-country context, and the relative importance participants attach to them has declined since the assignment ended. The trend is represented by the lower diagonal line in **Figure 5**.

In contrast, participants' accounts of them using and appreciating culture-general knowledge and capabilities that they developed in-country increased in frequency at later interviews.[83] It is these culture-general competencies, both specific behavioural capabilities and a broader orientation toward relationships and social and global issues, that participants have come to view as most transformative and most valuable.[84] The trend is represented by the top diagonal line in **Figure 5**.

As the following sections show, the reasons for this divergence after the assignment stem from two connected post-assignment experiences:[85]

- Opportunities for regular reinforcement through contact and application (culture-general capabilities were reinforced by everyday professional and social life in culturally-diverse settings, whereas culture-specific knowledge and capabilities had fewer natural applications and so tended to diminish), and
- Retrospective reframing, though less common, was also evident. Some volunteers re-evaluated their experiences such that the more transferable benefits of culture-general capabilities became increasingly salient over time.

Figure 5: Changing importance of cross-cultural knowledge and capabilities



4.4.1 Host Country (Culture-specific) Knowledge and Capabilities

Participants continue to view their volunteer assignment as contributing to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the host country. All 47 participants interviewed at T5 believe that they are better informed about the host country and its culture as a direct result of their volunteer assignment ("*absolutely*", #54, *"definitely*", #41). This applied equally to participants who had extensive knowledge of the host country before their assignment and those who had little:[86]

> "*I didn't know anything about [the host country] before I went. I really didn't know anything. So it has opened my eyes. I'm not sure if I keep up with much anymore unless it pops up, but I'm definitely better informed, more aware of not just [the host country], but I think just the South Asia area"* (#30, T5)
>
> *"In terms of awareness and understanding, I think we felt we learned a huge amount, no doubt. The value of that was great individually"* (#16, T5)

Participants' use of and interest in the host-country language fluctuated across the study. In-country language training – perceived as one of the most valuable components of the VLJ[87] – contributed to improved language capabilities at T2, when 21 participants (38%) reported continuing to use or learn the

host language in some form after the assignment.[88] Nearly two thirds of participants attributed language training to their assignment success; half considered some local-language proficiency important for understanding the host culture, building rapport with HCNs, and for their own self-confidence (T2).[89] Developing fluency in the host-country language was a contributor to some participants reporting a change in future personal or professional plans at T2.

Yet interest in and use of the host-country language has declined in subsequent years. Around one third (14/47, 30%) reported some use of the language at T5. This reflects a slight rise since T4 and the largest percentage since assignments ended, although it includes just six (13%) who did not speak the language prior to the assignment.[90] This includes five who had taken up studying and/or using the host-country language since T4 for reasons that were professional (working in a context that involved contact with the host country or a regional country with a closely related language), family (wanting a newborn to learn the language) and civic contribution (wanting to include representatives from the host country's region on a voluntary committee):

> *"I was never very good in [the host country language during the assignment], because mostly they spoke English to me, everyone wanted to practice their English. So beyond the pleasantries, I was never particularly good. I use it much more now, having learned it in [different country], even though [the language] is different, but close enough to be able to still use it in [the host country] when I visit"* (#02, T5)

Beyond language and cultural patterns, participants credit their assignment with deepening their understanding of a variety of host-country features, including its geopolitical dynamics, history and politics, relationships with neighbouring countries, security infrastructure, social dynamics, government structures, religious practices, positive and negative cultural traits, and attitudes towards foreigners.[91] For several participants, these insights were expressed in the years after the assignment through choices about lifestyle (Section 7.4) and personal relationships (Section 7.5).

4.4.1.1 Experiences Contributing to Culture-specific Knowledge and Capabilities

Participants' culture-specific knowledge and capabilities have been nurtured in different ways during their assignment and the years since the assignment ended.

» In-country Experiences Contributing to Culture-specific Knowledge and Capabilities

'Culture-specific knowledge and capabilities' accounted for the largest proportion (15%) of in-country learning episodes (T2).[92] The bulk of these occurred outside the volunteers' workplace, from informal or unstructured discussions with HCNs or expatriates and/or during work-related collaborations. Relatively few (3%) involved participants proactively seeking information from cultural 'penguins'.[93]

An example of this pattern is the **case study of Jeffrey on page 53,** which shows how he developed a deeper and more realistic understanding of the host country over time, not from actively seeking out advice, one-off 'cultural moments' or passive exposure, but as a more gradual process through field visits and repeated conversations with other volunteers and local colleagues that exposed him to different realities about the country. Five years later, he described feeling far more knowledgeable than before the assignment, while also cognisant of how much nuance he lacks. As Jeffrey's case illustrates, interactions with other expatriates, including his partner, were important sources of both new knowledge about the local culture, especially through learning about their experiences and work, and a mechanism for (shared) reflection.

Among the strongest elements supporting this culture-specific learning in-country were assignment conditions, and the structural arrangements and support provided by the program, that gave volunteers the opportunity to live, work, and learn in close contact with HCNs and the local culture. These features included:

- **The program's theory of change and assignment structure**, which provided volunteers with relatively long-term access to communities, POs and contacts that are more conducive to authentic intercultural contact (work and non-work) than other forms of international work and so conducive for developing more complex, unfiltered, and realistic understandings of the host-country:[94]

  > *"Absolutely I have a better understanding [of the host-country culture]. I don't have an in-depth knowledge. I was only there for nine months. But glimpsing at a different culture, looking at a different culture from within, it enhances my empathy when I go to other places and when I think about other places that that experience enhances how I understand, or I think I understand. So it's been helpful"* (#54, T5)

- **Structured VLJ activities, notably the PDB and ICOP**, which were regularly identified as catalysts that nurtured interest, contacts, and foundational local knowledge that continue to be appreciated by participants. Although the quality of ICOPs in different countries were perceived to vary greatly,[95] participants' view about the value and relevance of VLJ activities and the connections these supported has been increasingly positive. Many who were critical of aspects of the content and focus (e.g., giving too little guidance and support for volunteers in rural destinations) have re-evaluated these more favourably in recent interviews.[96] Participants' responses also made clear that these structured events were sources of knowledge, reflection, and relationship-building that were central to changes that took place during the assignment and that participants drew on in the years after their assignment:

  > *"… previously, my engagement with other cultures was as a tourist or … some work relationships. But I think the pre-departure briefing opened your eyes to how you're going to engage in a country with a quite different*

culture with these people who have different experiences to you - some similar, some different, and they'll think differently to you, so you've got to be very open-minded" (#22, T5)

- **The social positioning of volunteers as 'low-status outsiders'**, and participants' growing appreciation of this as a distinctive feature of the model, as discussed further in Section 5.3.3.

Participants whose assignments were more immersive[97] – i.e., rural locations and/or POs staffed by HCNs rather than expatriates – reported experiences that were more challenging[98] but also more conducive to developing culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.[99] Volunteers who have completed multiple assignments in different types of POs and locations support this view.[100]

» Post-Assignment Experiences Contributing to Culture-specific Knowledge and Capabilities

In general, participants' use of host-country knowledge and capabilities has declined over time, most notably for volunteers who discontinued their ongoing PO contact and support (Section 5.2.3).[101] That is, while their awareness of the host country has increased through their involvement with the program, is valued, is seen as an important part of their volunteer experiences, and has given them confidence interacting with HCNs and across cultures generally,[102] few volunteers have had opportunities to apply this in their day-to-day lives ("*there probably hasn't been a huge amount of opportunity to use that"*, #11, T5).

Without reinforcement of regular use, a recurring pattern that became more prominent in later interviews is the relative perishability of culture-specific knowledge and capabilities. In short, across the study's duration, without ongoing HCN contact and host-country engagement, participants believe that their knowledge and capabilities relating to their former host country tended to decline and become less important.

For participants who do use culture-specific knowledge and capabilities developed during the assignment, two applications are most common. The first is in work settings. This involved roles directly related to the host-country or, more commonly, through working with colleagues or clients from the HCN diaspora, and/or via work with neighbouring countries that share similar linguistic or cultural patterns.[103] The latter suggests a degree of re-use of culture-specific expertise in adjacent (culturally-similar) environments is possible, pointing to the possibility that avenues for re-use (and therefore ongoing development) might be feasible for some participants who lack direct home-country access or connections.[104]

» The Interaction of Host-country Networks, Engagement, and Ongoing Learning

The second chief application comes from participants' ongoing relationships with HCNs (Section 4.3) and cognitive engagement with the host country (Section 4.2). These are also the mechanisms through which participants have had the most opportunities to develop their host-country awareness in the years since their assignment ended. Thus, the participants continuing to develop this knowledge in the aftermath of their in-country experience are those who remain engaged with and connected to the host country.

In this, **the findings show that a mutually supportive relationship appears to exist between volunteers' host-country connections, host-country engagement, and their culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.**

This relationship was strongly endorsed by a sub-sample of participants during T5 interviews in 2025 and is represented graphically in **Figure 6.** It shows how volunteers' awareness and capabilities associated with their former host country are tools that support them to stay connected to and engaged with the country, but that the process of outreach and being updated appears to contribute further to their culture-specific knowledge and capabilities. In short: sustained connection supports ongoing learning and engagement; ongoing learning deepens connection and engagement; and engagement reinforces both connection and learning.

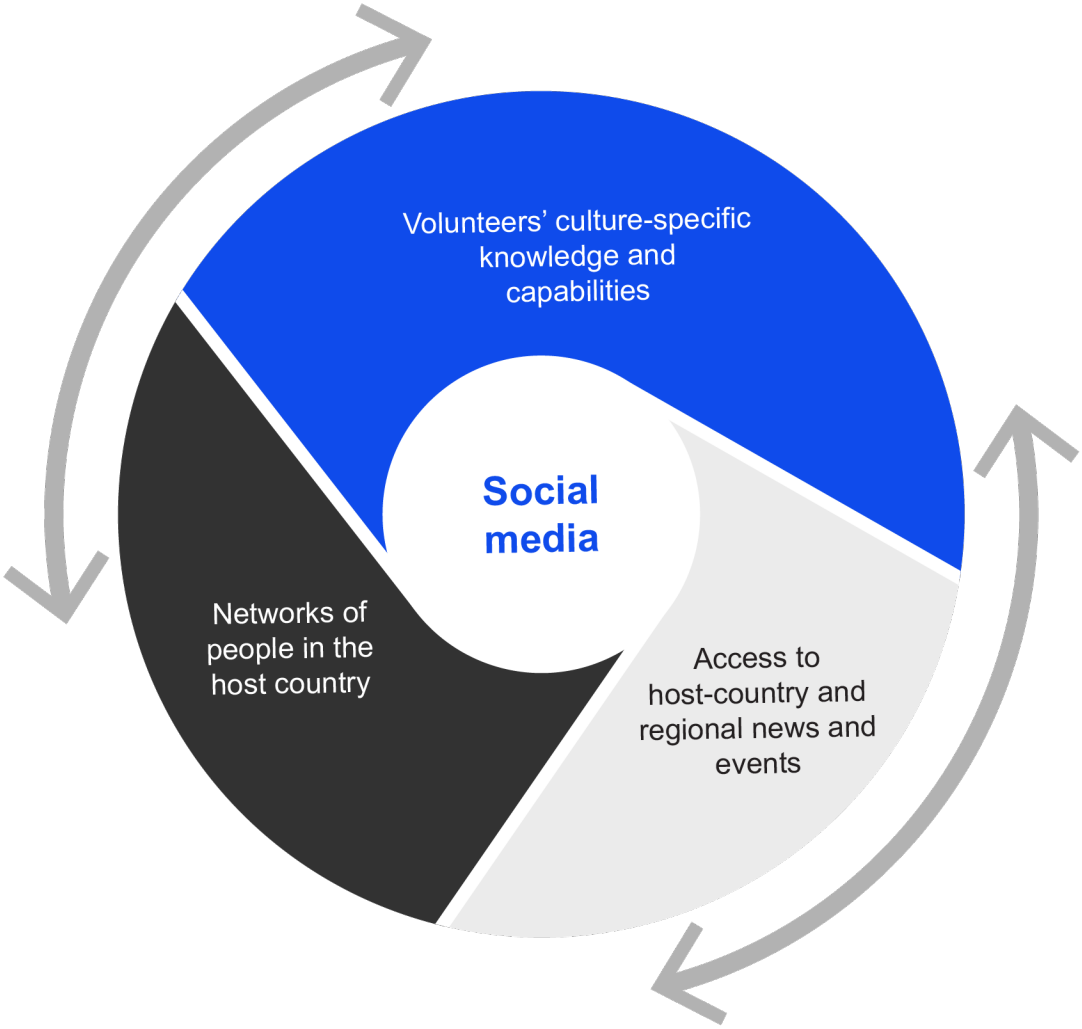
Importantly, these relationships appear to continue even when volunteers are outside the host-country and their connections and engagement are maintained largely from a distance and mediated via social media.

> *"… [My understanding of the host country] continues to grow because I'm in touch with the [former co-workers] all the time over social media … I have more of an awareness now. When I see something about [the host-country] culture, I go, 'Oh, I know that.' And so, my knowledge connects me with things that I see. I can talk about it to people. I can explain it a little bit better. Yeah, I just have an affinity. I feel like I have an affinity with the [host-country] people. I feel closer to their culture and them"* (#49, T5)

> *"We have a very strong interest in [the host country], not in a really acute way, but in a real, like, '[the country] is always in our heart' kind of way. But also, I think still having people on Facebook and still having people on social media and seeing what their updates are and that sort of thing - the interest is still populating my mind a little bit. Like, what are people doing? What are people experiencing? Especially when it's been things like the earthquake - just trying to understand what people were going through. So I think it's that interest that keeps me learning and understanding it even more than I did when I was there, actually"* (#21, T5)

> *"I feel way less adept in [the host country] politics and the state of [the host country] right now [than when I finished my assignment]. Honestly, I get most of my information when I meet up with my [HCN] friends, I get a sense check of where they think things are. Because I really trust their perspectives, knowing that it's subjective, obviously … unless someone from my network shares something, I won't seek it out. But if there's a story about [the host country] on the news, I'll stick around and watch it. I'll take the opportunity to learn."* (#46, T5)

Figure 6: How connections and engagement continue to support host country capabilities



4.4.2 Culture-general Knowledge and Capabilities

Participants report using and benefiting from 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities' that they had developed or improved during their assignment considerably more often than 'culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.' The proportion reporting clear benefits from these is 87% (T5) and has risen since T4.[105] Ten (21%) identified this as the major impact of the volunteer assignment.[106]

Around two thirds of participants who were working at T5 (including all *Enhancers* and most *Transitioners)* reported regular and specific examples of applying culture-general knowledge and capabilities that they acquired or improved during their volunteer assignment in work situations across multiple years.[107] Over a third of these believed they were a major contributor to improving their job performance,[108] while a quarter credited these as a factor in successful applications for a job, promotion or committee membership.[109] An additional six found these capabilities indispensable to follow-up international volunteer assignments.[110] Five others used these in formal or informal domestic volunteering roles.[111] All of these participants attributed the current volunteer assignment as expanding their culture-general knowledge and capabilities, despite most having plentiful prior international work or travel experiences.[112] Of the six participants[113] reporting no use of these capabilities since their assignment (including two *Non-working Partners*), most still valued the cultural elements of the experience. In two cases, participants reported developing important capabilities but having limited opportunities to apply them, given their work and family roles.

There is some evidence that, in the years since their assignment, participants have become better able to articulate and more appreciative of the practical benefits of culture-general changes. Participants' increasing use of these capabilities appears to be a reason for these. An example is participant #03, who soon after the assignment described it as "*enrich[ing] my current thinking. It gives you more knowledge … how to deal with situations and people. You do question yourself as well. I don't go in with preconceived ideas*" (#03, T3), who later reported "*probably on a weekly basis, even day-to-day life, it's something you can draw from quite a bit … there's always that playing in your mind*" (#03, T4) and, two years later during an international work assignment:

> *"I guess I'm able to sit back and deal with things a bit quicker and more effectively. So the challenges that I see I can go, 'Yeah, I've seen that before', or I can wrangle it this way. And I've only been here about two months now, and I feel I've slipped in very, very quickly, very easily. Talking to other [expatriates], they can't believe how far we've actually been able to go [on this project] in the last two months, because I guess I'm more comfortable with myself and with how I can deal with certain things … in a cultural context"* (#03, T5)

There is also evidence that participants have had more opportunities for repeated and increasingly complex use of culture-general capabilities within specific domains as their careers have progressed,[114] while others may have strengthened their views about the assignment's impacts and the magnitude of personal change. The **case study of Fiona on page 54** is one example of this and how it now informs her life and work. It is also true that many of the changes that participants view as most transformative and that have had strong impacts on their personal lives, such as self-awareness, reflective appreciation, and relational orientation, are underpinned by their growing culture-general awareness. These are discussed in Section 7.3.

In short, culture-general knowledge and capabilities were the chief cultural dividends participants linked to their assignment[115] and the most easily translatable[116] to new settings. Although descriptions varied, the two most consistently reported impacts have been variations on cognitive or behavioural adaptability, which the study labels 'behavioural flexibility' and 'global mindset.' Both are discussed below.

4.4.2.1 Behavioural Flexibility

'**Behavioural flexibility**' refers to transferable interpersonal capabilities that participants attributed to their contacts with HCNs or other foreigners, which have application outside the host country, and that made them better relationship builders with a range of people (establishing trust, having genuine conversations, establishing rapport with different stakeholders), collaborators, and/or communicators (e.g., explaining things simply, needing to listen more carefully, giving and eliciting feedback).

The in-country experiences most conducive to participants improving behavioural flexibility were unstructured workplace interactions during non-routine tasks, particularly volunteers' close collaborations with HCN and expatriate PO colleagues.[117]

Behavioural flexibility has been the capability that participants have found easiest to translate to a range of work and non-work situations, including to establish rapport, manage relationships, collaborate, or communicate.[118] Two believe that it has helped them establish an informal identity in their workplace as a 'mediating person' who can facilitate interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds.[119]

The most common use of behavioural flexibility is communicative - e.g., effectively adjusting when communicating with non-native English speakers, being attuned to (and overcoming) intercultural barriers when collaborating as managers or mentors, or when providing services to clients. One participant described being more adept at "*switching from the 'telling side*' to the *'listening side'"* with work colleagues (#31, T4), another (#39, T4) at "*making things accessible in plain English*." An early-career *Launcher* elaborated:

> *Sitting down and listening to what people have to say is something I've gotten from the volunteer program. I'm […] years old now and things change your life. You start to appreciate other people's stories a bit. The program was a mechanism that exposed me to these kinds of people [diverse, with different life experiences] ... very different stories to mine, very different experiences to mine* (#19, T5)

Most examples occurred in diverse Australian workplaces (government, corporate, non-profit) that comprise staff or clients from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and other minority groups. In the period since their assignment ended, nine participants have reported benefiting during their work with Indigenous Australians and/or refugees or migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds:[120] ("*I'm much more relaxed about working with Aboriginal people when things don't work out. I just think, oh well, we'll work it out tomorrow. And I think that's come partly from working in the [host country], and just getting used to that process – that's the way white people work, and you don't have to work like that"*, #05, T4). Others have direct applications in organisations or roles with specific international/global objectives and projects (e.g., INGOs, intergovernmental agencies).[121] Participants on follow-up volunteer assignments report using and benefiting from behavioural flexibility, despite these being in different countries, types of POs, and contexts (e.g., urban/rural).[122]

As participants describe it, behavioural flexibility involves making a series of relatively simple but practised adjustments. Hence, as enacted by volunteers, **behavioural flexibility is best understood as a set of 'micro-practices'[123] that help them adapt and be confident in intercultural interactions**. A lucid example of this is **the case study of Charlie on page 108** and introduced in Section 6.4. A retired *Veteran* with extensive prior international experience, Charlie found that his assignment in South East Asia challenged him to refine and use a suite of communication techniques – primarily when communicating in English with people who had different levels of fluency - that involve "*making changes to how I'd normally do it, just subtle things I picked up*" (T4). Charlie's case study highlights another potential benefit of behavioural flexibility for volunteers – as well as improving communication quality in the immediate setting, it created opportunities for Charlie to model behaviours in different contexts that his colleagues could learn from and use in their own international dealings (i.e., as a mechanism of interpersonal capacity development).

Related to this, the examples provided make it clear that **behavioural flexibility is portable and translatable across situations, stakeholders and mediums**. For instance, participant #46 shared specific

examples of benefiting from behavioural flexibility in a variety of interactions in work and non-work settings across three employers, four years, and three interviews that included: volunteering in her local community in rural Australia (T3), supporting Australian clients using an online platform to engage with activities that have an international focus (T4), participating at a global conference she was selected to attend (T4), living with housemates who hold different religious views (T4), mentoring colleagues in her workplace (T5), and developing relationships with migrants in a new community to which she had relocated (T5). Participant #53, who now works in international development with the Asia-Pacific office of an INGO, gave examples of behavioural flexibility improving her interactions with government agencies, family members, and her partner (T3), when communicating via Zoom and email with international colleagues, (T4), during regular meetings with a group of young leaders from five different nations that she oversees (T4), and when representing Australia at online and in-person global conferences (T5).

4.4.2.2 Global Mindset

'**Global mindset**' refers to cognitive capabilities and perspectives enabling participants to view people, groups, situations, or events more holistically, empathetically and/or flexibly.[124] It captures a set of outcomes that were commonly reported (T2-T5), but which participants had difficulty describing in terms of what changes these involved and how these affected their lives subsequently.[125]

The following descriptors capture the range of ways that participants[126] explained these changes, along with illustrative interview extracts:

- Being more aware or appreciative of cultural differences[127] ("*It's been such a wake-up call to the fact that you don't know everything, and that you have to just maintain this baseline curiosity and openness to learning new things at all times. Across the board, that's the biggest lesson that helps with all of my work*", #45, T5)
- Seeing and understanding different points of view[128] ("*Being able to see differences in the standpoint [of different groups] ... having an appreciation for both sides ... knowing the vast amount of miscommunication that's going on in there, the biases behind those differences", #20, T3*)
- Being able to view situations in less polarised ways; e.g., to see similarities rather than differences[129] ("*What am I better at? Just seeing similarities rather than difference. Just because 'they're' different and spoke a different language, everyone wants to be loved, to love, to be secure, to have their family around them and be part of their community. That is just being human. And we're all the same. The differences on top of that are minor compared to what everything we've got the same", #42, T5*)
- Having a broader perspective on events and one's own enculturation[130] ("*a much broader world view"*)
- Being willing and able to understand (in a non-judgmental way) the thoughts, motives and/or feelings of the others, and the reasons behind these[131] *("Once you understand the things that we take for granted that other people can't take for granted, like the availability of water out of a tap or electricity, it does make you think really differently. It makes you a more empathetic person. You have a greater understanding of the 'other', whoever the other is", #05, T4*)
- Being able to understand one's own culture as an outsider and able to see an "*outsider's perspective"*[132] ("*You see a much more concrete view of how other people see us …. A lot of Australians don't actually have a concrete idea of what people overseas think of us", #53, T3*)
- Being more interested in or comfortable with multiculturalism and cultural differences[133] ("*It's certainly something that I feel comfortable in, interacting or engaging [minorities] … being immersed in a completely different cultural environment, and one where you are a minority, because I am never a minority [in Australia], it does highlight the empathy that you might have for someone who is living in that situation here", #03, T5*)
- Being less categorical, divisive, or judgmental[134] ("*It definitely impacted the way I move throughout the world in terms of how I relate to, understand, and empathise with experiences of migration. My experience was obviously very different and very privileged, but I think just having that experience myself and the experience of learning about a new culture, I've always been curious about it, but it really embedded and solidified that curiosity and the positive benefit that I think can come from everybody having shared cultural experiences*", #07, T5)

Numerous accounts were given of workplace incidents that contributed to participants becoming aware of and developing these perspectives. The in-country experiences participants most strongly associate with global mindset were outside the workplace – day-to-day observations and experiences[135] - but also work and non-work incidents of dissonance or conflict, and informal and unstructured discussions with others, including HCNs. Consistent with this, the assignment features most strongly associated with these changes were volunteers working closely with a counterpart in a designated mentor role.[136]

One or more members of all categories believe attributes associated with global mindset have informed or improved interactions in their social lives (e.g., with people from different backgrounds),[137] or in workplaces by improving their confidence working with people from other groups, the quality of the policies they develop and implement, or how they provide services.[138] Participant #08, for example, was inspired to "*assist some of the most vulnerable people in our communities*" by making calls to service providers on their behalf when needed because:

> *"… I'm not discriminated against because I don't have an accent … I feel there's also an opportunity for me to utilise my privilege, growing up as a fourth-generation white Australian and having some understanding of systems and some ways to advocate. … I can assist people in little ways like that that just help remove some barriers for some people"* (#08, T5)

A common example of participants increasingly benefiting from this capability is their questioning or better understanding their own biases and the benefit of alternative approaches and mindsets informing their work. Participants shared examples from a range of situations. **Section 6.4** outlines some of the practical ways that participants translated these to benefit their work practices and performance.

4.5 Key Implications

Implication 4.1: Creating assignment conditions that support deep volunteer-HCN relationships

The most enduring and beneficial outcomes for participants' global literacy and connections arose when volunteers worked closely with HCNs in sustained, collaborative professional relationships. The strongest of these appear to exhibit a bridging-to-bonding tie evolution,[139] moving from relatively weak connections between social groups to high-trust, reciprocal ties with beneficial consequences (as illustrated by the case of Martha and Josie). Some of the most impactful involved working partnerships that were akin to a 'counterpart' model, characterised by intensive and regular collaborative interactions with a particular HCN.

The challenges of counterpart models for development effectiveness are numerous and were evident in several examples in this study (including counterpart turnover and competing work pressures). Nonetheless, the program could consider how assignment design, PO selection, and in-country support can create the conditions most conducive to forming these types of relationships. Frameworks are available to guide the design of optimal intergroup contact conditions (e.g., strong authority support for the contact, perceived equality, work involving interdependent tasks)[140] and to monitor both their positive outcomes and potential harms.

The findings of this study support global research that shows mutual benefits from these types of volunteer-HCN relationships.[141] Thus, the developmental gains for volunteers' global literacy, cross-cultural capabilities, and lasting connections from these types of relationships are likely to be mutual, also serving PO and HCN development goals. The program should therefore support POs and HCNs to identify and develop the capabilities that make these relationships mutually supportive and developmental.

Implication 4.2: Sustaining the ecosystem of host-country connections, engagement and learning after the assignment ends

Host-country ties and PO connections have shown a pattern of weakening over time without sustained structural support (e.g., professional collaborations, repeat assignments, shared networks).[142] This is important because the findings reveal a virtuous cycle of mutual reinforcement between three interconnected outcomes: participants' host-country connections, their ongoing engagement with the country, and their culture-specific knowledge and capabilities (**Figure 6**)**.** Maintaining the relational foundations of this cycle, particularly volunteers' connections with HCNs and POs, is both valuable in its own right and acts as a mechanism through which a wider ecosystem of post-assignment learning and engagement is maintained.

The program can play an active role in sustaining both the relationships and the ecosystem they support. At the relational level, this includes helping volunteers maintain access to host-country information by, for instance, supporting POs to share appropriate updates and achievements with volunteers (directly or via active social media accounts), or creating structured opportunities that re-activate and build on PO-volunteer ties (e.g., alumni events, hosted return visits).

At the systemic level, structured VLJ activities before, during and after the assignment can support one or more components of the cycle in **Figure 6.** For instance, ICMTs could share news and events with alumni volunteers (e.g., events in POs, national political or cultural issues from host countries) to refine volunteers' host-country knowledge and prompt outreach to POs. The model also draws attention to the wider range of impacts that arise from ICOPs beyond helping volunteers enjoy, cope, and succeed during their assignments; namely, ICOPs provide foundational knowledge upon which volunteers' post-assignment engagement, connections and application of capabilities are built.

Beyond dyadic HCN-volunteer ties, the program should continue to create opportunities to help volunteers establish and sustain a balanced and complementary set of social and professional relationships arising from their assignments that includes volunteers, HCNs, and others. One example of this is the program's use of accessible alumni volunteers to support in-country or incoming cohorts. Importantly, these initiatives also benefit POs, which gain from the ongoing informal contributions that alumni provide, a point developed further in Implication 4.3.

Finally, financial and technological barriers to productive engagement via social media can undermine each component of this ecosystem for both volunteers and HCNs. The program could consider ways to reduce these barriers (e.g., advice or training to support sustained connection, seeding online communities to encourage re-engagement).

Implication 4.3: Recognising and supporting alumni as transnational development resources

The evidence from this study makes clear that international volunteer assignments are not confined to fixed periods of service or one-way transfer of knowledge or support. Indeed, for these participants, the experience has been more transnational than international: their contributions, learning and relationships were multi-directional and extended past the assignment's official duration and host destination. These have been continued through cross-border relationships that enable ongoing two-way exchanges of knowledge and support across organisational, geographic, and sometimes generational boundaries.

Part of this exchange comprises the continuing benefits that some former volunteers provide by functioning as bridge-builders, knowledge brokers, and informal advocates for their former POs and HCN friends. These examples, which include involvement in multi-million dollar project partnerships, informal diaspora support, professional network brokerage, and ongoing civic connections, represent a valued form of social capital[143] that continues to benefit volunteers and appears to be a practical development resource for POs and host communities.

Efforts to identify, support, and communicate this set of activities offer potential benefits for the program's wider impacts and for volunteers' ongoing global literacy and civic engagement. Care should be taken, however, to avoid undermining volunteers' intrinsic motivations by, for instance, over-formalising these contributions or creating perceptions of instrumentalisation (i.e., that the program is seeking to benefit reputationally or diplomatically from volunteers' discretionary efforts). Simple initiatives that encourage and recognise these efforts might include helping former volunteers share collaboration opportunities with POs and networks, or profiling impactful bridge-building outcomes through alumni channels and social media.

Implication 4.4: Helping volunteers develop and sustain their culture-general capabilities

Participants' increasing appreciation and use of culture-general knowledge and capabilities over time is a strong indication of the longevity and depth of impact that the program creates for volunteers. It also shows that many have been able to convert context-specific cross-cultural experiences into more portable and flexible intercultural skills.[144] These capabilities, like behavioural flexibility and global mindset, have proven to be the most translatable and increasingly valued outcomes of the assignment.

The in-country conditions most conducive to developing these capabilities, such as non-routine tasks, close collaborations with HCNs, opportunities for unstructured discussions, and non-work intercultural contacts (Sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2), are all strongly shaped by program structures like assignment design, PO conditions and location, and VLJ activities. Program structures are therefore valuable enablers of this learning and should be viewed as such. The program could consider how to calibrate assignment design to create conditions most strongly associated with culture-general development, such as opportunities for close HCN collaboration, immersive placements, and experiences that allow volunteers to work through cultural dissonances, ensuring that any changes to assignment design are consistent with the assignment's primary development objectives.

It is also likely that a relationship exists between culture-specific and culture-general development: culture-specific capabilities provide the confidence, contacts, and contextual understanding through which broader culture-general insights and orientations emerge.[145] Thus, suggestions to help volunteers sustain their host-country knowledge and engagement (Implication 4.2) are likely to support the development of more widely used and appreciated culture-general capabilities.

Importantly, volunteers' culture-specific and culture-general knowledge and capabilities continue to evolve after their assignment. Both can decline or grow, depending on opportunities for ongoing contact and application. The program should consider facilitating these opportunities in ways that are tailored to volunteers' circumstances; for instance, helping *Enhancers* to apply these capabilities in professional settings with international dimensions, helping *Veterans* transfer them to follow-up assignments, and helping *Launchers* to apply them in international development roles. Alumni volunteers from these categories who have applied these capabilities in professional or developmental contexts may be a valuable resource here.[146]

Of equal interest to the program is the reciprocal dimension of this relationship. The conditions that most strongly develop volunteers' culture-general capabilities - close collaborations and 'counterpart-like' relationships (Implication 4.1) - also create significant learning and development opportunities for HCNs and PO staff, meaning that efforts to calibrate assignment design to maximise volunteers' culture-general development can support the program's primary development objectives.

Volunteer stories: Robin

Finding and sustaining connections in a remote placement

Arrival, Isolation, and the Search for Connection

Robin brought vast international experience to her volunteer assignment, having been born overseas and having spent large chunks of her career travelling the world. Her decision to volunteer was straightforward ("*I always wanted to do some volunteer work*", T1) but also pragmatic - "*I finished my last contract [at a former employer] … for me to find another job at my age is going to be impossible*" (T1).

A health professional, Robin's assignment took her to a remote village in Cambodia, a country she knew little of and had never visited. She arrived with no contacts and just a few weeks of basic language training in the capital city, "*nine or ten hours away by bus*" (T2). Initially, it was, she says, "*extremely isolating … I felt really quite isolated and lonely*" (T2), particularly after work hours "*when all the national staff [from the PO] go home to their families*" (T2). This led her to "*look for opportunities to do some volunteering elsewhere, just to get some social activity, something social outside work*" (T2).

Networks Formed in Place and Through the Program

A meeting with a local English teacher "*turned out to be a godsend*" (T2). Robin helped in the teacher's classroom ("*just to get some social activity*") and through this "*became best friends with [the teacher] … a very charming young Cambodian gentleman … we go cycling together and swimming and through him I've met other people*" (T2). She also met and began to "*hang out together*" with what she described as "*an eclectic group*" of expatriates - "*a group of young Austrians, 18-year-olds, straight out of school*" and *a "74 year-old gentleman from Ireland*" - who, collectively, comprised "*half of the expats in the region … we formed a nice little group*" (T2). The remoteness of her assignment ("*we don't even have traffic lights here*", T2) made Robin especially appreciative of the chance to attend organised program activities in Phnom Penh as "*a circuit breaker … to travel there, go to a nice hotel, nice restaurant and see [other volunteers] … I'd turn up early because I was desperate to meet people and talk about volunteering and the issues and social life*" (T2).

Robin's assignment was reduced to nine months because of the COVID pandemic. Even so, the contacts she made through her work in Cambodia led to an offer for "*my absolute dream job*" (T3) with a large intergovernmental agency that was ultimately derailed by the sustained disruptions of COVID.

Enduring Value, Fading Ties, and Movement to New Placements

Robin went on to complete two additional formal volunteer assignments in 2023 and 2024 and was offered her fourth 18-month assignment soon after her T5 interview ("*I am thrilled … currently busy getting visa documentation together and health checks et cetera, et cetera*", email). Now "*semi-retired*" (T5), she described her contact with friends and former colleagues from Cambodia as initially being frequent but gradually declining: "*At the beginning it was almost every other day … but obviously it's tailed off over the months*" (T3). Nevertheless, she remained connected to the PO for many years through a group messaging app and continued to provide ad hoc support to several former colleagues and the English teacher (T4), including giving feedback on job résumés and application letters. By T4, much of her support for her Cambodia-based colleagues had "*dissipated*" although she stayed in touch with "*a couple of colleagues who have moved onto different aspects of their work … I see their pictures and updates of what they're doing … socially*" (T4). By T5, even the social contact had begun to "*fizzle out.*" She had lost contact with all but one of her former colleagues ("*I see him putting up pictures [to social media], I comment, so that's sustained, but it's dropped off*", T5). And while she still had contact with the English teacher ("*he's actually moved to Phnom Penh, he messages me sometimes. I message him*", T5), over time the new networks associated with her subsequent volunteer assignments came to occupy a more prominent place in her attention and social media engagement (T4-T5). Robin also stays in touch with the expatriates - "*I managed to catch up with the young Austrians and English gentlemen when I was in the UK in 2023 … it was very nice*" (T4) … "*we messaged each other after that but it's certainly quietened down*" (T5).

A similar trend has occurred with Robin's engagement with news and events from Cambodia. In the months and years after her assignment, she would "*look at the news on Cambodia quite regularly … I'm more aware of it and I do look at the news and see what's going on, quite often colleagues post things for me*" (T3). Her interest, however, "*did decline; before I went to [the next assignment] I started reading up on what was happening there … my focus switched, I've been monitoring events there more*" (T4). Around the same time, she lost access to the PO group messaging feed "*because people [from the PO] moved onto different positions*" (T4) – a feed that had allowed her to "*check each day and see which little villages they've been to … they put pictures up … I'm following that quite closely, it keeps me in the picture*" (T3). Now, six years later, events in the host countries of her two follow-up assignments and other parts of the world ("*Rwanda, Gaza, Lebanon, what [USA President] Trump's doing*", T5) consume much of her attention, although her experiences in Cambodia give these an additional layer of context (T5).

Robin continues to view her assignment and the relationships she formed favourably. "*Cambodia stands out*" among her many international experiences, she says, because "*I felt part of the team, it was interesting living in [such a remote] part of the country even though it was a little challenging*" (T5). Despite her global background, she still believes her experiences in Cambodia "*absolutely*" gave her "*a feeling of comfort … getting used to working with a different culture, different ways of working, absolutely*" on her subsequent assignments (T5). She would love to "*go back to Cambodia and see people that I didn't have the chance to say goodbye to because we were repatriated so quickly*", she says, hoping for "*a proper goodbye this time*" (T4).

Volunteer stories: Martha

An evolving relationship from strangers to friends

Beginning as Workplace Counterparts

Martha knew little about the host culture and no-one from the host country when starting her assignment ("*I have never met a [host-country national] in my life*", T1). She was motivated by the role and the chance to do meaningful work in a different system (T1). Soon after starting her assignment with a local manufacturing co-operative, she was paired with a host-country colleague, Josie, who was new to the role herself and who became Martha's designated counterpart for the bulk of the assignment.

From the outset, their relationship was built by working side-by-side, day-in and day-out. Martha took the capacity building aspect of her assignment seriously ("*it was very much a mentoring role rather than management, which I'm more familiar with*", T2). She shared examples of the efforts she made to coach, role model, and then step back to help Josie build confidence and take on an increasing array of responsibilities ("*I led by example, was always encouraging others to do it … professionally, I got a lot out of it*", T2). Martha took pride in Josie's rapid growth in workplace skills, management proficiencies and burgeoning leadership within the co-op ("*she's a really good learner*", T2). For Martha, a moment symbolising this was Josie's selection to represent the country at an international expo linked to the co-operative's work ("*We practised her speech many times before she went. She wrote it and she was very nervous … she did a great job and she gave her speech and apparently lots of people were crying in the room when they learned her story",* T2).

From Mentoring Relationship to Personal Friendship

Just as importantly, Martha and Josie's connection quickly extended beyond their official duties at the co-operative. Living in a small island community, Martha sometimes felt isolated from the tight-knit expatriate circle and gravitated toward local relationships. She found friendship and belonging through relationships with HCNs that included Josie and her family, and which strengthened their personal bonds outside the workplace. The closeness was practical and ordinary - sharing meals, meeting Josie's relatives, participating in everyday activities - rather than staged 'cultural experiences':

> "*I spent more time with [the local] people and Josie's family … went to her village and home … I stayed the night at her house a few times and we cooked at her house and ate [local food] and did stuff with her kids, and I took them to the beach … we had a great time*" (T2)

Martha also contributed to Josie's independence outside the workplace, giving informal driving lessons and helping her buy a car (T2). By the time Martha's assignment unexpectedly ended due to COVID, the relationship had started to evolve from professional counterpart to friends who cared about each other's wellbeing.

Staying Connected after Repatriation

Although Martha's repatriation separated her from Josie geographically, they both made the effort to stay connected. Initially, Martha described "*speak[ing] to Josie nearly every second day or we certainly text every day. And then of course there's Facebook*" (T3). The relationship also became a conduit for continued support around the co-operative's immediate needs during COVID, with Martha feeling responsible for her volunteer project work to continue and an obligation to help Josie. For instance, Martha's concern about Josie's ability to cope financially ("*I thought, oh my god, how is she going to cope with a family of five children on her own and not have any money?*", T2) led her to help negotiate Josie's remote work conditions ("*I organised … for her to be able to work from home for 2–3 days a week*", T2).

Over time, the relationship has blended friendship, responsibility, and practical advocacy. It remains down-to-earth, emotional at times, and sustained by regular communication. It is also an ongoing "*two-way*" connection (T4). The two celebrate each other's achievements, such as a magazine article featuring Josie as a woman leader in manufacturing, which Martha helped facilitate from afar and takes great pride in (T5). Josie and other personal contacts are now Martha's main source of news and updates from the host country – on events, the lives (and sometimes deaths) of mutual friends, the co-op's status, and even broader geopolitical or economic shifts in the region (T4) - through video and phone calls, direct messages, and social media posts and feeds (T4-T5).

A Friendship that Endures Beyond the Assignment

While the volunteer project and focus on the co-op has become less dominant (T5), the friendship remains active and meaningful albeit also less intense than the immediate post-repatriation period. Still, Martha's language suggests that it will continue rather than decline: at T5 she had plans to visit the host country "*to see everyone*" and her connection with Josie remains part of her emotional geography, an ongoing attachment that has shaped how she remembers the host country, values her experiences there, and stays connected to it.

Volunteer stories: Susan

Connecting and helping diaspora networks through a shared language

Prior to her assignment, Susan had never visited the host country (T1). Her first contact with HCNs and the host-country language occurred during the assignment recruitment and VLJ process.

Although truncated by COVID, Susan's assignment involved deep immersion in the local culture. She was the sole foreigner in the PO and dealt daily with HCN colleagues and clients. Almost all the learning outcomes she reported at T2 related to the host culture and cross-cultural skills to build relationships and work as a cultural and linguistic minority. The role necessitated learning the host-country language, something that, at T1, she "*would like to do while I am there*" and by T2 "*was able to pick that up relatively well … by the start of this year, I felt pretty confident I could navigate any kind of conversation that I needed to*." These language skills - and her ability to use them to connect with the diaspora community in Australia after her repatriation - became important when she was contacted via social media by a former HCN colleague who had come to Australia. She explained:

> *"He did seasonal work … (W)ith COVID I didn't get to visit him, but he ended up needing some support for his mental health and connecting with services. His English is totally fine, but just to have some of those conversations around mental health [in his own language] … to frame that within the context of his language and asking those questions meant I got better answers and he got better support. There's just questions and ways of saying things that you can't get the same meaning out of (in) English"* (T3)
>
> *"His contract got extended because of COVID … he just wanted to be home and it wasn't possible. So we had to figure out how to keep him safe out in the middle of rural Western Australia and then how to get him home in a 'hurry up' timeframe. There was another volunteer in […] who I'd never met but worked at […] and who knew this guy. And another gentleman who came out … who I had met and who also knows the [man]. So between the three of us, we all linked up and helped him out. And now he's home and happy"* (T3)

When borders re-opened in 2022, Susan returned to a follow-up assignment with the same PO where she helped "*keep [the PO] funded … diversifying the funding so it's not just a single grant or a single government supporting"* (T5). Now back in Australia, she continues using her language skills when she "*speaks regularly to a handful of friends*" in the host country and with diaspora from the host country and other countries from the region where the language is understood (T5).

Volunteer stories: Kevin

Language and network node connecting Australia and the host country

Kevin spoke the host-country language and was familiar with its culture before starting his assignment. While this familiarity was advantageous during his assignment, he is adamant that it has been equally valuable to his professional life in Australia.

Kevin's current work involves engagement with the host country "*every day*" (T4) and regular visits (T4-T5) and he sees the relationships he developed as a volunteer as central to the way he now performs his work ("*to build the relationship … I do rely on a lot of the engagements that I did via the volunteer program*", T5). He has sustained multiple sets of ties with HCNs that cut across different aspects of his work and life, and that have benefited him personally and professionally in numerous ways. These include, without conscious planning, serving as an informal 'bridge' between different communities in Australia and the host country – both directly and indirectly – where he uses his relationships, deep understanding of both cultures, and credibility as a former volunteer. They include:

- Connecting former PO colleagues, who he has been "*constantly in contact with*" for five years ("*you become friends after a while*", T5), with in-country Australian officials and colleagues during work trips to the host country ("*when I bring them to [the host country] we go [to the PO] and visit, have a look*", T5).
- During the same trips, using his "*reputation*" as a former volunteer with embassy staff in the host country to access local networks that benefit his work ("*Definitely, 100% … all the time when I go there*", T5) and to promote the benefits of the volunteer program to owners and managers of host country organisations ("*I walked them through the process … how to apply*", T4).
- Supporting Australian colleagues' understanding of the host-country culture and language by mediating connections, answering questions and conducting training (T4).
- Creating indirect connections between Australian organisations (including his employer) and "*deserving*" host-country NGOs via informal workplace fundraising events ("*we organise happy hours … and then we send funds over to [the NGOs] … we've raised about $3100 this year so far*", T5) and donations ("*we've connected [an Australian organisation] and, via us, they now donate their old basketball equipment*", T5).
- Continuing relationships with former volunteers and the program's in-country staff ("*I can reach out to them at any point … for advice*", T4), which allow him to connect with the right people in the host country when the need arises.
- Coordinating what is, in effect, an informal support service for HCN friends and diaspora members (including seasonal workers) in Australia who need assistance – a role that sits outside his formal job but which he sustains via personal obligation and accessibility ("*I've just shared my phone number out to people and people contact me at all hours of the day … questions like, 'How do we get a licence?', 'What does this mean?'*", T5).

Volunteer stories: Jeffrey

Growing cultural knowledge "mired in nuance"

From Limited Knowledge to Emerging Awareness

Before his assignment, Jeffrey's knowledge of the host country was minimal ("*I would have known the capital of [the country] before I went and that's it. I could maybe point it out on the map*"). Over time, that understanding shifted to what he later described (T5) as:

> *"… a Dunning-Kruger rollercoaster. I think I know stuff and then you end up hearing something and it's mired in cultural nuance and you're aware that there is nuance there and you just don't know what it is … and my understanding of the surrounding countries too, frankly. The relationship with [neighbouring countries] … all of the international development and international relations within [the region]"*

Learning Through People and Place

Jeffrey links much of his insight to learning through others. He says it was "*a product of speaking with other volunteers first and foremost and then realising where that all fits in with what you're doing.*" He illustrates this through trips he made to visit volunteers working in a remote border area where he was exposed to:

> *"… a clearer understanding of the country's international relations and international development landscape … the work is a lot more acute in terms of frontline development and humanitarian style rather than [in the capital], which felt quite removed from most of the privations of the rest of the country. Then there's, obviously, those people who were doing direct work there and hearing about that."*

Interpreting Social Dynamics in Everyday Interaction

Back in the capital, Jeffrey also made a deliberate effort to spend his time with local co-workers. Over months, these everyday conversations helped him notice and interpret social dynamics he would otherwise have missed, including majority-minority relations:

> *"It's valuable to have an appreciation of the diversity … it informs the way you see other people interacting with [minorities] and the way that people might be dismissive [of certain groups] … seeing [country] as not just many ethnic groups, but one which has a majority which then [dominates] the others"* (T5)

Continuing to Learn

Jeffrey describes his learning about the host country as substantial and yet unfinished: he feels he gained "*gigantic new knowledge*" about the host country as a result of his assignment, both through time in-country and through continued engagement since. He also credits "*having [my partner] to essentially bounce those ideas off*" during and after the assignment as important to deepening and sustaining his understanding:

> *"Without her, I feel like it would just be me on an island. Especially because there's nobody here that we were in [the host country] with … so if I were by myself, it would be at arm's length, talking to people online and then it wouldn't be that sort of everyday thing. We still have little phrases in [the host country] language that we speak to each other when we're trying to remain sotto voce amongst English speakers … that little cultural touchstone, that shared experience and keeping that alive between us, someone who lived and went through that … it means that this is like a feedback loop, like a positive reinforcement of our own … it ends up being a little touchpoint in our relationship and our own way of dealing with the world … it's a huge part of our relationship"* (T5)

Jeffrey and his partner both stay informed of events in the host country through social media connections ("*The only reason I still have Facebook is because it provides that tether to a hundred [HCNs]*"), allowing him to maintain and further refine his awareness of the cultural and political nuance that he is still trying to understand, five years after leaving the country.

Volunteer stories: Fiona

"The longer ago it is, the more important it's become"

Familiar Setting, Deeper Impact

Volunteering in the Pacific wasn't a new experience for Fiona. She had worked in the same host country previously, and her career in community/social development had involved substantial work and consultation with Aboriginal communities in Australia. Yet her assignment in 2019, nearly a decade after she retired from full-time work (T1), would prove to have a deeper and more enduring impact than she expected.

Much of Fiona's energy in-country was directed at the practicalities of the role and the challenges of working in a government department. She found "*the first few months extremely unproductive*" and described the frustrations of navigating bureaucracy, mismatched expectations, and limited resources (T2). Yet, in reflecting on her time in-country, she also acknowledged that the experience was already beginning to shift her perspective: "*I've broadened my capacity to be empathetic and to understand where other people are coming from*" (T2). She found "*the last couple of months*" of her assignment, before being repatriated, "*very productive, I can now see exactly what needs to be done, just as I'm leaving!*" (T2).

Post-assignment Meaning Making

As Fiona describes it, the benefits of her cultural exposure became more apparent after she returned home. A year later, she described herself feeling unexpectedly homesick, "*not for the project or even for the people, but just for the place*" (T3). She stayed in contact with fellow volunteers and former PO colleagues. She began to notice how the experience was benefiting her part-time work consulting with Aboriginal communities. Despite decades of cross-cultural work and training, she noticed: "*I've become much more sensitive … trying much harder to understand what people are saying and the body language and things that you have to interpret in order to really communicate with someone from another culture*" (T3). She also found herself drawing on her [host-country] experience in conversations with Aboriginal colleagues, using it as a reference point to explain shared challenges around land, culture and community: "*I like talking to Aboriginal people about what I did in [the host country] - they're always interested*" (T4).

Carrying Cross-cultural Learning into Work in Australia

By 2023, Fiona was clearer about the connection between her evolving outlook and the experiences on her assignment. She described in detail how working in the Pacific had reinforced the importance of patience, listening, and recognising different ways of working that were equally applicable to her work with First Nations Australians ("*If you really want to get results you sometimes have to use a different time scale*", T4). She also described how "*working in a country where the Indigenous people are the majority*" (T5) has changed the way she now builds relationships with Indigenous clients in Australia ("*the most important thing the volunteer program does is teach you to understand other people's ways, that really helps [those relationships]*", T5) and how her knowledge of the host culture has transferred to inform her consulting work, including in relation to Indigenous sea rights, which informed advice she provided in a government report ("[*In the host country] every coral reef is owned … you can't just go and fish wherever you like, you've got to get permission. Most people in Australia don't understand that*", T4).

Becoming Part of Her Identity

By 2025, the impact of Fiona's assignment had only deepened. "*The longer ago it is, the more important it's become … it's become part of my identity*" (T5). Despite her extensive prior international and cross-cultural experience, this assignment stands out, she believes ("*It fundamentally changes everything - your whole value system really*", T5). She continues to work with Aboriginal communities and still regularly references her time in [the host country]: "*I just feel I'm a better person overall … because I've had that volunteer experience*" (T5). She is firm in her belief that the assignment has given her a renewed sense of empathy, a broader perspective, and a lasting connection to the Pacific. It has also shaped how she relates to others: "*I think it helps - it makes them aware that I can see things through their eyes"* (T4). "*It's just in there*", she said, gesturing to her heart, "*I'm subconsciously making comparisons all the time*" (T5).

Section 5

Civic Participation and International Development Literacy

- Involvement in the program has had a stronger influence on the *nature* of participants' civic participation than the intensity or volume of that participation, with nearly three-quarters of civically active participants redirecting their voluntary service toward internationally-oriented, skills-based, or values-driven activities since ending their assignment.
- Twenty participants (48% of volunteers) have completed a total of 36 follow-up volunteer assignments, contributing approximately 240 additional months (20 years) of service to the program's POs. Interest in future in-country assignments has remained stable at around 70%.
- A largely hidden but substantial ecosystem of discretionary volunteering, including in-country after-hours activities, resource sharing, network brokering, and contributions from family members, extends volunteers' prosocial contributions beyond their assigned role. These represent important but currently unrecognised contributions to the program's overall impact.
- Informal post-assignment support that volunteers provide to former POs is real and meaningful. Most POs that sought assistance received it for 3-4 years post-assignment. However, this support has declined sharply in both scope and substance. The strongest predictor of sustained support is a close ongoing relationship between the volunteer and a key contact in the PO.
- One of the clearest and most consistent impacts across T2-T5 was on participants' 'international development literacy.' The large majority are better informed about, more engaged with, and more supportive of international development than they were before their assignment, including participants who studied it or who had completed prior assignments. This more literate view has informed their advocacy, engagement with development policy issues, and role as bridge-builders between Australia and host countries, activities that appear to contribute greatly to the program's development and public diplomacy impacts.
- Volunteers have become increasingly sophisticated in their understanding of development practice, with many establishing a 'positive realist' outlook - holding nuanced and sometimes critical views about the effectiveness and limitations of international development and development volunteering while remaining strong advocates.
- The program has functioned as a meaningful but inconsistent socialisation mechanism for the subset of volunteers wanting to work in international development after their assignment. The quality of this socialisation was context-dependent; some gained valuable sector exposure but others experienced only incidental or deterrent socialisation.
- The impacts documented in this section suggest that the program's civic legacy may be more substantial and relevant than it currently recognises. Because the impacts are qualitative and informal (e.g., the reorientation of volunteers' civic lives, the informal support ecosystem around POs, and their sustained and evolving international development literacy), much of this may be invisible to the program's current monitoring systems.
- The main implications for the program are discussed on pages 70-72.

5 Civic Participation and International Development Literacy

5.1 Overview and Background

The outcomes reported in this section address the program's objective that volunteers and others better appreciate the value of volunteering and the contribution it makes to sustained development.[147] The section focuses on the impacts of the assignment on two outcomes:

i. **Civic participation**[148] includes participation in formal and informal voluntary service (Section 5.2), including participants' civic participation patterns (Section 5.2.1), involvement with and attitudes toward formal international volunteering (Section 5.2.2), participants' post-assignment support for former POs (Section 5.2.3) and discretionary voluntary activities arising from their assignments (Section 5.2.4).

ii. **International development literacy** (ID literacy) is a composite indicator of how deeply volunteers understand international development issues and practices, engage with them, and feel personally committed to them (Section 5.3). It includes participants' understanding of the sector and its issues (Section 5.3.1), engagement with these (Section 5.3.2), and attitudes towards development volunteering (Section 5.3.3).[149] A section is also devoted to the program's role as a mechanism of 'socialisation' to international development work and practices, as perceived by volunteers seeking employment in the sector (Section 5.3.4).

The section concludes by considering the implications of the key findings for the program (Section 5.4).

Civics baseline: Summary of participants' civic participation, engagement and literacy at T1

On the whole, the study's participants were strongly engaged in civic participation and civic issues prior to accepting their assignment (T1). The proportion of participants involved in community volunteering was more than double the national average for Australians at T1. Half had previously participated in short- or long-term international volunteering. This comprises some who had completed (sometimes multiple) assignments with the program and others who had completed different forms of skilled or semi-skilled international volunteering through secular, religious, or voluntourism agencies. Half were active volunteers in Australia either in a community of interest or community of identity. Strong engagement with international development and civic issues formed important parts of many participants' identity.

Six (13%) were working in Community/Social Development, a sector with strong career links to international development volunteering, while seven expressed an aim to enter the International Development and Humanitarian Aid sector on the back of their volunteer assignment. The latter included several *Launchers* and *Enhancers* who had completed degrees focusing on international development and some *Transitioners* and *Imposed Transitioners* who had aims, with varying levels of conviction, to apply their skills to a career in the sector.

The sample's knowledge of and engagement with international development issues varied, although it was generally strong at the outset, evident in their monitoring of media, their advocating on certain issues, and their vast international experience. Some saw their international volunteer assignment as an extension of their other volunteering ("*it's just another branch of that*", #10, T1), while others viewed it as quite distinct. For example, a *Veteran* who had done pro-bono work as a director of a health-related NGO observed: "*It's quite different to what I've done in the past … I'm not working anymore … I've got the time to put in some serious mileage [to] this [volunteer role] …*" (#22, T1).

5.2 Civic Participation[150]

Most participants' interest in civic participation remains high. Since their assignment ended and since restricted access to many voluntary activities caused by COVID was lifted, participation in volunteering and civic activities has risen modestly, despite broader declines in Australia and internationally.[151]

Thirty-two participants (68%) were involved in some form of regular or temporary voluntary service at T5.[152]

Figure 7 compares the intensity of participants' voluntary service at T1 with their contributions at three points after their assignment: T3 (2021), T4 (2023) and T5 (2025).[153] The right column shows that 20 participants (43%)[154] exhibited a general increase in the intensity of their volunteering - a proportion that grew over the study's duration – while the civic participation of others remained unchanged (40%) or declined (17%).[155] *Enhancers* and *Non-working Partners* were the groups whose members increased their involvement most noticeably.[156]

The primary contributor to changes in the volume or intensity of civic participation is participants' life-stage rather than involvement with the program. The three patterns most evident are:

1. **Participants who embed civic contributions through work and professional practices:** This is most evident among *Enhancers*, whose increase is strongly connected with more skills-based volunteering that draws directly on professional networks and experiences incubated during their volunteer assignment and which is connected to professional opportunities and goals.

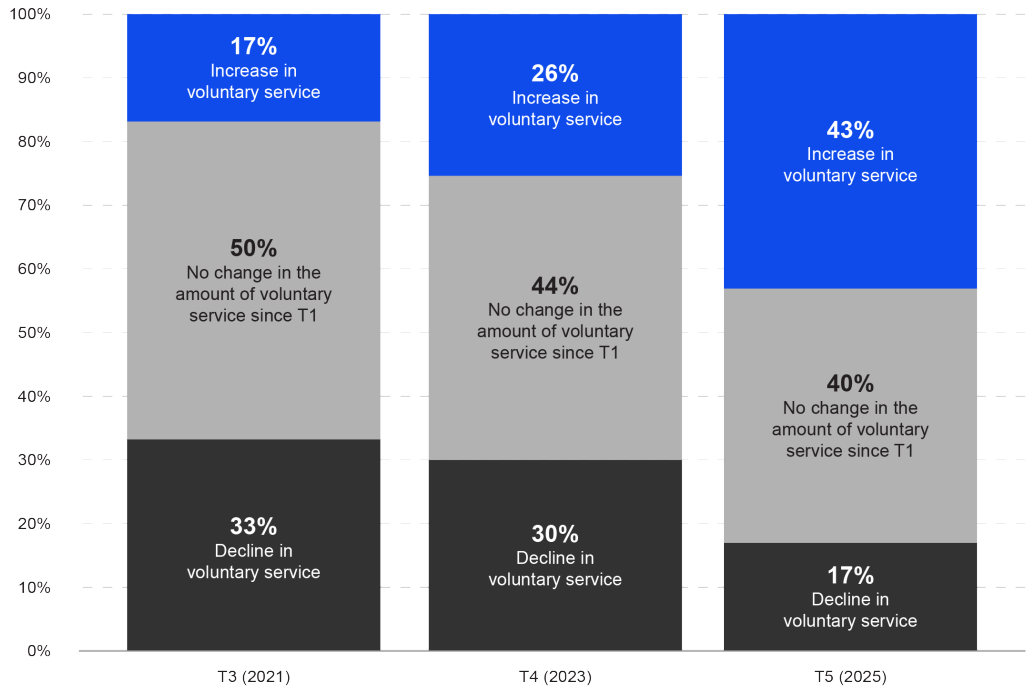
2. **Participants who volunteer via structured local or international service in community organisations:** This is most prominent among *Veterans*, *Non-working Partners* and some *Transitioners*. All ten *Veterans* were involved in some form of voluntary service at T4 and T5. Many of

these were 'reverse transitioners' – moving from full-time employment (and generally low levels of volunteering) at T1 to full- or semi-retirement, where volunteering has been a more prominent part of their lives.

3. **Participants whose civic contributions have contracted and now involve limited re-engagement only when feasible:** This is most common among *Launchers* and some *Transitioners*, who show the lowest levels of involvement at T5 and the strongest decline since T1. For most, these declines are attributed to external circumstances like a new or renewed focus on work or family ("*I work full time … and that's kind of exhausting*", #08, T5).

At different times across the study, a small number did feel that their experiences on the program had diminished their appetite for further volunteering, such as participant #52 ("*No, done that, no more of that … I'm a bit disgruntled from my volunteering experience. My skills are worth a bit more*", #52, T4). Others temporarily disengaged from all volunteering and civic activities due to financial pressures, employment, or personal and family health/wellbeing. Thirteen participants were performing no formal voluntary service at T5, although half of these had undertaken (sometimes large amounts of) civic participation in the period preceding T5.[157] *Transitioners* (7/11) was the group least likely to report voluntary service at T5, although some now work in paid roles which they associate with strong prosocial features (Section 6.3).

Figure 7: Change in intensity of voluntary service (pre-post assignment)



5.2.1 The Nature of Civic Participation

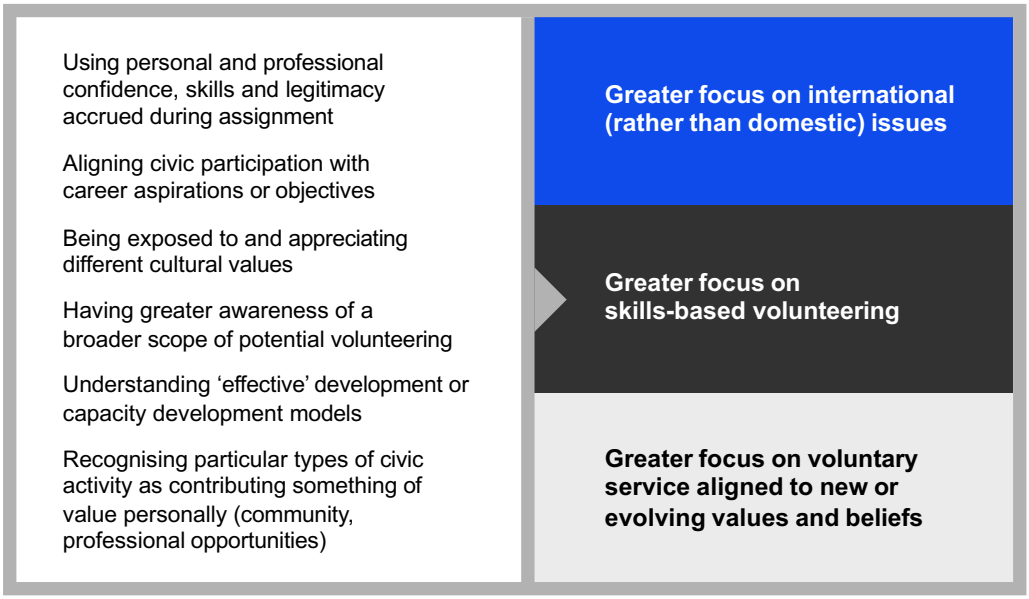
Clear evidence shows that involvement in the program triggered changes in the nature of voluntary service undertaken by volunteers and *Non-working Partners* alike. This was the case for 23 of the 32 participants involved in civic participation at T5 (72% of participants who are civically active, 49% of the T5 sample), and as many as 29 participants at one or more points since their assignment ended in 2020.[158]

In general, the program's influence on participants' civic participation manifested in three ways, shown on the right side of **Figure 8**. They include participants placing greater focus on volunteering that is oriented toward three things: (i) international rather than domestic causes, (ii) skilled rather than unskilled activities, and (iii) new or evolving values and beliefs. **Figure 8** also summarises some of the main program experiences that contributed towards these changes (left). As it shows, the program's impact on participants' ID literacy – what they came to understand, value and believe about international development, discussed in Section 5.3 - influenced their civic contributions after their assignment. The three changes are expanded and illustrated below.

5.2.1.1 More Internationally Oriented Volunteering

Twenty participants oriented their formal or informal voluntary service more strongly toward international organisations, issues or contexts in the period T3-T5 than was evident at T1.[159] This includes 13 who were actively doing so at T5.[160] *Imposed Transitioners* and *Veterans* are the groups whose volunteering has shifted most noticeably from domestic to international in focus (T1-T5).

Figure 8: The changing nature of participants' voluntary service (main changes and contributors)



The extent and nature of this international focus varied greatly. Six had incorporated one or more subsequent international volunteer assignments as part of this change; a few had facilitated partnerships between international civic organisations. Still others had sought and commenced voluntary positions in international professional associations, working groups, INGOs, or NGOs with explicitly international concerns.[161]

Others were applying experiences and knowledge forged in the international context of their assignment to internationally-oriented issues in Australia by, for instance, advocating for or practically working on issues like multiculturalism, anti-racism, migrant and refugee issues, or supporting greater localisation in global development.[162] In each case, participants drew causal links between their observations and experiences as volunteers and their interest in and willingness to act on these international issues.

Although no clear overall trend in patterns of charitable donations was discernible, a small number reported donating more toward international issues at multiple interviews - typically to organisations or ventures with which they had had direct contact during their assignment.[163]

Two major contemporary events – the global COVID pandemic, and political upheaval that unfolded in the host country of a handful of participants - contributed to elevated levels of international engagement and advocacy by some participants, although for most these were temporary. Besides these, the main reason given for an "internationalisation" of civic participation was participants' desire to use the (international) knowledge and experiences that their assignment gave them, with many linked to professional and/or career opportunities.[164]

An important outcome of some of these activities is the links they continue to create between Australia and other countries. For instance, participant #54 "*took on the leadership of a program*" that connected two INGOs, one in Australia and one in the host country, "*in whatever way we could*" that has resulted in professionals working together to share skills and knowledge ("*It has its challenges … but [the organisation] has carried on with it … my time in [the host country] and connections I made … enabled my contribution to that effort*", #54, T5).

Another example is **Nick's case study (Part 1 and Part 2) on pages 73 and 74**,[165] which shows how the international dimensions of volunteering can strengthen rather than fade after an assignment. As the case shows, Nick's post-assignment voluntary service has become increasingly internationally oriented via a project that creates a platform for collaboration between communities in Australia and the host country. What began as a discretionary in-country activity (Section 5.2.4) has grown into a long-term project with tangible development and cultural impacts.

5.2.1.2 More Skills-based Volunteering

A second change in the types of voluntary service undertaken by participants (compared to T1), most common among young volunteers, was increased involvement in volunteering activities that utilised their professional experiences, knowledge, or capabilities. Most of the sample's current voluntary service draws on their professional knowledge or capabilities in some capacity, and 16 linked these at multiple interviews directly to their experiences as volunteers.[166] The civic participation of *Enhancers* and *Launchers* has shown the strongest shift from relatively unskilled volunteering (T1) to skills-based volunteering (T5).

Seven participants had applied for and/or accepted voluntary positions on boards or executive committees for NGOs or INGOs; five of these organisations have explicit international humanitarian/development foci.[167] Just two of these participants had interest or experience in this type of role prior to their assignment, and the contributions involve the volunteer combining their professional interests with their volunteer experiences. For example, participant #09 gained a passion for and understanding of social enterprises through her PO, which was her first experience with a social enterprise. She is now a sector leader in Australia and:

> *"I sit on a few Boards of some not-for-profits … I'm one of the members of the [national industry] Council … we set up events and do networking stuff which is pro bono and then do some mentoring stuff at some of the universities … I don't really have much time [but if] they're looking for a Board member they might ask me because they need [someone with] a specific skill in social enterprise"* (#09, T5)

Greater professional confidence and/or feeling better equipped to make a substantial form of contribution were the most common reasons for this shift. Seven participants reported actively seeking out local volunteering roles enabling them to use cross-cultural skills that were formed or sharpened during their assignment.[168] An example of this is the **case study of Christine[169] (page 75)**, which illustrates how insights gained during her assignment became the impetus for a new, sustained direction in civic participation, and how she has sought to use her better awareness of inequity and power in a practical way. In one interview she noted that this work was sparked, in part, by her experiences giving her *"more legitimacy to get my voice going again. I have always had a bit of imposter syndrome … but now I feel like I actually do know a few things"* (#04, T3).

Like Christine, others believe that their assignment experiences give them more credibility or legitimacy to use their expertise productively for civic causes and/or that their volunteering experiences have given them access to skilled volunteering opportunities that they would otherwise not have. Participant #28, for example, used her volunteer experiences to be selected to two voluntary professional associations, which allow her to promote issues of interest to her host country ("*part of my role is to make sure that it's not just Australia and New Zealand … [and to ensure] that the Pacific is considered within that*", #28, T3; "*… I do often remind [other members] that we are Asia-Pacific, not just Australia and New Zealand", #28,* T5).

5.2.1.3 More Values-based Volunteering

Eleven participants reported, across multiple interviews, shifting their volunteering energies in response to evolving values or interests that were shaped by their experiences on the assignment.[170] One of these was greater appreciation for communitarian voluntary service (e.g., in local community gardens) and community-oriented practices (e.g., helping neighbours), whatever their form, as important civic contributions. Participants experiencing this change attributed this to their extended exposure to different cultural values, and all identified learning outcomes at T2 that stemmed from dissonance relating to cultural values and practices.

Participants have also embraced (more strongly) issues such as environmental neglect, pollution, or over-consumption, to which they had been exposed in the host country. One example is the **case study of Deirdre on page 76**.[171] Deirdre's decision to volunteer at a local toy library arose from multiple factors, including her retirement, her role as a grandparent, COVID restrictions on international volunteering and travel, and a lifelong commitment to education and volunteering. Yet her exposure to resource scarcity and pollution during her volunteer assignment in Sri Lanka reinforced her commitment to recycling and sustainability and was a strong impetus for her interest in volunteering for a community centre with environmental benefits.

Other participants have found opportunities that built on professional and/or civic interests that were instigated or developed during their assignment, such as social enterprises, gender equality and/or issues specific to their former host-country.[172] Yet others began questioning the value of certain forms of volunteering they had participated in previously, from the negative impacts of using expatriates to the types of organisations best able to support capacity development. These findings build on large numbers of participants whose views about the efficacy of short-term, unskilled volunteering and/or voluntourism were shaped by VLJ activities.[173] In this, participants' more 'literate' understanding of effective development (Section 5.3) seems to have informed their post-assignment volunteering decisions. One participant, for example, combined legal training to help an INGO ("*three to four hours a day, five days a week*", #53, T5) to develop a policy document about "*the principles of building tech in the humanitarian space … it's really about humanitarian tech and how we think about technology issues in those contexts*" (T5). She says she instigated this role, in part, because:

> "*the only negative thing [about my volunteer experiences] is recognising the validity of some criticism of 'big aid and development' … there are amazing things they do, but there are also areas where they could reform … it's given me a contextual understanding. When you see this [negative] aid news, you're like, 'Yeah, that's true*'" (#53, T5)

Finally, a few have embraced civic participation as a means to meet personal needs to which their assignment had drawn attention. Participant #14's decision to form a book club ("*20 or 30 of us, it's really engaging. It's the highlight of every month*", T5) and to volunteer at a local sports club ("*it's a beautiful community to be a part of*", T5) arose, in part, from a very isolating assignment she experienced in a rural

community and her resulting desire to embed more fully in the community in which she lives. She explained at the time that during her assignment:

> *"I got really lonely … I was not feeling able to fully connect with people … I would get to a point in a friendship [with HCNs] where they'd say, 'Oh, but you're not [an HCN]', as well as cultural and language barriers. That was hard … so it's really beautiful to feel like I am a part of a community where I belong"* (#14, T3)

5.2.2 Formal International Volunteering

Twenty different participants (43% of the sample, 48% of volunteers) have completed a total of 36 formal international volunteer assignments (remote and/or in-country) since their 2019 assignment ended.[174] Combined, these amount to a total of approximately 240 months of structured voluntary service towards the program's POs in the five years since completing their 2019 assignments (an average of six months per volunteer in the study).

5.2.2.1 Remote International Volunteer Assignments

Twelve volunteers (29% of volunteers, 26% of participants) have completed a total of 24 formal remote volunteer assignments since their assignment ended, primarily *Launchers* (4) and *Veterans* (4). Most were with different POs based in different host countries to their 2019 assignment.[175] In total, this amounts to approximately 110 additional months of formal remote volunteer support for the program's POs.[176]

The number of participants completing remote assignments and completing multiple remote assignments has grown across the years since these were made available, despite remote assignments being consistently perceived as less rewarding, more challenging, and less effective than in-country assignments; this negative attitude is similarly shared by those who have completed remote assignments and those who have not.[177] The reasons for this paradox (perceived ineffectiveness yet growing involvement) were unclear from interviews, but may relate to other changes reported in Section 5.3, notably participants' desire to sustain engagement with the sector and with development goals or their appreciation of other benefits of volunteering (e.g., public diplomacy).[178]

5.2.2.2 In-country International Volunteer Assignments

In-country assignments remain this cohort's preferred mode of international voluntary service. Ten participants (24% of volunteers) completed - or were completing at the time of the final interview - at least one formal in-country volunteer assignment between 2021 and 2025.[179] Two volunteers had completed multiple assignments, while two *Veterans* were waiting to commence assignments pending overcoming temporary health issues.[180] In total, this amounts to approximately 130 additional months of formal in-country volunteer service towards the program's POs,[181] with the number of assignments rising at each successive time point.[182]

Most in-country volunteer assignments placed participants in host countries and POs different from those of their initial assignment. More than half were also in different *types* of POs and in different *contexts* (e.g., rural/urban) to their initial assignment.[183] They have involved volunteers across all categories except *Career Breakers*, although primarily *Veterans*.[184] For at least four, the decision to volunteer again arose from "*a sense of unfinished business*" (#15, T4) they associated with a premature repatriation.[185] Five also completed one or more remote assignments, most in different host-countries from their subsequent in-country assignment.

Six of the 10 participants completing in-country assignments had indicated at a prior interview that they would not, or would be unlikely to, complete another assignment, indicating that attitudes towards formal international volunteering change.

5.2.2.3 Interest in Future International Volunteer Assignments

Figure 9 shows the proportion of participants (T2-T5) expressing interest in a future in-country volunteer assignment has remained largely unchanged since T3 at 69-72%, although individual participants have fluctuated in their attitude based on life and work circumstances (including their involvement in remote or in-country assignments).[186] Interest is strongest among older and younger volunteers (*Veterans*, *Imposed Transitioners*, *Non-working Partners* and *Launchers*). More participants expressed conditional interest at T5 than in previous interviews, linked to their financial status and/or a future time period (younger *Enhancers* and *Transitioners* with new family or professional commitments) and to health (*Veterans*).[187]

These conditions (i.e., finances, other commitments, health concerns)[188] were also the main reason participants gave for rejecting a future assignment, which rose from 10% to 19% of participants (21% of volunteers) in the period 2023 to 2025. Many desire to volunteer again but are pragmatic about the feasibility of this, which is impacted by caregiving, health, career pressures, and ageing. This is most evident in *Veterans* and some *Non-working Partners*, many of whom feel cognitively equipped to contribute productively but who are deterred by physical conditions and health concerns. It also appears among mid-career participants (*Transitioners*, some *Enhancers*) as family responsibilities and domestic stability become more central.

Veterans' rising interest in both modes of volunteering, albeit with certain conditions, reflects a mix of factors: their generally favourable experiences on the initial assignment, continuing motivations to share skills and be productive, and beliefs about the impacts of their initial assignment.[189]

Table 11 summarises the main reasons given by participants for their reservations about in-country assignments (left column) and remote assignments (right column).

Figure 9: Participants' interest in future in-country volunteering (T2-T5)

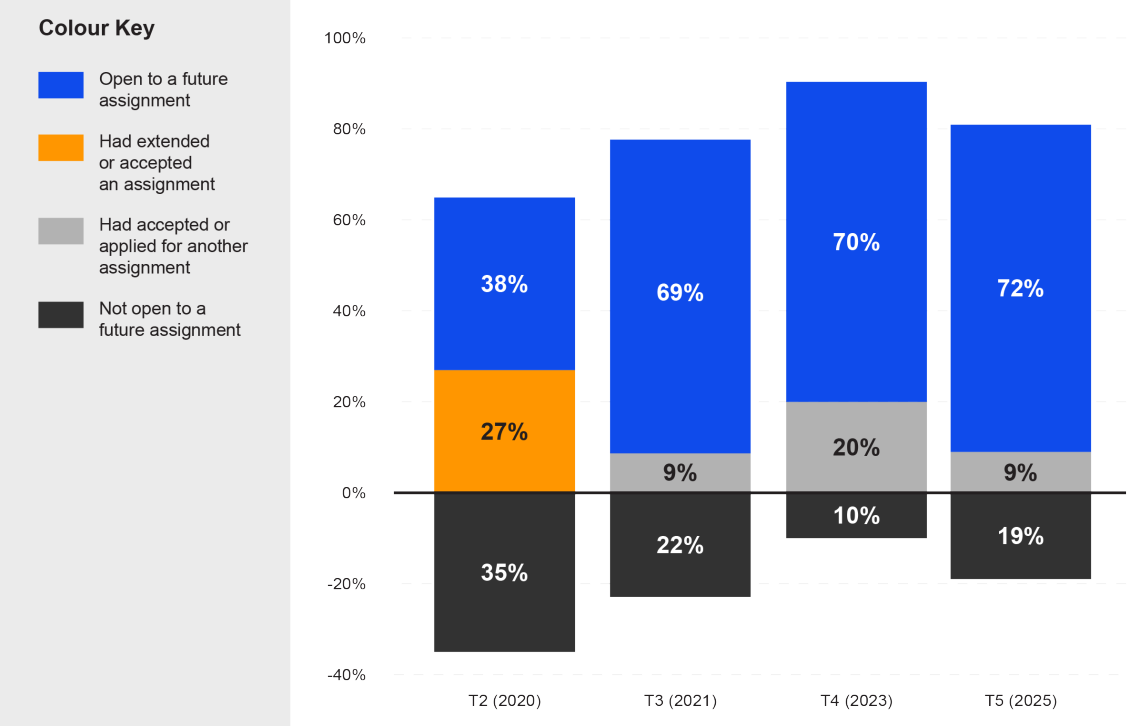


Table 11: Main reasons for not being interested in a future volunteer assignment (by assignment type)

In-country assignments	Remote assignments
» Career or finances (negative financial implications or insufficient remuneration, desiring paid employment)	» Online medium is inappropriate (not suited to the profession, ineffective, lack of digital infrastructure in host country)
» Timing not right (stage of life)	» Online medium is not enjoyable (limited interpersonal contact and no in-country experiences)
» Assignment features (too long, circumstances too challenging) sometimes linked to health/ageing	» Financial incentives (poorly remunerated)
» Concern about assignment's suitability and contribution to the PO (e.g., type of role, PO readiness, strategic nature of the contribution)[190]	

5.2.3 Formal and Informal Support for Former Partner Organisations

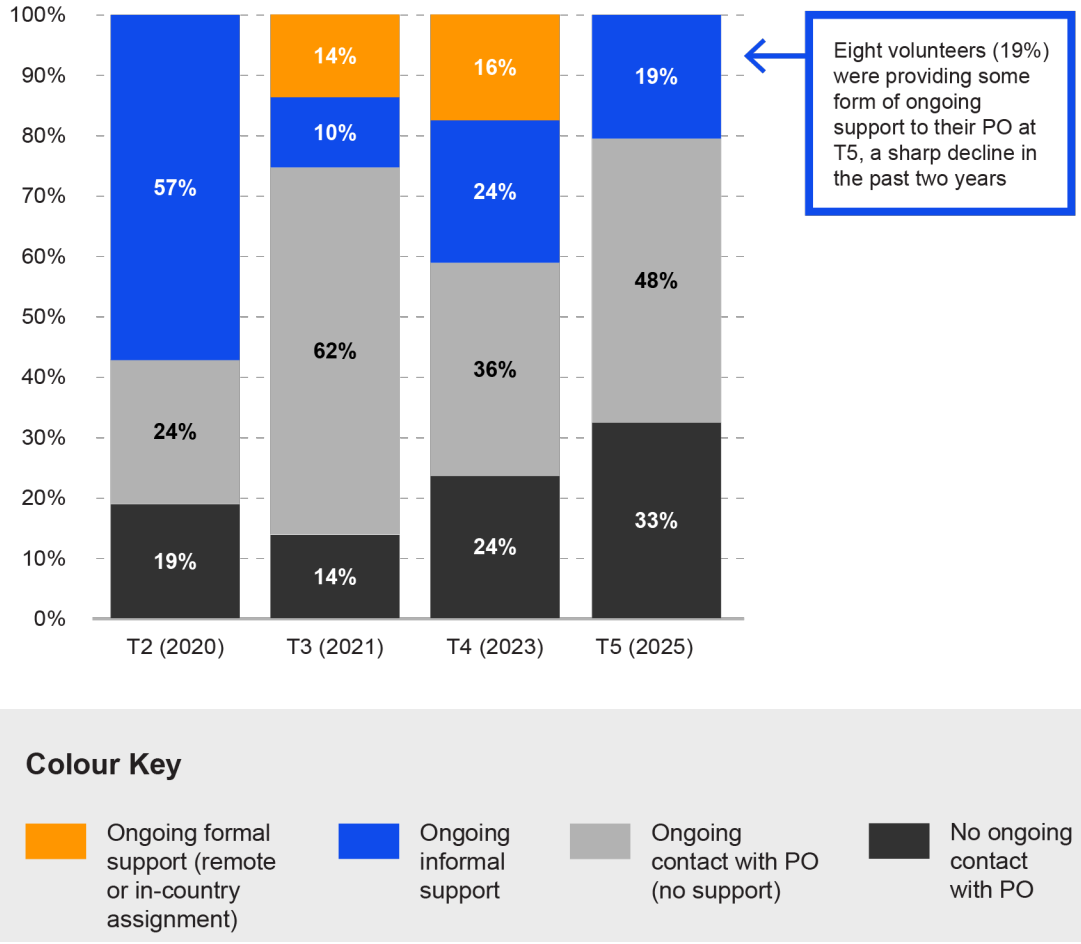
A feature of volunteers' post-assignment civic contributions has been the continuing support they have provided to their former POs in the months and years after their official assignment ended. While this support declined across the study period, most POs that sought or received assistance from former volunteers did so for 3-4 years after the assignment ended. Several repeat volunteers continue to support former POs from *previous* assignments (prior to 2019).

This support has taken two forms: (i) *formal* support via a structured follow-up volunteer assignment with a pre-defined position description and overseen by the program[191], and (ii) *informal* support, in which the volunteer continues to contribute to POs' capacity via regular or ad-hoc 'discretionary' voluntary assistance.

The four columns in **Figure 10** show the percentage of volunteers at each phase (T2-T5) having no contact with POs, some contact with POs without providing support, and those who are continuing to support POs. The latter group is disaggregated to show volunteers providing *formal* PO support via a structured volunteer assignment and those providing *informal* support through direct contact between POs and the volunteer.

The results, consistent with the findings of the 2024 VIS, indicate that PO support after an assignment has the potential to generate substantial capacity development benefits to POs, but that this support declines over time.[192] Eight volunteers (19%) were continuing to support their former POs at T5, all informally,[193] down from 40% providing support in 2023.[194]

Figure 10: Volunteers' ongoing contact with and support for partner organisations (T2-T5)



» The Nature of PO Support

As well as fewer participants supporting their former PO, the *intensity* of this support has also declined, being, on the whole, less regular and substantive (e.g., responses to periodic inquiries from POs) than in earlier periods.

For support that has continued and remains strong, two features of the support are worth highlighting. First, the clearest indicator of continuity is a strong relationship between the volunteer and a central person who has remained at the PO and who worked closely with the volunteer during the 2019 assignment (often a counterpart).[195]

Second, while the overall intensity and frequency of support provided by volunteers has declined, the type of ongoing informal support that individual volunteers provide their PO has evolved with these relationships (and the PO's needs). Early support (T3-T4) often centred on tasks associated with a project that the volunteer had instigated or been a part of - ranging from "*very basic*" to elaborate mentoring involving several hours per week across extended periods. Since then, other types of activities include (at T5) responding to periodic requests for advice relating to general management issues, technical (domain-specific) issues, advising on cross-cultural issues with international donors, reviewing written reports and applications (e.g., donor reports and grant applications), and managing PO databases or websites. As part of this advice,

several participants have connected POs with other professional contacts – including some based overseas - to support their operations.[196]

The **case study of Serena (page 77)** – the most intensive and impactful support relationship between a participant and PO that has continued since the assignment - illustrates both these dynamics. It shows how PO support is anchored by a relationship, in this case Serena's former counterpart, the PO manager. It also highlights how the type of knowledge being shared has altered (and altered the relationship) as the PO's capabilities have grown and been affected by new stakeholders.

Serena's case elucidates the way that volunteers' civic action has been reoriented after their assignment. Before her volunteer assignment, her civic participation was "*less than other people I know*" (T1) and mainly social, unrelated to her professional training as a scientist. This has shifted since her assignment. While she is still active locally - volunteering in sports clubs, cultural groups and for environmental causes – the PO support, now a large part of her voluntary work, utilises her professional expertise and the international relationships she formed during her in-country assignment.

Serena's case also shows how this support has grown and evolved in the years since the assignment ended, moving from structured mentoring towards something close to peer exchange. The **case study of Martha and Josie on page 51**, introduced in Section 4.3.2, is another example illustrating this evolving support relationship between volunteers and key PO personnel.

» Reasons for Discontinuing PO Support

The decline in volunteers' support for their PO reflects a combination of POs' less frequent outreach to seek advice or support, and volunteers' decision to discontinue (or inability to continue) contributing. Most volunteers who discontinued support for POs did so for pragmatic reasons – health issues, PO employee turnover, or taking on new personal or professional priorities. The latter include subsequent volunteer assignments. An example of this is participant #49, currently on a second in-country assignment since 2021, who supported the initial PO for more than three years ("*I'm still giving them plenty of tips and suggestions*", #49, T3; "*I helped them set up a website … and we worked to develop some resources to put up on the website and things like that*", #49, T4) but who says that "*it's now mainly a social friendship"* (#49, T5) because her efforts are directed at helping her current PO as well as the most recent former POs, for whom she:

> *"… continues to give advice [on] their [work]. I send them resources, and I send them ideas. And every day - almost every day - they send me like 50 pictures of what they've been doing, sometimes videos. And then I look through those pictures, and I get a sense of what they've been doing, and then I give them some suggestions of how to extend that activity or whatever. And they're very grateful. They always tell me that they're very grateful. But every day I get messages from them about what they're doing"* (#49, T5)

Pertinently, from T2 to T5, 11 participants chose a 'strategic retreat' from their former POs when they began feeling disconnected from the POs' operating context and so unable to contribute productively. In some of these cases, the PO began hosting a subsequent volunteer, a point that signalled a demarcation for some participants.

5.2.4 Volunteers' 'Discretionary' Contributions

The informal support and advice that participants continue to provide POs after their assignment - and outside the formal parameters of the program – is one example of an important finding that stretched across all six years of this study, from T1-T5.

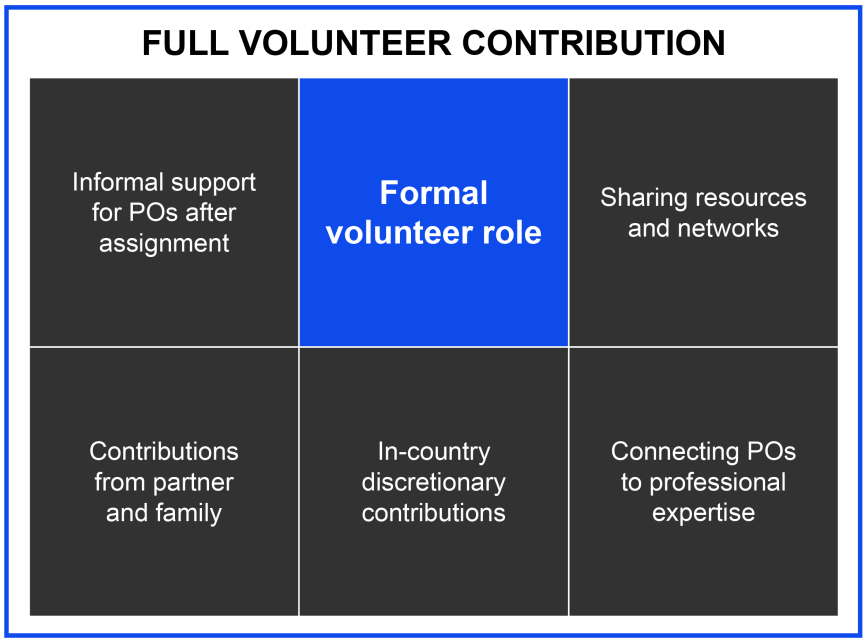
Although all the volunteers had formal position descriptions defining their roles, the study revealed vast informal 'discretionary' contributions that volunteers made before, during and after their assignments that went well beyond their formal volunteer role. This ecosystem of informal and largely hidden contributions to POs and host communities is represented by the black boxes in **Figure 11**. These contributions encompassed pre-departure, in-country, and post-assignment phases and fell into five broad types (clockwise from top right in **Figure 11**):

- **Sharing resources and networks (before, during and after the assignment):** Through their networks and other sources, helping POs to access equipment, wifi/mobile data, reference materials, subscriptions and other resources (including funding and supplies during crises like natural disasters that disrupted the POs' activities).
- **Connecting POs to professional expertise (during and after the assignment):** Using networks with other professionals, associations and organisations in Australia and elsewhere to provide POs with access to information, projects, funding or knowledge exchanges. This has resulted in several former PO colleagues having international work and study opportunities in the years since the assignment ended.[197]
- **In-country discretionary contributions (during the assignment):** Applying their expertise to 'after hours' voluntary activities for the PO or for other community groups, such as schools, libraries and local NGOs, or for individuals and families they meet. These activities include conducting evening lessons,

coaching weekend sports teams, mentoring managers and board members, offering pro-bono counselling or consulting, developing business plans, and creating or managing websites.

- **Contributions from partner or family (during the assignment):** Facilitating opportunities for *Non-working Partners* or family members to use their interests and skills to directly or indirectly support local community groups or POs. Examples included helping to run a stray dog shelter, instigating and leading a women's community sewing group, and overseeing the installation and operation of an upgraded IT system for a local school.
- **Ongoing informal support for POs (after the assignment):** As outlined in Section 5.2.3.

Figure 11: Volunteers' discretionary contributions



» Volunteers' Motivations for In-country Extra-role Contributions

Volunteers' reasons for discretionary contributions during their assignments varied considerably. An important trigger was volunteers' desire to make the most of the time committed to volunteering and use their knowledge and skills productively during the period in-country. This was especially common for volunteers who believed that their expertise was not being well utilised in their role and during the early phases of the assignment when they felt that much time was spent orienting themselves to the role and building relationships ("*doing nothing for the first six months, just drinking tea*" #08, T5) rather than getting things done.

An example of this is presented in **Susan's case study on page 78**, which illustrates how in-country discretionary volunteering can emerge as a natural extension of the assignment, and Susan's desire to make productive use of the time with the PO and contribute something of benefit. In Susan's case, these activities were further enabled by the enthusiasm and support of the PO and by the flexibility her assignment allowed, which meant she could respond to needs as they arose. The case also highlights volunteers' capacity to draw on networks and resources in Australia (or elsewhere) for the benefit of POs. In this sense, discretionary volunteering became a practical way for volunteers like Susan to align their actions with how they wanted to contribute during their assignment.

A second motivation was social – the desire to develop trust and express goodwill towards colleagues at the PO or to establish new relationships in the host community, especially in isolated locales. One participant volunteered through (newly formed) friends in a local NGO (#40), while another gave voluntary English classes at a local school and took on "*a bit of volunteering at a local library*" through a domestic NGO (#33, T2), both via friendships established outside work. Less structured assistance for HCN friends or PO colleagues to learn or practise English language was common. Three participants highlighted how members of their PO boards had invited them to support other organisations or initiatives in the same sector in the host country.

These activities indicate that the entirety of volunteers' (and the program's) contributions to the capacities of host communities and POs are unlikely to be captured by the program's formal monitoring and evaluation protocols. They also reveal how volunteers' prosocial motivations can be expressed differently in different circumstances - initially fostered by assignment conditions (and perceived constraints) that created the impetus and later sustained as volunteers continued to express prosocial motives towards POs where strong bonds had been formed. These activities provided productive outlets for volunteers - several noted them as

assignment highlights, and some later cited them in applications for jobs or other positions (Section 6.2.4). While they appear to have been well received, potential benefits and risks to volunteers, POs and the program of these discretionary activities are discussed in Implication 5.1 (Section 5.4).

Collectively, the findings in this section suggest that the program's impact on participants' civic participation is primarily qualitative, not quantitative. It does this by reorienting participants toward prosocial contributions that are internationally-oriented, skills-based and values-driven, and that volunteers express through their choices about the nature of formal volunteering, their informal support for POs, and the 'hidden' discretionary contributions they make. To the extent that these types of contributions are likely to widen and increase the potential impact of participants' voluntary service, they make the program's civic impact substantial and highly relevant, a point expanded in Section 5.4. The results also suggest that a prominent driver of these changes is participants' improved international development literacy, a point addressed in the next section.

5.3 International Development Literacy

On the whole, participants' involvement in the program increased their 'international development literacy' (ID literacy),[198] which refers to what participants know about international development, how far they remain cognitively and behaviourally engaged with it, and how they evaluate its value, legitimacy, and significance.

The majority of participants report being more engaged with, better informed about, and more supportive of international development than they were at T1. There is also evidence of the tangible application of this literacy through participants applying new interest, knowledge, skills, and attitudes to professional and civic roles.

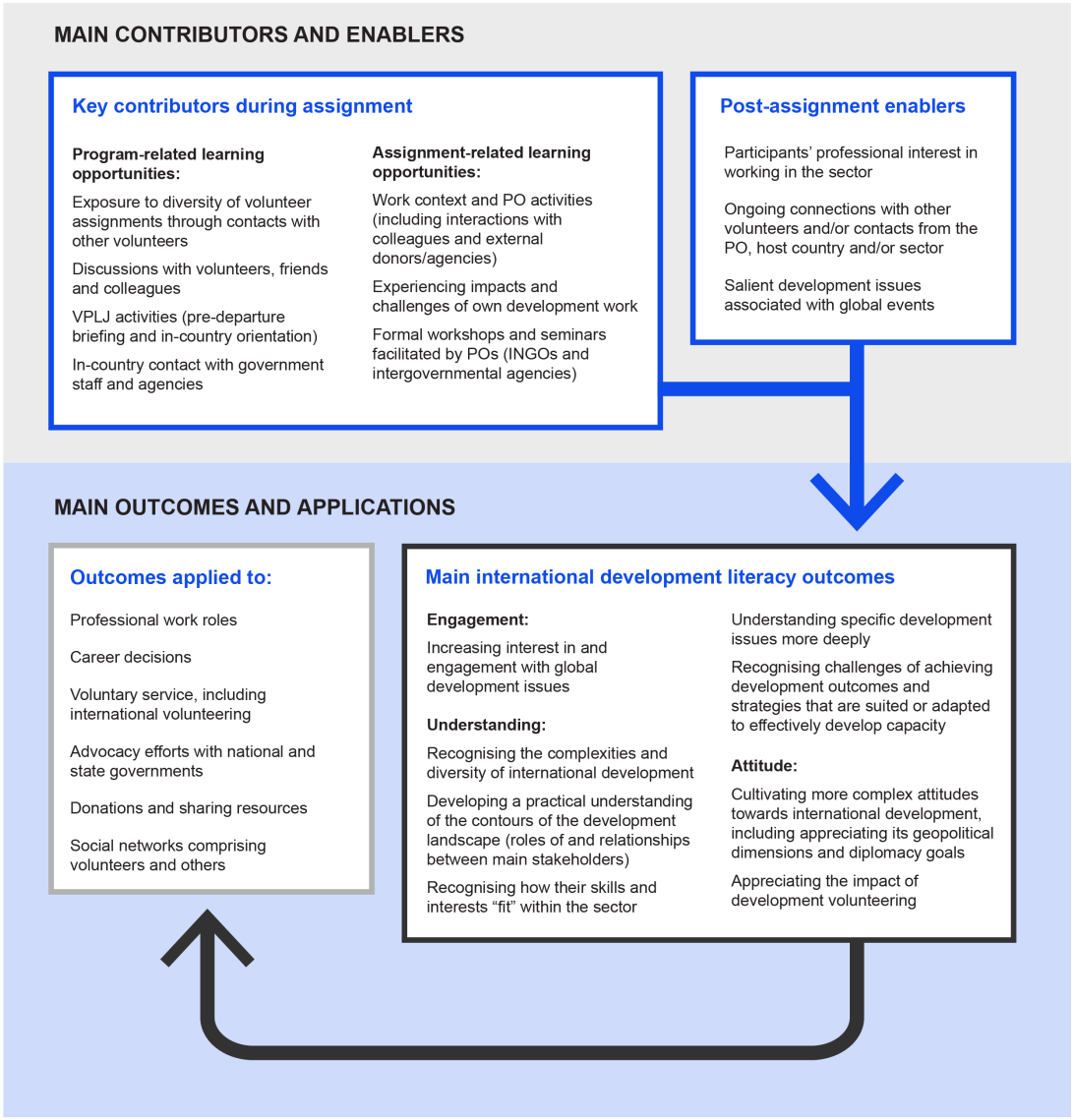
Figure 12 on page 66 summarises the main contributors, enablers, outcomes, and impacts of the program on participants' ID literacy.[199] The panel below the figure defines key terms.

The main box (bottom right of **Figure 12**) highlights the variety of ways that participants' ID literacy was shaped by their assignment. It is drawn from responses from T2 to T5 and includes themes raised frequently at multiple time periods.[200] Some of these relate to participants' career aspirations in the sector – for instance, recognising how their skills and interests fit within the sector or gaining a practical awareness of the aid/development ecosystem that had previously been classroom-based knowledge (mainly *Launchers* – also see Section 5.3.4). Others include a more nuanced understanding of specific development issues (e.g., gender inequities or 'decolonising aid' agenda), recognising the diversity of the sector's objectives and challenges, and better awareness of, and practice deploying, mechanisms to achieve productive development outcomes.[201]

Figure 12 also identifies the experiences participants had during their assignment that contributed most strongly to their ID literacy (top left) and conditions or activities that participants undertook after their assignment that have enabled or facilitated their ongoing understanding of the sector (top right). A notable (ongoing) contributor at both stages – reported by participants across categories but most evident in the large changes in understanding and engagement reported by *Non-working Partners* - is the strong networks that participants developed with other volunteers, seeded mainly during VLJ activities prior to and during their assignment and sustained informally via social media.

Finally, **Figure 12** shows the primary ways that participants have applied their ID literacy since their assignment in professional, civic, and personal arenas (bottom left).

Figure 12: How the program contributes to participants' international development literacy



Notes:

"Key contributors during assignment" refers to features experienced by participants during their assignment that contributed most strongly to their improved international development literacy. In general,"program-related" contributors are more strongly influenced by the program and in-country program staff, whereas "assignment-related" contributors are more strongly influenced by the PO and the volunteers' specific role.

"Post assignment enablers" refers to conditions that participants experienced or activities that they engaged in after their assignment that have enabled or facilitated their ongoing understanding.

"Main international development literacy outcomes" refers to the main changes reported by or observed in participants as a result of their involvement in the program.

"Outcomes applied to" refers to the situations where participants reported being able to apply their new understanding or changed view since completing their assignment.

The following sections address each of the facets of ID literacy: understanding (Section 5.3.1), engagement (5.3.2) and attitudes, focusing on attitudes towards development volunteering (5.3.3). This is followed by a separate section (5.3.4) which discusses the ways in which the volunteer assignment acted as a socialising mechanism for participants who wished to leverage their volunteer assignment to gain paid employment in the 'international development and humanitarian aid' sector.

5.3.1 Understanding the International Development Sector and Issues

All but a few participants were able to articulate specific ways in which their involvement with the program had led to a deeper understanding of international development at T5. Thirty-three (70%) had made consistent reports at multiple interviews of their assignment's impact on this.[202] Those who had volunteered previously or who had studied international development were just as likely to express greater understanding as others.[203] An example is participant #29, who completed a degree in international development prior to the assignment and now works as an international program manager, and also believes the major impact of the assignment on her was:

> *"… confidence in being able to take a more nuanced approach to thinking about international development and foreign policy … and the justice system. There are some people who haven't had those types of experiences and can struggle a bit more to find nuance. But the people I worked with in [the host country], who have had those types of experiences are also comfortable navigating those ambiguities and nuances … part of what makes [the volunteer program] valuable is that you hold off trying to pinpoint what about it is of value to the Australian Government at any one time. It's more of a longer-term value … I guess in many ways you realise how small [my] experience was. So it's the timeframe … it can be long, slow work. I guess that's part of what I saw when I was in [the host country] as well. You're there - as it turned out - for nine months, there's only so much you're going to achieve in a very concrete sense"* (#29, T5)

The **case study of Vivienne on page 78** illustrates this trajectory well. A health-sector worker who described herself at T1 as largely disengaged from international affairs, Vivienne arrived at her assignment with little understanding of how aid and development worked. Although not a dramatic change of view, five years on she engages with development issues with confidence, able to discuss the geopolitics of aid, critique the limits of development volunteering, and articulate views she previously felt unable to express.

A consistent and noteworthy feature of participants' growing ID literacy is their retrospective appreciation of the program's pre-departure and in-country support activities. While several participants were moderately critical of aspects of these in early interviews, most have come to appraise them more favourably over time, recognising contributions to their in-country experiences but also recognising opportunities to use these in other ways after the assignment. Particularly valued were activities that equipped volunteers with frameworks and orientations to help them develop trust through relationship-focused approaches, articulate a personal philosophy of volunteering and development, and apply the 'sidekick manifesto' in their work. Several volunteers, including some not working in the sector, reported actively applying these and other ideas in professional and civic contexts in the five years since their assignment ended: in policy work, stakeholder engagement, governance, and everyday interactions. Examples of some of these are introduced in Section 6.5.1. While these capabilities benefited volunteers during their assignments, the examples in Section 6.5.1 make clear they have also provided a toolkit and vocabulary that has utility in participants' lives and has informed their thinking about capacity development and cross-cultural practice.

5.3.2 Engagement with International Development Issues

Most participants across all seven categories described behaviours reflecting higher levels of cognitive engagement[204] with ID issues than they had prior to their assignments. While exceptions existed, participants monitored and consumed news, media reports, social media and/or policy announcements more acutely at T5 than they had at T1. These changes apply equally to *Non-working Partners*, who were influenced mainly by their participation in VLJ activities, exposure to their partners' and other volunteers' experiences, and their social networks and activities within the host country.[205]

Three features of participants' engagement with international development issues are worth noting:

- **First**, a noticeable shift for many participants is a greater appreciation of the multiple and interconnected objectives of development practice ("*trade, regional connections, geopolitics"*, #55, T3). Fourteen participants (predominantly *Transitioners* based in the Pacific) reported deeper appreciation for (and interest in) the geopolitical dimensions of aid and development at two or more interviews (T2-T5). Interest in geopolitics remains an important anchor for those who continue to monitor global development issues and host countries.[206]
- **Second**, the best predictor of ongoing engagement is employment in the sector. The participants showing the strongest cognitive engagement all now work in different areas of international aid/development, either in paid roles or formal volunteer assignments. A related decline in engagement was evident in some *Transitioners* and *Career Breakers* whose professional aspirations returned to unrelated areas, and among *Veterans* who have turned energies towards other voluntary and personal pursuits. *Enhancers* remain most strongly engaged; *Veterans* the least; *Imposed Transitioners* and *Transitioners* who do not work in the sector are those whose interests have declined most noticeably.[207]
- **Third**, participants' ID literacy has evolved in the years since their assignment through continuing engagement, exposure to networks, reflections on their volunteer experiences, and global events. These have shaped participants' understanding and the types of outcomes they report as important. For example, while the 'main outcomes' in **Figure 12** remained relatively stable across the study duration (T2-T5), 14 participants reported evolving understanding or views of certain issues at different times (T2-T5), shaped by new or accumulating insights.[208] Six proffered during interviews (T4 or T5)

that they would have approached their initial assignment differently given their current understanding of effective development practice.[209]

The depth and longevity of participants' investment in the sector is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that 24 participants (51%)[210] spontaneously raised at T5 the recent (at that time) decision by the United States government to cut aid and development funding. Ten used this as a basis to contact former colleagues, engage with events in the host country, or discuss the issue with others:

> *"It broke my heart, what's happening in the US with the USAID program just being decimated, and the impacts that will have on people. I think people don't realise the importance that volunteering has, and in line with the UN's 17 Goals for Sustainable Development … and the US was a great aid. When I was in [the host country], there were Albright scholars there from that program who I got to meet from the States … there was the USAID program taking out the [land] mines and bombs … what a great thing!"* (#33, T5)

Over half rely on social media or mainstream media for their engagement.[211] Others keep up-to-date through discussions with friends or former and current volunteers who share interests in the sector.[212] Several were inspired to engage with specific aspects of development that are relevant to their work, like social enterprises, public health, specific programs in which they have been involved, and/or development issues in specific nations or regions.[213]

5.3.3 Attitudes Towards Development Volunteering

Most participants have a better (and more nuanced) awareness of the contributions of international development volunteering to international development and public diplomacy. This view has strengthened among most participants in the years since their assignment in ways that have made them more 'positive realists' about its value and impacts. In other words, **despite some participants experiencing unsatisfying assignments and most being realistic about its limitations and flaws, most participants are now more appreciative of the benefits of development volunteering than they were before their assignment.**[214] This includes participants who had studied international development or completed prior assignments.[215] These changes, which continued to evolve after their assignments, were influenced by participants' contact with the program's formal support activities (e.g., VLJ and Alumni network), their in-country experiences, and their contacts with volunteers and others during and after their assignments.

Participants with limited prior exposure reported the largest changes and were among the most appreciative of their new understanding. This includes four of the study's five *Non-working Partners*, whose knowledge was seeded at VLJ events and expanded by mixing with volunteers and others in-country. One of these described being "*only very superficially aware"* of Australia's aid and development program "*until we went*" (#32, T3), but benefiting "*from seeing what [volunteers] did and talking to them about what they were doing every day and stuff, and certainly from knowing what [my partner] did*" (T2). She now believes she understands the development landscape "*a lot more*" (T3) a trend evident in the way she discussed her developing understanding, appreciation and engagement at different times across the study:

> 2021: *"I understand a lot more because I understand what the volunteers were doing in [the host country] and how that happens elsewhere and their involvement in that"* (#32, T3)
>
> 2023: *"Now I actually think Australia does run a very good aid program … they really have very capable people that go there, not to do it but to train them and leave that skill behind … that's the way to do it, to transfer those abilities and skills. I didn't really know how AusAID worked at all [previously], or how the volunteer system worked. Now that I understood it, I think it's a very intelligent way with all sorts of bonuses, like not just upskilling the locals but making that connection between the two countries. For the volunteers who've lived there, they go back to Australia and have a much better understanding of [the host country] and the people and the politics. That is an added bonus"* (#32, T4)
>
> 2025: *"I do now [pay attention]. If there's things in [the newspaper] or on the ABC News or whatever, I take note, I do, because if you've had that experience, you're aware of it. Maybe in the past I would not have even read those articles. Now, I'll read it, I look on the website and see what's going on sometimes, just every now and then. The volunteers we were there with, they were so impressive. Capable, extremely capable people, who had their heart in the right place who were very good representatives for Australia"* (#32, T5)

The number of participants viewing (and endorsing) development volunteering as "*totally unique*" (#05, T5) has grown. For those with the strongest views, the three characteristics most commonly cited were:

- **Appreciating the distinctive value of the 'volunteer model'** in which motivated volunteers work closely with HCNs, base themselves in local POs, and live in local communities - i.e., the commitment of volunteers ("*people aren't volunteers unless they're really dedicated*", #05, T5) and the side-by-side nature of the work and lifestyle ("*I just see it as a jewel in the crown … having Australians and [HCNs] engage on a personal level … will do more for diplomacy and aid",* #36, T5). This includes the symbolic and social position volunteers occupy ("*low-status outsiders*" #05, T5) which positions them close to local institutions and communities in "*places that you would otherwise never dream of going*" (#05, T5). This positioning was seen to facilitate a qualitatively different kind of engagement with host communities, as one participant reflected:

  > *"I think doing it as a volunteer rather than as a paid person is a really special thing. It was completely unique … you're not just living there like some hobo because you've opted out of real life and you're not there as a highly paid consultant or a bureaucrat, you're something else … and I think in a way it makes it easier to connect with*

> *the local community. I think [HCNs] probably think that we have greater understanding of what it's like not to be well-off … you're just like an ordinary person and they think you've got a greater chance of understanding … I think it's an extraordinary experience"* (#05, T3)

- **Benefiting from the program's social infrastructure**, which provides access to networks and structured pathways into POs. "*Having those pathways pre-forged*" helps volunteers to "*make those relationships quickly and [makes it easy] to find the people … and different resources available in-country*" (#08, T5). They also accelerate learning and relationship-building and "*created a lot more opportunities and a lot more understanding"* (#08, T5). Part of this is the program's peer environment, which exposes volunteers to others with different backgrounds, assignments, and worldviews (volunteers and others).
- **Valuing the long-term, relational and sometimes intangible outcomes** that volunteering enables rather than discrete project outputs. While this view sits alongside acknowledgements that effectiveness can be "*hard to measure*" (#52, T5), and is not always realised (such that volunteers may sometimes gain more than POs in the short term), the long-term contributions were seen to differ in substantive ways:

> *"Having been through it, I think there's a level of engagement that volunteers can do … we're trying to keep this sense of Australia connected with the world and have influence. State officials and even formal development programs primarily engage with the links and the country … but volunteers, or 'private citizens', are willing to turn up as Australians, as their ordinary selves, and bring their skills to form relationships that are almost outside of that whole state infrastructure, and we're really set on achieving this outcome … it does something quite different that I think needs to be protected … I guess what the volunteer program does is create a reason and an 'in' to a community that would be much harder to create otherwise"* (#29, T4)

The structural features that underpin these views, including assignment conditions, VLJ activities, and the positioning of volunteers within host communities, are examined in detail in Section 4.4.1.1.

Several participants described themselves as active informal advocates who recommend the program to others. Important in this is that most, at some point, expressed honest understanding of critiques of international development and development volunteering (e.g., inefficiencies, politicisation, the limits of brief placements) while still being advocates for the 'model'. Many whose assignment was dissatisfying noted that "*maintaining connections through volunteers*" was "*really important*" (#11, T4) to:

> *"… show you the bigger picture, because when you're on your assignment that's the only experience you know, whereas meeting other volunteers, particularly ones who have done other assignments, you get a much bigger picture of the program or what it's capable of"* (#11, T4)

5.3.4 Socialising Volunteers to International Development Work

Seven participants – mainly *Launchers* and *Enhancers* – expressed a pre-assignment goal to seek paid employment in international development or humanitarian aid roles on the back of their volunteer assignment; several others were conscious of professional opportunities in the sector, albeit with less clearly formed aims. For most of these, their assignment was their first exposure to the practicalities of full-time work within a development context and so served as a form of sector-level 'socialisation' - that is, a platform through which they could acquire knowledge, norms, behaviours, and identities necessary to participate competently and legitimately as paid practitioners within the sector's ecosystem.[216]

Responses across T2-T5, including from participants who have subsequently entered the sector and others whose experiences deterred them from entering the sector, suggest that their assignments were helpful but inconsistent socialising mechanisms, dependent mainly on local conditions and assignment design rather than systematic program support.

For some it provided valuable exposure to community-level realities, governance practices, and sector norms. These volunteers emphasised that hands-on fieldwork helped them understand "*how development actually works*" (#20, T5). Seeing development from a host-country (recipient) perspective (i.e., understanding the context and challenges of grassroots actors operating in the sector) was highly valued by those who now work in large agencies and government departments, although some now working in the sector found this perspective difficult to translate in ways that peers appreciated (Section 6.5.2).[217] This also provided an important recalibration for some who realised tensions between their preferred work (hands-on, community-based grassroots) and the type of roles that would be available to them in the sector.

> *"I worked at a regional advisory body … it gave me a snapshot of a very particular sector and a very particular way of doing international development, which is that top-down approach, very driven by diplomatic relations and driven by governments … I will say, though, it was a good experience in ruling out what I didn't like and really affirming what I did like. And that was if I had continued in international development, I knew that I didn't want to work in that way - at that higher level. I wanted to be doing something that was much closer to community, much more immediately impactful, and much more driven by need that the community was showing, rather than diplomatic ties and generating need rather than responding to it"* (#07, T5)

Three participants experienced a form of 'deterrent socialisation' – being discouraged from a pre-assignment plan to enter the sector; a productive outcome from a career perspective if their assignments provided a realistic preview.[218]

Some participants intending to enter the sector noted that peer networks emerging from the placement were a strong socialising force by learning about roles available and by seeing others in their cohort progress into the sector ("*it showed me pathways I could follow*", #53, T5).

However, others described the assignment as only partially helpful, providing career clarity but not structured socialisation. One participant, now a contractor with a development agency in South-East Asia, believes the experience "*helped me realise where I wanted to be*" although "*it wasn't a thorough [structured] socialisation*" (#37, T5). These volunteers spoke about gaining motivation or direction but lacking exposure that would give them a deeper understanding of common practices and issues, funding systems, program cycles, or professional opportunities.

Table 12 summarises some of the main factors of their assignment that participants believed contributed to or impeded their socialisation. The latter includes weak PO capacity, poor task design, constrained autonomy, or limited opportunities to interact with sector actors ("*I didn't see how this linked to development work beyond the PO; I wasn't exposed to any of the stakeholders or structures*", #14, T5).

What is clear from these experiences is that the processes and conditions underlying these different experiences - valuable socialisation, partial socialisation, deterrent socialisation – were mostly ad-hoc and highly context-specific, a point returned to in Implication 5.4 (Section 5.4).

Table 12: Assignment features strengthening and weakening sector socialisation

Features strengthening socialisation	Features weakening socialisation
• Exposure to alternative models and peer comparisons (learning what the sector can look like from different people's experiences and how their own experiences and skills fit)	• Exposure to a narrow, top-down slice of the sector that may be unrepresentative (and that led two participants to question the sector's scope and suitability and reduced its attractiveness)
• Sector 'sensemaking' through opportunities to experience patterns and contrasts in the development ecosystem (e.g., comparing grassroots and large agencies; pay structures in local NGO vs UN/INGO)	• Exposure to organisational constraints (e.g., limited PO resource or capabilities, funding irregularities) that limited opportunities to learn or contribute and that participants believed might be widespread
• A clearer understanding of practice principles (experiencing what good and bad development looks like and opportunities to apply constructive practices)	• A narrowed understanding of practice principles due to perceived mismatch between participants' ideals (community-led, demand-driven) and the sector realities (diplomacy-driven, generating 'need', inequality and insecurity)
• Opportunities for transferable hands-on field experiences, including domestic or international field trips	• A chaotic repatriation, creating emotional and practical barriers to re-engagement following field experiences
• Exposure to specific new sector-relevant ideas (e.g., governance, duty of care, safety) through formal training via POs and VLJ activities	• A diminished sense of the sector's professionalism, driven by concerns about volunteer quality and the potential harm this creates

5.4 Key Implications

Implication 5.1: Making volunteers' informal and discretionary contributions visible and strategically valuable

Volunteers' discretionary contributions at different stages before, during and after their assignments (Section 5.2.4) are important yet ad hoc contributions to the program's development impact. Based on descriptions provided by participants of these activities, the program may be under-reporting its own development impact and thus failing to recognise the full value proposition it creates.

At the same time, these activities are currently undertaken with little accountability (or program support), meaning the consequences for volunteers and POs (positive and negative) are currently unknown and rely on volunteers' motivations and goodwill and POs' willingness and capacity to seek or support it.

The program may benefit from supporting productive forms of discretionary volunteering by recognising these contributions as part of the program's impact, setting boundaries to ensure that volunteers understand risks, and helping volunteers be effective while mitigating the challenges these activities may cause (such as creating dependency or circumventing PO governance). However, this risks over-formalising these activities, creating additional administrative burden and/or diluting the motivations that drive these behaviours.

Seeking to recognise these activities without over-formalising them would allow the program to collate and document their value while preserving the organic, volunteer-led character that makes them effective. This could be complemented by brief guidance, communicated during PDBs and ICOPs, that helps volunteers understand the boundaries of their formal role, the potential value and risks of extra-role activities, and how to contribute productively without creating unintended obligations for POs.

Implication 5.2: Helping to sustain effective post-assignment support for partner organisations

Related to Implication 5.1, the findings show that post-assignment PO support, which is mainly informal and which many volunteers sustain for 3-4 years after their assignment, represents a tangible extension of the program's impact. However, this support has declined sharply and appears largely relationship-dependent, with its clearest driver being the strength of the volunteer's relationship with a key PO contact.

From a social capital perspective, these relationships begin as 'bridging ties', which are valuable because they connect people from different social groups but challenging because they require active maintenance and are susceptible to disruptions like staff turnover, geographic distance, and competing priorities.[219] The support relationships that have lasted longest are those where these ties appear to evolve toward more resilient 'bonding ties', characterised by trust, reciprocity, and genuine psychological closeness like the relationship between Martha and Josie in Section 4.3.2. The findings suggest that a bridging-to-bonding transition may extend volunteers' contact with and support for their former PO (see Implication 4.1).

More broadly, the program should also consider how to better sustain this post-assignment PO support in ways that focus on the POs' development needs while also drawing on the volunteers' interest in and capacity to help. This could include creating opportunities for periodic re-engagement between volunteers and former POs, assisting POs to maintain stable key contacts during and after volunteer assignments, and helping volunteers navigate successive stages of support as they progress, for instance, from in-country volunteer to active supporter or collaborator (post-assignment) to targeted adviser in the longer-term. Not all volunteer-PO relationships will need or warrant equal support, and the program and POs may benefit from developing criteria to identify and prioritise the relationships with the greatest potential impact.

The program should also consider research to better understand the 'strategic retreat' that some volunteers make when they feel unable to contribute to POs (Section 5.2.3). Doing so may illuminate ways to extend the productive lifespan of PO support and to distinguish constructive retreats from premature ones. This research might address, for example, the processes informing volunteers' decision to disengage (e.g., timing, triggers) and the POs' perspectives on this.[220]

Implication 5.3: Recognising the program's influence on the nature, not just the quantity, of civic participation

The program's main impact on volunteers' continuing civic participation is how it reshapes their contributions towards internationally-oriented, skills-based, and values-driven service. This shift reflects volunteers' in-country experiences, networks, exposure to VLJ activities, and enhanced international development literacy, which informed their choices and increased their confidence and legitimacy. These qualitative changes, and the more targeted and impactful contributions they appear to produce[221] represent a valuable social legacy.

The program can support these contributions by:

- Creating pathways for returning volunteers to engage with civic roles aligned to their experiences and interests (e.g., partnerships with INGOs and professional associations, positions in advocacy, governance or mentoring). Doing so would contribute to the program's development impact and serve volunteers' ongoing ID literacy and engagement.
- Evaluating the impact of its VLJ activities in ways that consider both their role in supporting volunteers' success *during* the assignment and in influencing the quality and direction of volunteers' civic lives *after* their assignment. This could be incorporated into future versions of the VIS.
- Building on Implications 5.1 and 5.2, assessing the qualitative nature of volunteers' post-assignment contributions. Volunteers' board and committee positions, policy contributions, or cross-border projects and mentoring (like their discretionary contributions and PO support), are likely to be developmental for the volunteers and produce impacts that are currently outside the program's MEL framework. Understanding the nature and scope of these impacts gives the program a fuller picture of its overall value.

Implication 5.4: Providing more structured sector socialisation for volunteers who are seeking this

The strongest socialising experiences arose from assignment design features like exposure to different organisational models, hands-on field experience, peer networks, and opportunities to observe good and poor development practice. That such experiences were context-dependent rather than systematic program design raises two issues for the program. First, a sub-set of volunteers is making major career decisions based on assignment experiences that may be partial or unrepresentative of work in the sector rather than realistic previews. Second, if these limitations are remedied, the program can more effectively serve as a valued pipeline of future talent in the international development and humanitarian aid sector in ways that can benefit the program, the sector, volunteers, and host communities.

The program could improve the socialisation process for these volunteers by offering more structured (and perhaps optional) sector orientation during or after an assignment that provides realistic insights into sectoral work, for example: (i) curated exposure to different sector segments, (ii) realistic and diverse representations of the sector's ways of working, structures, and operating constraints, (iii) explicit guidance on the sector's ethical tensions, practical constraints, and career opportunities, and (iv) opportunities to engage with practitioners, observe work across different organisational levels, or gain exposure to multiple local contexts. These structured experiences could be supported by reflection opportunities, individual or shared, that help volunteers interpret what they have observed, consolidate their understanding of the sector, and assess their fit with the norms and values of international development work.

Collectively, these experiences resemble forms of 'legitimate peripheral participation' through which individuals gain access to the tacit practices, norms, and identities of a professional field without occupying central or authoritative roles.[222]

One source for these types of insights may be program alumni who have entered or tried to enter the sector following assignments, which some participants identified as a socialising force in its own right.

Implication 5.5: Supporting volunteers' international development literacy and treating this as a valued asset

The findings show a process of ID literacy growth that is uneven but that, for many participants, has continued in the years since their assignment and has informed how they understand, engage with, and act on development issues. Two points are worth noting.

First, the fact that ongoing professional connection was important to some volunteers in sustaining this growth suggests a role for structured activities like those offered by the alumni network to help former volunteers deepen their literacy about development issues (among former volunteers who are already well-disposed to contribute).

Second, the 'positive realist' view that many participants have developed, combining nuanced appreciation with informed criticism, enables them to articulate both the value and the limits of development volunteering in authentic ways. Alumni with this sophisticated and authentic view may be valuable resources as advocates and policy influencers, precisely because their critique comes from direct on-the-ground experience. This outlook also positions them well to be mentors for future volunteers, and/or connectors between Australian civil society and civil society in host countries. Their insights also represent a potentially valuable source of evidence for the program's own continuous improvement. With this in mind, the program should continue using structured mechanisms (e.g., consultations, program reviews, targeted research projects) to capture and use these volunteers' insights, which are developed during and after their assignments, and convert them into practical inputs for program improvement.

Volunteer stories: Nick

The birth of an online digital archive (Part 1)

Nick began his volunteer assignment in Indonesia in early 2020 with strong professional foundations that included experience in community work in Australia and Indonesia, a recent Master's degree in international development, and the aspiration to "*continue working in sexual health and HIV in South East Asia in the future … hopefully Indonesia, depending on the visa situation*" (T1).

Nick's PO was a small Indonesian NGO with a long history supporting people living with HIV and deep roots in Indonesia's LGBTQ+ community. The office environment was modest ("*internet that wasn't great, no AC*", T2) but it gave Nick daily contact with local staff, community members, and a broad network of activists and advocates on HIV issues. His assignment centred on project administration and community engagement, roles that suited his skills and interests. While Nick hoped the experience would improve his career prospects, he had no expectation that it would also be the impetus for a side project that would grow far beyond the original scope of his placement.

The Origins of the Queer Indonesia Archive

The genesis for what would become the Queer Indonesia Archive (QIA) emerged unexpectedly. When the PO was forced to relocate midway through Nick's assignment, long-forgotten boxes were unearthed containing documents of Indonesia's queer history that had been in storage and, in some cases, were physically deteriorating. Nick explained how:

> "*During the move some stuff came out of the back rooms … some were already getting damaged. There were photos from the 3rd Gay and Lesbian Congress in Indonesia in 1997 … when I [later] chatted to some younger Indonesians, they knew nothing about this … I thought, wow, there's so much history here that's vulnerable to getting lost forever … that was the seed for the project. It's just grown from there*" (T3)

Recognising the significance of these materials, Nick suggested to an Indonesian friend that they begin digitising the materials "*as a side project*" (T3). Their initial motivation was modest: preserving archives that were difficult to store safely in Indonesia "*because it's not particularly safe in Indonesia to collect all the physical objects in one place*" (T3) and perhaps expanding this to help other "*community groups digitise their photos and papers*" also (T3). Nick's early efforts focused on generating what he describes as "*the archiving impulse*" within Indonesian queer communities, helping people understand "*the idea of what an archive is and why this stuff is important*" (T4).

Growth and Impact

The project really took off after COVID forced Nick's repatriation to Australia. With limited employment prospects during lockdowns, he remained closely connected to his Indonesian colleagues and devoted most of his spare time to building the archive remotely, acknowledging that "*if COVID didn't happen, the Indonesian archive wouldn't have happened. It was very much born of that*" (T4). Much of the archive's creation was experimentation and incremental learning ("*a make-it-up-as-you-go-along process*", T4), supported by data management courses Nick sought out.

In its first five years (2020-2025), the archive has digitised and exhibited a database of artefacts that include magazines, flyers, photographs, films, blogs, and oral histories "*reflecting the lives and experiences of queer Indonesia*" (QIA website, November 2025). It also curates topical exhibitions based on the team's own international and local research. One of these traced the life of a pioneering Indonesian woman, the first woman to appear on the cover of a lesbian magazine in the United States:

> "We were *going to a conference in Montreal, we stopped at the New York Public Library … we found a bunch of her letters … and eventually we found her widow, who was still alive in the Netherlands*" (T5).

Exhibitions like these and the archive's multilingual descriptions and search options have highlighted the transnational dimensions of Indonesian queer history ("*it's such a story of global solidarity and crossing borders*", T4). They have also helped expand interest in the archive: not just in Indonesia ("*people just have a real, genuine interest in the history of their community*", T5) but also from abroad, where it has generated international funding and partnerships with similar ventures in other countries, including two from Australia.

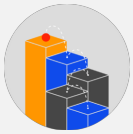
By 2025, the side project initiated by Nick and his co-founder had become the country's largest digital archive of queer life, averaging 14,000 website visits each year and exhibiting around 7,500 unique objects with materials from the 1930s to the present day. Among the QIA's achievements are:

- establishing a core team of eight experienced volunteers that oversees curation and operations.
- securing multiple international grants ("*at least one a year*", T5) to enable the archive to rent office space, hire consultants, and employ a part-time staff member, in large part a result of "*stuff I did as a volunteer that prepared me for [writing successful grants*]" (T5).
- engaging over 150 volunteers from across Indonesia, who collectively have contributed thousands of hours to reviewing, cataloguing, and curating materials for the archive.
- presenting at international museum and archiving conferences.
- collaborating with museums in London and Berlin and with similar archives in Europe and Australia.
- having the archive registered as a formal NGO, a lengthy process that strengthens its long-term sustainability by supporting regular funding streams.

Continued in part 2 …

Volunteer stories: Nick

The birth of an online digital archive (Part 2)



Impacts on Nick and Other Volunteers

The QIA now links communities across generations and across cultures. Nick meets online with the QIA team each month and travels to Indonesia annually for strategic planning, during which "*we meet in person to talk about the big-picture stuff*" (T5). At the time of the final interview, he was awaiting the outcome of a major international grant application which, if successful, would "*give us funding for a year of field trips*" to collect materials for archiving (T5).

Sustaining the project, however, has involved significant effort for Nick and his co-founder. Managing the archive "*takes time … volunteers often burn out*" (T5). To ensure continuity, the team plans to expand its volunteer base, including recruiting from Indonesian diaspora communities abroad. Nick hopes the archive will "*continue to grow*" (T5), and evolve to "*its own thing … not so strongly shaped by the people who set it up*" (T5).

The archive's impacts extend well beyond protecting fragile documents. It has also had a profound influence on those involved in creating and maintaining it. This includes the team of volunteers working on the project. For them, it has fostered, Nick says, "*a really big community-building, social element … and a lot of skill-building as well*" (T5). Among the opportunities created for the archive's volunteers are:

- presenting at international conferences and collaborating with teams working on similar initiatives overseas.
- developing professional skills and experiences in digital archiving, oral history, and curation.
- building friendships and supportive networks in Indonesia and in other countries, including Australia.
- accessing scholarships and study opportunities that build on their experiences with the archive, including one volunteer currently studying in Australia on an Australia Award scholarship.

The impact on Nick has also been strong. Although COVID disrupted his plans to develop a long-term career pathway in Indonesia, the archive remains "*the one thing that keeps me most connected to Indonesia now*" (T5), as well as with his former PO, which continues to work with and support the archive.

Transferring Learning from the QIA to Australia and the World

Nick's job in Australia with a local community organisation supports 30,000 people living with HIV in Australia, half from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (T5), and so keeps him closely connected to the issues that originally drew him to the region, to the volunteer role, and to the archive ("*A big part of me getting the role was having experience in HIV in South East Asia*", T4).

Nick has recently begun transferring his digital archiving skills and voluntary ethos to this paid employment. Drawing directly on his QIA experience, Nick persuaded his employer to retrieve "*about 15 boxes of archives … so we can digitise them and make them accessible*" (T5). This has since expanded to a project, completed mainly in his own time that Nick calls "*a memory audit*" (email, December 2025) that is collating, digitising and publishing a comprehensive catalogue of historical materials of people with HIV in Australia, sourced from archives, libraries, museums, and art galleries.

Nick's involvement with the QIA has also given him opportunities to share his understanding of HIV issues in Indonesia in professional and civic spaces. When attending policy events and international gatherings such as the global AIDS conference and the World Pride Human Rights conference (T4), he regularly advocates by drawing attention to Indonesia's under-representation, explaining:

> *"[At a recent conference] there was nothing on Indonesia at all, even though they're in the top 10 countries in terms of numbers of AIDS-related deaths. Every other country in that top 10 is really well represented. But [Indonesia's] just not on the radar. I was bringing that up a lot … I see it as Australia's role to ensure that countries in our region aren't being forgotten … this advocacy is always in addition to my [formal] role, but I know what the HIV landscape is like in Indonesia, there's not that many people that have experience in the region, so it's been quite useful for that"* (T4, T5)

The QIA was started as a voluntary side project to preserve a collection of deteriorating documents and photographs. Since then, it has evolved into a public archive that now supports a growing community of volunteers, safeguards and shares valued histories, and connects Indonesian and Australian queer communities. Nick views the archive as "a *living, breathing manifestation of the long history of solidarity"* (T4) between Indonesian and Australian queer communities ("*I really do see the archive as a continuation of that*", T4). Personally, he says, the archive is now "*a big part of my life … and that wouldn't have happened except for the volunteer program"* (T4).

Volunteer stories: Christine

From mentoring in PNG to anti-racism advocacy at home

When Christine began her volunteer assignment in PNG, she was "*close to retirement*" (T1) and already possessed deep ties to the country. She had lived and worked there previously, spoke some Tok Pisin, and had close personal connections with the PNG community in both her host city and in Australia. These relationships had instilled in Christine a profound respect for Melanesian cultures and ways of life.

After several decades in management roles in Australia, Christine was eager to return to "*hands-on, relationship-based work*" (T1). Her volunteer role was to support the manager of a community development organisation. She viewed her assignment as a chance to use her mentoring and interpersonal skills in a role that aligned with her values. Yet she also carried critical awareness shaped by earlier experiences, including one of racial hostility during a previous posting that had "*left a deep impression*" and heightened her sensitivity to issues of race, privilege, and allyship in development work, even before departing for her assignment (T1).

Experiences in Papua New Guinea

Christine found her time in PNG professionally fulfilling but also unsettling. The work was rewarding, her local relationships enriching, and the PO's mission inspiring. Yet she was disappointed by what she believed was a lack of critical dialogue about decolonial practice within the development sector: "*There's not much space for critical thinking around the systems [of development] … that hasn't moved on as I thought it would when I was here 15 years ago*" (T2).

Despite her many years in PNG previously, living "*a much more Papua New Guinean lifestyle*" (T2) during her assignment deepened her empathy and awareness of structural inequality - an awareness that she repeatedly identified as the most significant personal impact of her volunteer assignment across the duration of this study (T2-T5). This awareness came, in part, from observing how expatriates working in development could remain insulated from the frustrations of daily life that local people navigated constantly, such as corruption, unreliable systems, and donor politics ("*People will throw money at a problem, but it doesn't necessarily change the problem. It's got to be thoughtful, not just tokenistic*", T2).

A particular turning point for Christine occurred at a meeting with an international NGO. She witnessed her local counterpart, an experienced and capable manager, being ignored by visiting donors, who directed all their questions to Christine as the "*white foreign*" volunteer (T2). Afterward, the two women de-briefed and coined the term "*white magic*" as a bleakly humorous shorthand for the racialised way that credibility is conferred in the aid system. "*We played the game*," Christine later told a conference audience about the event, "*but it's humiliating, it's stupid, and it's not good work*" (RDI speech transcription, 2021). And while the experience was disquieting, it was one factor in Christine's determination to question the racial hierarchies she saw embedded in society beyond development practice.

Re-orienting from the Host Community to the Local Community

By the time she returned to Australia in March 2020, Christine was already thinking differently about where her efforts should be directed. Soon after returning to Australia (T2), she explained:

> "*I came back with an agenda, to see how we can support less racism for Aboriginal people in Australia … it's less of a focus on the 'out-there' [international] stuff. I've started thinking about how we can bring that back to be meaningful within Australia*"

Christine used the pandemic lockdowns to read, reflect, and re-evaluate her purpose, a time when anti-racism movements were growing in size and profile ("*Part of the energy was around Black Lives Matter, and COVID forced me to let go of my lifelong PNG connection … and instead focus on justice with Indigenous Australians and anti-racism*", T3).

In response to these experiences, Christine directed her energies towards a volunteer initiative in her local community - a reconciliation and anti-racism action group - and began developing community workshops and "*an anti-racism online [learning] course … getting people to think through their white supremacy … developing critical self-reflection workshops*" (T3). The motivation for Christine's involvement in this was rooted in a broader realisation that addressing issues she experienced in PNG required a "*bigger picture focus, to affect the thinking and power base in Western countries, not developing countries*" (T3). What had begun as a volunteer assignment directed at helping a foreign country with which she held strong ties evolved into domestic civic action intended to "*decolonise thinking*" (T4) - not in PNG but at home. Christine describes this initiative as her "*passion project*" (T3) and she sees a direct continuity between her PNG experience and her new activism:

> "*Expats can live in a foreign environment and not think deeply about race and class and white saviourism. But for me … I really had to get my act together around white saviourism. That experience [in PNG] 100% informed the direction this project is going now.*" (T3)

The Growth and Impact of Community Engagement

By 2025, Christine's anti-racism work had become an important feature of her post-retirement life. She volunteers regularly with the group, which operates "*on the smell of an oily rag … it's a small group of women doing some really interesting work*" (T4).

The group's flagship initiative is a six-week course that combines personal reflection with education from, mostly Aboriginal, guest speakers ("*one week on allyship, one week on colonialism, one week on self-determination*", T4). It secured local council grants, delivered workshops for local health organisations, and has developed a "*community of practice*" (T4) to support non-Indigenous participants seeking to sustain their learning ("*It's a safe space for white fellas to ask questions, support each other, and be active*", T5). While Christine says, "*It's hard to tell what the impacts of these initiatives have been*" (T5), the sessions have attracted local residents from diverse backgrounds, and over time the group has built a modest but sustained following - 60-70 participants completing the course, a mailing list of 150-200 people, and a Facebook membership of around 500 locals. At least one participant was inspired by the program to seek full-time work with a local Aboriginal controlled organisation.

Christine continues to advocate publicly on anti-racism and reconciliation issues. She was an invited speaker at an aid and development conference where she reflected on her "*white Australian experience in PNG*". She made submissions to government inquiries (2024) and maintained correspondence with policymakers on racial equity matters. She credits her time in PNG with giving her confidence and adding legitimacy to her voice on these issues that she now feels strongly about ("*I've always had a bit of imposter syndrome … but now I feel like I actually do know a few things. I want to write a few things and talk to a few people and see if we can move this along a little bit*", T4).

Volunteer stories: Deirdre

A continuing legacy of sustainability

Deirdre brought more than forty years of work experience as an educator and a long history of volunteering, both in Australia and abroad, to her volunteer assignment in Sri Lanka. She described her assignment, which she undertook with her partner, David, as her last, and one that was "*a combination of all the things that we are passionate about*", especially sharing her love for vocational education and passing on her skills to others who could benefit from them (T1).

The Impetus in Sri Lanka

Deirdre reflected on her assignment as "*fantastic, professionally I think it was perfect for me*" (T2). Among the many memorable experiences of living and working in Sri Lanka were two conditions that left lasting impressions:

- A scarcity of teaching resources in the colleges in which she volunteered as a teacher trainer, which required her to help her local colleagues innovate suitable resources from whatever materials she could find.
- A city that, although not large, was struggling to cope with environmental pollution that was visible in her everyday life and which she noted at the time as "*really depressing*" (T2) and "*distressing*" (T3).

According to Deirdre, the conditions in the school demanded creativity: "*I saved every box … anything broken or recyclable … I created practical resources for the classroom*" (T2). This left her "*more appreciative of what I have now and how lucky I am … the local teachers inspire me*" (T2). Outside work, it was the "*garbage everywhere … beautiful beaches strewn with rubbish*" (T2) that stood out, despite her fondness for the culture.

Although she had always been environmentally conscious, it was the experience of living these contrasts - between scarcity and waste - that heightened Deirdre's environmental awareness and turned her mind to practical activities she might be involved in ("*that was one of my big drivers. I thought, this is something that has to be done - we have to start at home*", T2). As time has passed, she has become increasingly convinced that these experiences "*sparked something in me, definitely*" (T4).

A New Direction at Home

A year after returning to Australia, Deirdre noticed a local toy library had opened. The opportunity to contribute to the library appealed to her as a retired teacher, grandparent, and long-time volunteer. Its emphasis on repairing and reusing toys aligned with the commitment to resourcefulness and sustainability she had carried home from Sri Lanka. To explain her interest in volunteering with the library, she said at the time: "*I am passionate about keeping toys out of landfill and having them available to parents … one of my hopes is that my husband can help me repair the toys, repaint them, reuse them … and not buy more plastic*" (T3).

Since she first started volunteering with the library in 2021, Deirdre's involvement has grown substantially. She is now a prominent member of the library's volunteer community, serving as the main Toy Coordinator and a central part of the library's operations. She leads maintenance sessions where volunteers "*check, clean, and catalogue new toys … there's $12,000 worth of toys in my garage now, waiting to be catalogued*" (T5). She also mentors and trains other volunteers and runs open toy exchange sessions.

Besides being the spark for her involvement with the toy library, Deirdre sees many of her experiences as an international volunteer transferring directly to her work there. This includes her volunteering philosophy of working with and mentoring other volunteers rather than doing everything herself ("*I see myself as a supporting person, like I was in Sri Lanka*", T4) despite the fact that she volunteers "*up to 80 hours a week, ask my husband!*" (T5). She also credits her cross-cultural experiences and her "*awareness of what other cultures do and how they think*" (T5) – which she identifies as the single main benefit of her time in Sri Lanka (T5) – for helping her volunteer work. An important part of this, she says, is supporting local families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through outreach and accessible communication, not just as users of the library but also as members of the library's volunteer community, some of whom Deirdre has invited as volunteers and who she now mentors and trains.

Deirdre's role with the library has also become a strong part of her identity. At every interview since she instigated contact with the library, Deirdre has framed her future plans around her voluntary work with the library - focusing on expanding its recycling initiatives, securing additional funding, sharing her learning with others, and supporting similar initiatives elsewhere. She attended national and international conferences on toy libraries in 2023 and 2025. At the time of her final interview in 2025, she had applied for a Churchill Scholarship to study toy recycling in Taiwan and Malaysia and was making plans to self-fund her attendance at forthcoming toy library conferences in Melbourne and Taiwan (T5 and follow-up emails).

Making an Impact

Deirdre's practical contributions to the growth and sustainability of her local toy library are tangible. She has instigated and written four successful grant applications totalling $40,000, including one collaboration with nine other libraries for a $16,000 state grant. Another of these grants funded the creation of a play corner at the library that was built entirely from recycled materials. She has coordinated the purchase and cataloguing of new toys and the re-use of tonnes of recycled toys donated to the library. At her T4 interview, for example, she noted, "*Last week, myself and one or two other volunteers processed 175 kilos of donated toys … that's just in one week.*" This influence has extended internationally, helping a university in Papua New Guinea establish a toy library for early childhood education students: "*We made sure we found toys that were culturally appropriate … we weren't going to send blonde-haired dolls or 100 battery-operated toys where it costs money just to use. We didn't think that was appropriate. We didn't give them toys with missing pieces. Everything was complete, playable, and ready to go*" (T5). Efforts like these have been critical to the library being recognised with awards from the largest council in the State ('community group' category, 2024) and at a national conference for "*the best library with over 100 members*" in 2023.

Volunteer stories: Serena

Sustaining support through a long-distance professional relationship

Foundations of Trust In-country

Serena took leave from a 20-year professional career to volunteer in East Asia. Her initial motivation was, in part, "*to challenge myself … I need a change; this will help me re-evaluate what I'm good at*" (T1) and to gain confidence and experiences at a time in her career when she was "*slightly stagnating*" (T1). The assignment was brief and Serena attributed no major personal changes to it, although she believes coping in a challenging environment "*boosted my confidence*" (T5). She also developed - and enjoyed using - different approaches to mentoring and helping her PO colleagues with whom she developed strong relationships, especially the director of the organisation who was Serena's counterpart (T2). As it transpired, Serena's brief in-country assignment provided the foundations and trust that has been the basis for the most substantial impact she has had as a volunteer, which has unfolded across the five years since she returned to Australia.

Sustaining Support Across Distance

During this time, Serena has continued to support the PO in myriad ways, centred on regular online meetings with the director and staff - initially "*weekly Zoom sessions set up for about an hour on Tuesdays*" and later "*it comes and goes in how regularly it happens … about once a week to once a month*" (T4). During these meetings Serena answers questions, shares advice and helps the PO solve problems, mainly on the use of advanced medical equipment. She sometimes provides "*teaching sessions for the more junior staff*" (T4).

Since 2022, Serena has invited a professional colleague, based in a different Australian city, to join these Zoom sessions. Serena says the three-way discussion format allows them to compare practical problem-solving ideas across different circumstances: "*it's useful to say, well, I would do it this way and he would do it this way… in [the host country] we've got to come up with a solution that works with what you've got*" (T4). Supplementing these meetings are "*occasional Facebook messenger chats to try and solve a problem with this piece of equipment or that*" (T4). Both Serena and her Australian colleague have visited the PO recently - the colleague "*for a one-week stint … [and] again possibly [in 2025]*" (T5) and herself during holidays in 2024 ("*I dropped in for a coffee, [my counterpart] was keen to see me but it turned out … that week they had visitors from South Korea so I couldn't do much to help them*", T5).

Towards More Equal Exchange

Serena's support for the PO continues despite competing personal and professional commitments ("*I'm juggling too many things*", T5) and a changing technical context. Online meetings are increasingly ad-hoc - now occurring "*maybe once every 2 or 3 months*" and supplemented by email (T5) as the technological infrastructure and proficiency of the PO has grown, and as more experts from South Korea, the UK, and other countries have begun helping them (T5). When Serena initially arrived at the PO in 2019, she "*didn't realise how [technologically] behind they were … it was quite basic*" (T2) and her early post-assignment consultations had concrete commissioning milestones. Recently, issues have become less bounded and harder to structure into regular sessions: "*initially we were doing quite effective regular catch-ups … now they're treating patients … the regular catch-ups have become less frequent … and it's moved into the training space … I don't feel like I've got the swing of it*" (T5).

Serena describes the impact of her volunteer assignment on her as still meaningful but less emotionally immediate ("*I can feel its impact fading … I still feel very proud that I did it… [and] still feel linked to the country*", T5). Her pride is directed less at her own experience than towards the PO's achievements - "*I'm incredibly proud of what they've done with our help … it's so far in advance of where they were 5-6 years ago … bypass[ing] … 20–30 years of standard practice*" (T5). Serena sees this growth as impressive but also complicating her informal advisory role. As the PO moves closer to "*cutting-edge*" practice, she describes a shift toward more equal dialogue - yet also greater uncertainty, because she lacks the day-to-day visibility she had when she was in the host country ("*It's become more of a conversation between equals … but then I'm only getting half the story … I don't have enough of the background because I'm not there and can't see everything I'd like to*", T5).

Serena nonetheless anticipates the relationship will endure: "*it's going to continue and evolve … in some format for a long time*" (T5), even as she acknowledges her own capacity limits ("*I'm frustrated I can't do more … but that is the reality of it*", T5).

Five years after her assignment ended, Serena remains committed to the relationship with the PO. "*They're special people*", she reflected in her final interview, "*I think what they're doing is amazing … I'm happy that we helped them get a good step along that way.*"

Volunteer stories: Susan

Extending impact through discretionary volunteering

Susan, an exercise physiologist, volunteered with a grassroots youth and community organisation in the Pacific. While her formal volunteer role focused on sport and exercise programming, she undertook several discretionary activities that sat outside her position description – what she described as "*doing extra things on top of volunteering*" (T2). These included preparing and leading practical English classes for colleagues and brokering partnerships between the PO and Australian universities to support staff professional development.

At the request of junior colleagues, Susan "*ended up running English classes every week for six months of my nine months there*" (T2). These sessions focused on practical workplace communication such as writing professional emails, explaining procedures, and making presentations. Susan emphasised that this work was unrelated to her formal role, describing it as "*a really practical skill [for staff] … that had nothing to do with my assignment"* (T2). Although not a trained teacher, she drew on "*resources and contacts from [Australia] to be able to set that up and run it*" (T2). She described the classes as fun and "*not a big thing*" for her, but "*a valuable resource for the people that wanted that*" (T2). The classes also had the benefit of strengthening her relationships with PO colleagues who participated.

In parallel, Susan initiated partnerships between the PO and Australian universities. These emerged in response to a practical problem: no one was available in-country to provide important strength and conditioning training to local sports coaches, so Susan sought ways the training could continue "*without the expense of having to fly someone over*" (T2). Drawing on her professional networks, she facilitated an agreement whereby the PO would host Australian university students on placement programs while an instructor from the university taught the course. These student visits were structured as reciprocal exchanges, with students having "*the opportunity to learn in a different cultural setting and gain experiences beyond a typical professional placement setting*" (email), and local staff gaining access to accredited training and professional development (T4). The visits were deliberately designed to reduce the burden on the PO, rather than "*just dropping the students in the country and ticking the box*" (T2). They evolved through "*consecutive groups of students that could build on projects over time*" (T2). The PO ended up hosting student visits before and after COVID border closures, including during Susan's follow-up volunteer assignment with the PO in 2023, before discontinuing due to staff changes at both organisations (T5).

Volunteer stories: Vivienne

More nuanced and confident engagement with aid and development

Vivienne was a health-sector worker who had recently been made redundant when she accepted her volunteer assignment in Fiji. At the time (T1), she described herself as largely disengaged from international affairs: "*I almost close myself off from other things outside of work … [others] seem to have more worldly views … I'm not particularly proactive.*"

By the time she returned from her assignment, this lack of "*any understanding of what the aid program was*" (T4) had begun to erode. She initially noted becoming "*more politically aware*" and "*slightly more aware and a bit more interested*" in international aid/development issues (T2).

This has deepened greatly over subsequent years. Vivienne "*refers back to*" her volunteer experiences "*so often … as a reference point for understanding how political decisions are shaped and how aid intersects with strategic relationships*" (T4) and says she now views aid as part of a wider political structure ("*I now 'get' how having aid going into Fiji feeds into political goals in the Pacific area*", T4). She attributes this interest in the political dynamics of development to her strong engagement with Fijian culture (T2) and to conversations with other expatriates and volunteers during her assignment:

> *"Discussing 'Why would a French company invest in Fiji?' or 'What's the value to Australia in investing in Fiji's agricultural sector?' … I understand why Australia is going to do this activity … it's around having that influence and that positive influence, not just a presence"* (T4)

A notable associated change, Vivienne says, is her confidence discussing international politics, aid and development issues. Whereas previously, "*I would have an opinion but I might not have been able to verbalise why"* (T5), she now feels better equipped to engage in more constructive and rational discussions:

> *"My thinking has changed so much in the last five years … previously where I would have gotten really angry [at someone], I am able to challenge their thinking with questions … I think about it more because I've learned more about it, taken in more about the political environment. I am able to have that conversation"* (T5)

Part of this change is a better understanding of the pros and cons of development volunteering. Vivienne is more engaged in critiques such as "*white saviour*" narratives (T5) but also appreciative of its reciprocity ("*it's a pretty even swap … we learn a lot from the people we're supposed to be helping … I don't think they tell us enough about that*", T5).

Section 6

Career Progression and Professional Capabilities

- Most participants' careers have been impacted positively by their volunteer assignment, with 68% achieving career gains five years after completing it. Benefits were strongest among younger volunteers and were shaped significantly by career stage, assignment conditions, and the disruptions of the COVID repatriation.
- The program has been an effective mechanism for career transition, particularly for entering the international development and humanitarian aid sector or making horizontal transitions across professional fields. Over half the sample has transitioned to a substantially new sector since their assignment, with many of those transitions inspired by their volunteer experiences.
- For many participants, the volunteer assignment was one of several deliberate career construction activities undertaken across the six-year span of the study, alongside formal education, sectoral repositioning, and proactive network building. In this, many volunteers were actively crafting careers that align with their values and that were entwined with and built upon their volunteer experiences.
- For volunteers seeking careers with stronger prosocial elements, an assignment has been largely effective in helping them achieve this transition, with the majority of prosocial career seekers reaching a more prosocial role by T5, although not always the role they had hoped for.
- Across all career and professional outcomes, the assignment's value was consistently greatest for younger, career-oriented volunteers (particularly *Launchers* and *Enhancers*). This pattern reflects the degree to which the assignment was able to provide field experience, career direction, and professional credibility that volunteers at earlier career stages could not easily have obtained elsewhere.
- The professional development generated by the assignment was concentrated primarily in interpersonal, communicative, and intercultural 'soft' capabilities rather than domain-specific knowledge and capabilities. These proved to be versatile, being widely applied to new roles, sectors, and contexts. Crucially, there is some evidence they may function as mechanisms of transfer by helping volunteers build legitimacy, navigate new work settings, share knowledge, and translate their prior expertise into new contexts.
- Domain-specific knowledge and professional networks were less consistent outcomes and more limited than many volunteers anticipated. Both were heavily dependent on role alignment and depth of engagement with host-country professionals during the assignment.
- The assignment's interaction with formal education was one of its most professionally beneficial impacts. For some, it consolidated and extended prior learning; for others, it catalysed or guided new educational pathways. The large majority of those who pursued further study as a direct result of their assignment reported tangible professional benefits.
- Career benefits were not uniformly timed. Some volunteers realised gains quickly; others (particularly *Transitioners*) experienced delayed benefits that only became apparent years later. For some, COVID-enforced repatriation functioned as a career shock that disrupted trajectories and delayed the realisation of the assignment's benefits.
- The strongest barrier to professional development was misalignment between the assignment role and the volunteer's professional expertise and identity. Poor 'fit' undermined professional development, eroded confidence, and in some cases contributed to early withdrawal intentions.
- In general, volunteers' professional development is more conditional than in other areas. Assignment design, PO readiness, and post-assignment support all influenced volunteers' professional outcomes.
- The main implications for the program are discussed on pages 102-104.

6 Career Progression and Professional Capabilities

6.1 Overview and Background

This section reports outcomes relating to participants' career progression and professional capabilities. As well as addressing the program's objective of supporting volunteers to 'gain professionally', these outcomes are central to the motivations of many program volunteers[223] (including most LSAV participants)[224] and to the occupation-based volunteering that the program offers.[225] The section addresses the impact of participation in the program on:

1. Participants' **career trajectory and employment outcomes** (Section 6.2). Sub-sections are devoted to examining participants' changing employment status across the study (6.2.1), the assignment's impact on career trajectories and job performance (6.2.2), the variability of these across the study's duration (6.2.3), and participants' use of their assignment experiences in applications for jobs, promotions and other professional roles (6.2.4).
2. **Transitions into prosocial careers** (Section 6.3), an outcome sought by a large number of participants when entering the program.
3. The **development of professional knowledge and capabilities** (Section 6.4), with sub-sections devoted to what professional capabilities are impacted most (Section 6.4.1), professional development by each category of volunteer (Section 6.4.2), and what made the assignment professionally developmental (6.4.3).
4. The **transfer and application of professional knowledge and capabilities** (Section 6.5), including the application of professional knowledge and capabilities in post-assignment contexts (6.5.1), soft skills as mechanisms of translation (6.5.2), and the development and use of professional networks (6.5.3).
5. The relationship between **volunteering and formal education (**Section 6.6).

The section ends by setting out the core implications of these outcomes for volunteer support and management (Section 6.7).

Professional baseline: Summary of participants' professional status and capabilities at T1

Participants were highly qualified in their field and more educated than most Australians, with 95% holding either a Bachelor's (45%) or Master's or Doctorate degree (49%). Eighteen percent aimed to continue a formal education program during their assignment and a few expressed tentative plans to continue or commence studies after their assignment. Professionally, the background of participants was diverse. The largest occupational categories represented were 'Business/Marketing/Tourism/Art and Design' and 'Education/Training/Library' (both 18% of the sample), and 'Community/Social Development' (13%).

The sample comprised a mix of participants working full-time (39%), recent full-time students (11%) and retirees (30%), as well as several who were seeking work but unemployed (20%), mainly due to recent departures from professional roles (e.g., redundancies). Participants' experience in their occupational field varied from zero to 41 years (mean: 14 years).

Thirty-two participants (59%) identified career benefits as an important motivation for volunteering. This was especially true among younger participants. For 13 (24%) of these, 'career' was the primary or sole motivator. Among the professional benefits that participants sought from their assignments were: gaining field experience to help them enter or transition into the 'International Development and Humanitarian Aid' sector, enhancing their skills and experiences through working internationally or in a challenging context, or accumulating experiences to allow them to re-enter the workforce after a career setback. Twenty-two (41%) – mainly *Transitioners* and *Launchers* - reported a desire to develop a temporary or permanent international career and saw the volunteer assignment as a stepping-stone to achieving this.

An important feature of the cohort is that just three participants had firm employment options arranged for the completion of their assignment. Most described being at a professional transition point when they commenced their assignment: for example, entering the workforce (*Launchers*), reconsidering their career direction (mainly *Transitioners*, *Enhancers* and *Imposed Transitioners*), seeking renewal (*Career Breakers*), or closing a professional chapter (*Veterans*). Participants' narratives were often characterised by a deliberate attempt to integrate their professional capabilities with prosocial work that they hoped to continue after their assignment. Twenty-eight (52%) expressed an aim or a general interest in pivoting their career (job, employer or sector) toward one that had stronger prosocial features (i.e., help others and produce beneficial social/environmental impacts). For these and other participants, the decision to volunteer, therefore, had altruistic and strategic goals – a means of entwining their professional capability with a (more) meaningful career.

6.2 Career Trajectory and Employment Outcomes

6.2.1 Employment Status Across the Study (T1-T5)

The study has documented regular improvements in the proportion of participants working in their chosen professional field (if wanting employment) and in roles that provide satisfaction or meaning, particularly since their post-COVID repatriations, when most returned to Australia with no job and limited employment pathways, but also since their entry to the program.[226]

Pertinently, most had no firm work plans to which they could return after their repatriation. Eight approached prior employers to seek work opportunities,[227] most with some success. This includes two participants who continued part-time or ad-hoc remote work with an employer during their assignment. The average time taken for respondents to find work after their repatriation was 5.8 months (range: 0 to 34 months).[228] While the circumstances of COVID were unprecedented, these experiences draw attention to the risks of volunteers breaking ties with former employers when entering the program, especially volunteers whose assignments are oriented towards career objectives.

Table 13 summarises the sample's employment status prior to their assignment (T1) and at each data collection point across the study's six years.[229] The table shows generally positive changes in employment status, a decline in unemployment (to zero at T5) and an increase in the proportion working in a preferred professional field. COVID had a major impact on all participants' post-assignment careers, the main impacts of which are raised in the box **'The impact of COVID repatriations on participants' career objectives, status, trajectory, and progression'** on page 82.[230] Most participants who were seeking work had found employment aligned to their professional interests within three years of the assignment ending (T4), and a handful experienced delayed improvements after that (T5). While not all careers benefited from the assignment, most participants have successfully recalibrated their career and professional lives in response to the changed circumstances since their volunteer assignment ended in 2020.

Table 13: Participants' employment status (pre-post assignment)

Employment status[1]	T1 (2019) n (%)	T2 (2020) n (%)	T3 (2021) n (%)	T4 (2023) n (%)	T5 (2025) n (%)	Notes
Employed (full-time)[2]	22 (40%)	9 (16%)	24 (44%)	32 (64%)	30 (64%)	Six participants were working full-time internationally at T5 (four on volunteer assignments, including one former retiree). Three others were about to commence international roles at the time of their T5 interview.
Employed (part-time)	0 (0%)	6 (11%)	5 (9%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	Both participants working part-time at T5 are *Imposed Transitioners* who were unemployed at T1. Just one of these (who works multiple part-time roles in a casualised sector undergoing declining employment) is seeking full-time work, down from four at T3.[231] In addition to the two participants working part-time, at T5 two retirees work part-time in casual roles relating to their professional field.[232]
Student (full-time)	6 (11%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	Both full-time students at T5 are studying areas that were inspired by their volunteer assignment. All who were full-time students at T1 now work full-time in the careers of their choice and all believe that their assignment helped their career, albeit to varying degrees. One of these changed the focus of their career because of their assignment experiences.[233]
Unemployed (seeking work)	11 (20%)	24 (44%)	6 (11%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	Ten participants who were unemployed at T1 are now employed; the other has since retired and completed multiple subsequent volunteer assignments. The sole unemployed participant at T4, who had resigned a full-time professional role to enter the program (T1), has since found employment.
Not working (retired)	16 (29%)	15 (28%)	17 (31%)	10 (20%)	13 (28%)	Those in retirement include one *Transitioner* and one *Imposed Transitioner* whose volunteer assignment had improved their employability and helped them find subsequent work roles that drew on their professional training (although these differed from their pre-assignment goals due to COVID). Three retirees (T1) have now re-entered the workforce.
Total	**55 (100%)**	**55 (100%)**	**54 (100%)**	**50 (100%)**	**47 (100%)**	

[1] Columns include data from all participants involved in that phase of the study.

[2] 'Employed (full-time)' includes participants working full-time on formal international volunteer assignments.

The impact of COVID repatriations on participants' career objectives, status, trajectory, and progression

The enforced repatriations of most participants due to COVID and the subsequent labour market disruptions and travel restrictions had major impacts on participants' careers. The impacts were strongest for the 41% who were seeking international work opportunities through or following their assignments and/or the 95% with no work position to which they could return in Australia (i.e., those who had resigned or otherwise left a previous employer).

For most participants, these events reduced the magnitude of professional benefits they were able to accrue, cutting the average length of their assignment by 31%, and disrupted post-assignment career opportunities across T2 and T3 because of restrictions on travel and hiring freezes across most sectors of the labour market.

Reflecting these conditions, at T3 36% of participants reported that the assignment had been detrimental to their career or not beneficial despite their expectations that it would be. Six attributed 'career setbacks' to volunteering, including two whose primary motivation for entering the program was 'career'. One in three who had found work at T3 were in a 'plan B' job unrelated to their preferred career. For some, especially older volunteers, the time out of the workforce that their repatriation created was perceived as reducing their options for future work or skilled volunteering positions.

COVID travel restrictions also curtailed prospective international roles or careers, including three participants who had arranged or applied for post-assignment international work roles and for eight who had extended or made plans to extend their existing volunteer assignment (T2). Several others had international work offers or opportunities discontinued or cancelled due to COVID.[1]

Many repatriated participants were forced to relocate to a different city/area in Australia (than prior to the assignment), to live in temporary and unfamiliar accommodation, and/or to take on one or more work roles that were outside their preferred professional area**.** Participants' repatriation to Australia also created new obligations that have led some participants to make radical changes to their career plans stemming from family or personal circumstances or changes in economic, social, and employment conditions that would affect their prior career plans.[2]

[1] It should be noted, however, that three participants (#02, #21, #33) found employment in roles relating to COVID response interventions in Australia that provided outlets for them to apply knowledge and skills developed during their assignments.

[2] Examples of participants who made changes to their career plans stemming from personal obligations after being repatriated (e.g., caring for family) include: #01, #12, #21, #24, #36, #45 and #53.

» Key Features of Participants' Employment Status Since Their Assignment

1. **All participants who were seeking work had found employment at T5. For almost all (91%, 29/32) this was in their preferred professional field**.[234]

2. **The career outcomes of participants entering the program with career-related motivations were strong.** Nine of the 11 (82%)[235] participants expressing 'career' benefits as their primary or sole motivation for volunteering were employed full-time at T5.[236] Of the 16 identifying career as a subsidiary (second or third) but not primary motivation, 15 were employed (one had retired); 14 worked in their chosen field, although not all had employment security.

3. **While many viewed their assignment as an entry point to an international career, this had not materialised for most, although the global COVID pandemic had a major impact on this and a large number worked in roles with strong international emphasis and reach.** The number working overseas has remained small – nil at T2, three at T3 (6%), five at T4 (10%), and six (13%) at T5, the same number as at T1.[237] At T5, an additional five worked domestically in roles with exclusively international/global foci (e.g., managing international projects from an Australian base) and roles requiring regular international travel.[238] Many others had roles with substantial international dimensions through services that are directed at or designed specifically for international clients, or migrants or others from CALD backgrounds in Australia. At least four had applied for international positions at the time of T5 interviews, all of which related to or built on their experiences volunteering with the program.[239]

   The case study of Bronwen on page 105 is an example of one of the few participants to successfully pivot from a domestic to an internationally-focused career that now defines a large part of her professional identity, a transition that arose directly from the professional experiences and networks that she formed during volunteer assignment, her first international work role.[240]

   For the 20 participants with international work aspirations at T1 who are now in Australia,[241] 11 (55%) reported their assignment furthered their interest in international work and believed that they would have continued international careers if COVID had not intervened. Six (30%) have since pivoted to an explicit domestic focus due to personal/family commitments (2) or changing interests inspired by their experiences as volunteers (4).[242]

4. **Participants' careers are characterised by high levels of fluidity in interests, roles, employers, and sectors. Many have been defined by precarious employment, even when their pre-assignment career goals have been met.** Consistent with many participants' career pathways prior to their assignment (T1)[243] - and influenced strongly by both COVID and their assignments - very few career trajectories have been stable and linear. After their COVID repatriations, the most common number of employers per participant is three (range 1-4);[244] just eight returned to part- or full-time employment at a previous role or employer.

   This fluidity is most prominent among young respondents, including *Launchers* and *Enhancers* who had expressed specific career objectives at T1. The **case study of Barbara on page 106** illustrates this

pattern. A *Transitioner* whose post-assignment career has moved through a former employer, a government agency, and ultimately a second international volunteer assignment, Barbara's trajectory shows a sequence of deliberate steps, each shaped by the assignment's legacy and motivated by an incomplete search for paid work that feels meaningful.

Fluidity was also common among *Veterans* and *Non-working Partners*, several of whom have moved between full-time retirement, casual or part/full-time work, and/or follow-up volunteer assignments. In other words, retirement has not been a static phase for participants in this study.[245]

This fluidity was least evident among *Career Breakers,* all of whom re-connected with a former employer post-repatriation and observed, at one or more interviews, their fortune in having a role to return to during the COVID pandemic. At T5, all three *Career Breakers* have re-commenced more traditional career pathways and fewer fluctuations than other groups. Two remain with their pre-assignment employers despite entering the program, in part, to explore alternative career possibilities. Both reported higher levels of professional satisfaction at T5 than at T1, part of which they attribute to the assignment.[246]

6.2.2 Impact on Career Trajectory and Job Performance[247]

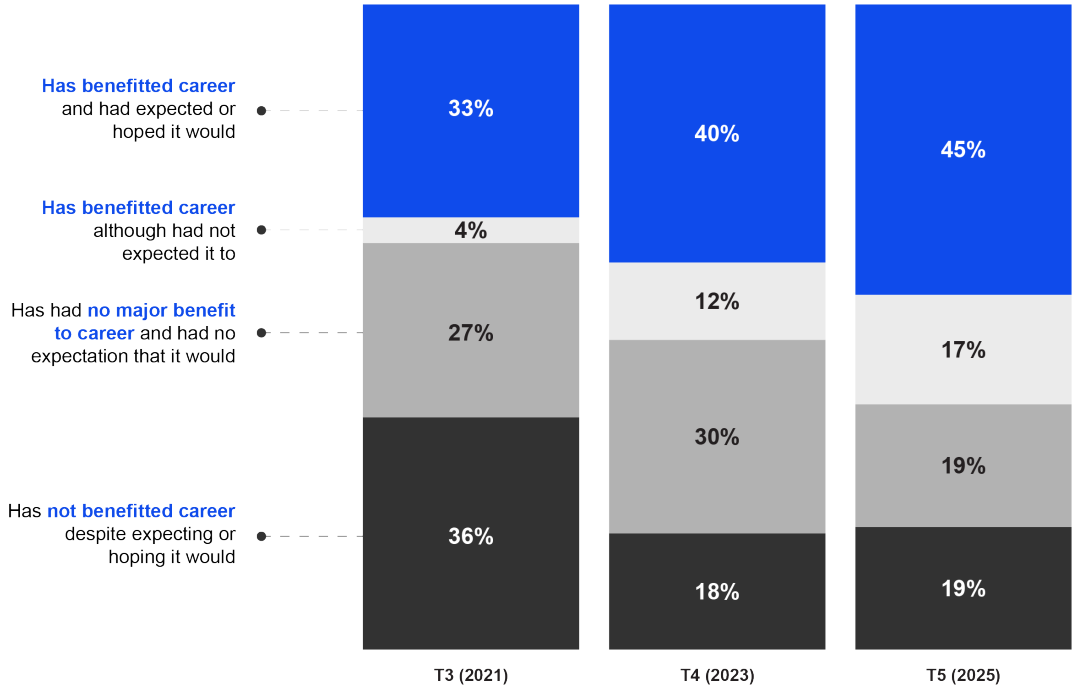
6.2.2.1 Impacts on Career Trajectory

Figure 13 summarises the assignment's impacts on volunteers' careers at three time points: T3 (2021), T4 (2023) and T5 (2025).[248] For each, it shows the proportion whose careers have benefited from the assignment (top), and those whose careers were not helped or were harmed (bottom).[249]

At T5, the careers of 62%[250] had been impacted positively by their participation in the program. When participants who were retired or not seeking work at T5 are excluded, **68% of the volunteers in the study who are working have achieved career gains from their assignment five years after completing it. This includes 91% of participants identifying 'career' as the primary motive for volunteering and 69% of participants with some career-related motive at T1**.[251]

The groups of volunteers with the largest numbers showing career benefits tended to be younger - mainly *Launchers* (4/5, 80%), *Enhancers* (5/6, 83%) and *Transitioners* (8/11, 73%). Nine of these identified career benefits as the single biggest impact of their volunteer assignment.[252]

Figure 13: Impact of a volunteer assignment on volunteers' career (T3-T5)



Tracing direct links between participants' assignment and phases or shifts in their post-assignment career is sometimes difficult. Nonetheless, while each volunteer's professional pathway has differed, the three most common career trajectories evident in the data were:

1. **Direct career advancement** (20 participants), mainly *Launchers*, *Enhancers* and a sub-set of *Transitioners*. These volunteers describe their assignment as providing them with credibility,

capabilities, and (for some) networks that have enabled career opportunities or provided career direction that they have capitalised on. This includes participants for whom the assignment provided career clarity rather than professional advancement.[253]

2. **Indirect development without strong recognition** (9 participants), where volunteers describe the experience as professionally developmental but not always sufficient to help them secure career opportunities. This pathway is most frequent among *Imposed Transitioners* and a sub-set of *Transitioners*.[254]
3. **Continuity and some enrichment without reinvention** (13 participants), mainly *Career Breakers* and *Veterans* re-entering the workforce, where the assignment's professional impacts represent an affirmation of their competence, and offered meaning and refreshment but no major trajectory shift.[255]

6.2.2.2 Impacts on Perceived Job Performance

At T5, five years after their volunteer assignment, 21 respondents believed that they were better at their current job as a direct result of their experiences with the program.[256] This represents:

- Two-thirds of participants who were working at T5.
- Seventy-two percent who were working or studying full-time in their chosen fields.[257]
- Two-thirds who reported 'career' related motivations, including 73% who identified 'career' as their primary or sole reason for entering the assignment.[258]
- All *Launchers* and *Enhancers* but no *Career Breakers* or *Non-working Partners*.
- Seven *Veterans* who were using their professional skills in some form (paid employment or international volunteer assignments).

Figure 14 summarises features of participants (T1), assignments and in-country experiences (T2) and outcomes and post-assignment experiences (T3-T5) associated with *both* career benefits *and* perceived improvements in job performance.

Figure 14: Features associated with positive career benefits *and* perceived job performance

As the box '**Variations impacting career trajectory**' on page 85 explains, participants who now live overseas or in urban areas of Australia, or are geographically mobile were more likely to achieve both (i) improved career outcomes and (ii) improved perceived job performance than others. It also shows that other features (e.g., participants' age, professional field, assignment location) were associated with better career outcomes although not with perceived job performance.

Over half the sample working at T5 had transitioned to a substantially new professional sector or sub-sector since completing their assignment.[259] This comprises some who shifted to find work during COVID and have remained in these new sectors. For nine, the decision to move to a different career path was prompted by in-country experiences.[260] This includes some who were deterred from pursuing international work by the assignment, as well as others who were inspired to pursue careers in new areas as diverse as agriculture, education, community services, or health research. It includes several who expressed a desire to transition to a new sector at T1 (*Transitioners* and *Imposed Transitioners*).

Variations impacting career trajectory

1. Some evidence suggests that geography has contributed to the impact of participants' assignments on their career.[1]

Participants living in capital cities since their return to Australia, in general, have been more successful in finding work opportunities that have built on their volunteer experiences than those in regional or remote Australia.

Moreover, eight participants - 24% of those working or seeking work at T5 - have relocated to a different city or State for work reasons. This includes more than half of all *Launchers*, *Enhancers*, and volunteers who were residing in rural/regional Australia at T1.[2] In general, these geographically mobile participants report better outcomes and being more able to build on the experiences of their volunteer assignments than those who have remained in rural areas. As an example of this, participant #42, living in a regional city since returning to Australia, has been unable to find work that builds on his volunteering or prior professional experiences. He entered the assignment after losing a "*previous job of 29 years*" (T1) and although the assignment role was "*not quite the area I worked in*" (T1) he was hopeful it would lead to more opportunities, including the chance of another volunteer assignment (T2). Since returning to Australia, he experienced a personal and professional "*rollercoaster*" (T3) and several years of poor mental health, moving through several jobs (T4, T5). He is now employed in a sector related to his professional training but that does not utilise his professional expertise ("*it's not the easiest work, but it's a job and it's an income*", T5). While job opportunities have been available if he was willing to relocate, he is pragmatic in observing that:

> *"… in some ways, just fitting in as I did [during my assignment], has helped me not resent that I've chosen a job which is less stressful than what I could be doing professionally [elsewhere] … the work is hard but it's a lifestyle I enjoy. I don't have huge ambitions. Basically, I'm looking for something that'll pay the groceries and I don't dip into savings. And I do sort of look back at how little [income] I could survive on [during the assignment]*" (#42, T5)

2. The data also show that some features of volunteers and their assignments are associated with career benefits, although not necessarily improved performance at their job.

The most notable of these were:

- Participants' age (and years of professional experience when entering the assignment). Younger volunteers were more likely to experience career benefits from their assignment than older volunteers, yet they did not report higher levels of improved job performance.
- Assignment location: Volunteers who worked in a PO in a capital city have achieved stronger career benefits than those whose assignment was in a rural location despite no differences in the subsequent impact on their job performance.
- Professional fields: Volunteers working in 'Community/Social Development' experienced better career outcomes but did not necessarily report better job performance outcomes. Volunteers working in 'Business/Marketing/Tourism/Art and Design' experienced weaker career outcomes than other professional fields but not necessarily weaker job performance. In contrast, volunteers working in 'Education' reported improved job performance but had not, at T5, experienced career benefits that reflect this.
- Professional networks: Volunteers who developed professional networks during the assignment and have sustained these in the years since have achieved better career outcomes than those who did not, although these networks are not strongly associated with improvements in job performance.

[1] Analysis of the impacts of participants' home location in Australia (State, rurality) on their career outcomes was hampered partly by the large number of participants repatriating to different cities/States (T2) and to frequent inter-city and interstate relocations in the years since then.

[2] The number of volunteers who are currently working and who have relocated to a new city and/or State for work purposes since returning to Australia: *Launchers* = 3/5 (60%), *Enhancers* = 4/6 (67%), participants residing in regional or remote Australia at T1: 4/7 (57%).

6.2.3 Variability Over Time and Across Groups

The career outcomes of particular groups and individuals have shown variation across the five years since participants' assignments ended. Three features are worth noting.

1. As **Figure 13** shows, the proportion of *working* participants who have experienced career benefits from their assignment has risen since the aftermath of COVID (47% at T3) to 67-68% (T4-T5).[261]
2. While it is true that some participants began recouping career benefits soon after the assignment (T3 or T4) and the benefits for these participants have remained relatively stable in the period since, this is not true for all participants. That is, for participants from a variety of categories and professional areas, the career value of the volunteer assignment has waxed and waned: some benefits emerged later than others, shifting from neutral to detrimental at T3 or T4 to having a positive impact at T5; others began promisingly but the value has since deteriorated. **Table 14** presents illustrative examples of four participants, all of whom had career objectives when entering the program (T1), whose career impacts have shown measurable variability across different data collection periods.
3. At the group level, *Transitioners* - whose career benefits in early waves (T2-T3) were weaker than other groups - took longer than most groups to find employment after repatriation[262] and showed the strongest improvement in the post-COVID period (especially T4 to T5).[263] In other words, the five-year data suggest that career benefits for a sub-set of *Transitioners* were somewhat delayed compared to others but proved to be equally beneficial over the longer term. *Veterans* have also seen improved career benefits across the study, although this reflects a growing number re-entering employment (including international volunteer assignments) over the study's duration. In contrast, *Career Breakers* and *Enhancers* showed the least variation.

Table 14: Illustrative changes in career impacts over time (T3-T5)

Volunteer	Category	T3 (2021)	T4 (2023)	T5 (2025)	Brief narrative
Participant #20	Launcher 	No benefit	Benefit	Benefit	The assignment was valuable in clarifying that the type of work **participant #20** enjoyed was grassroots education-focused programs, and that pursuing a career in international development required her to develop different skills and expertise. After further study inspired by this, she found permanent work in a new sector (in part due to a project she had managed during her assignment) and has since been promoted to a more senior policy-focused position that emphasises the cross-cultural capabilities she developed in-country.
Participant #24	Transitioner 	No benefit	No benefit	Benefit	**Participant #24** "absolutely" believed the assignment made her better at her profession. Yet she initially had difficulty finding work (in a regional city) that allowed her to apply new skills in stakeholder engagement, which she considered an important outcome of her assignment. Although she found fulfilling employment, it was in 2024 that her career "completely shifted" when an internal opportunity arose for a promotion to a new role that built directly on the interests and experiences she had during her assignment. The new experiences she had as a volunteer, especially relating to stakeholder engagement, are now central to how she performs this work.
Participant #45	Enhancer 	Detriment	No benefit	Benefit	**Participant #45** struggled to find work after repatriation. Being abroad hampered his job prospects, he says, by cutting him off from the context and contacts he needed to work in his sector (and by the sector's contraction in Australia). A 15-month period of unemployment eroded much of the professional confidence that he had gained while volunteering. After finding work in 2021, partly due to his intercultural acumen, he has since had many opportunities to use his host-country experiences after beginning in 2023 to manage a program that provides services impacting large numbers of Australian residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
Participant #01	Imposed Transitioner 	Benefit	Benefit	No benefit	**Participant #01** had been offered a paid position in the host country before her enforced repatriation. While disappointed, she returned to Australia enthused to apply the many practical insights and experiences she gained during her assignment. After rotating through multiple short-term contracts for five years, she believes the experiences of her assignment added to her performance in important ways. However, she has found that the context of her assignment (a volunteer assignment in a small Pacific country) is less valued by her peers and employer than more conventional international roles. At T5, she worked part-time casual work but had failed to secure a permanent or full-time position.

» Participants Whose Careers Did Not Benefit from Their Volunteer Assignment

Eight participants (19%) expected or hoped at T1 that their involvement with the program would help their career but were yet to realise a tangible benefit five years after it ended (T5). These came from across all volunteer types except *Veterans*, although primarily *Imposed Transitioners*,[264] the category with the least favourable career outcomes overall. For three *Imposed Transitioners*, enforced repatriation due to COVID directly disrupted their T1 plans to further their careers internationally. [265]

For the remaining participants in this group, COVID was also a contributing factor, but a more fundamental issue was the poor 'fit' among the volunteer, their role, and the PO. Common problems included roles that did not match volunteers' expertise or interests, vague or inaccurate position descriptions, and POs that were unprepared or unsupportive of the volunteer's role. Notably, this lack of fit led four of these participants to prematurely end, or seriously consider ending, their assignment (T2), including **Addison**, whose experiences are described in the **case study on page 28**.

This issue of 'fit' also extended beyond career outcomes to volunteers' sense of their own professional effectiveness. Relatively large numbers of *Transitioners* (5/11, 45%), *Imposed Transitioners* (3/7, 43%) and *Career Breakers* (2/3, 67%) who had been motivated primarily by career considerations at T1 also felt that their assignment had not contributed significantly to their performance in their subsequent work.[266] Misalignment among the volunteer, their position, and the PO was the strongest contributing factor - suggesting that poor fit has compounding consequences, limiting both the immediate developmental value of the assignment and its longer-term career benefits.

> *"I think I learnt stuff … even though I wasn't really able to apply those things into practice … I think there were some positive sides … the networks were useful. But I think it is what you make of it. The program does create some opportunities. If you make the most of it, if you are very proactive, you can get something out of it, but you do have to really fight to get something out of it. It's certainly not gift wrapped and handed to you on a silver platter"* (#41, T5)

6.2.4 Applications for Jobs, Promotions and Other Professional Roles

In general, participants have found that their international volunteer assignment is viewed favourably in applications for jobs, promotions, and other professional roles (e.g., memberships to boards or committees). Some participants reported benefiting from the confidence gained during the assignment to take on new roles while others identified specific activities, roles, and outcomes as most beneficial. In terms of applying for new professional roles, participants' volunteer assignment has been most beneficial for entry to roles and some new sectors, or in signalling particular dispositions (e.g., resilience, sense of adventure), rather than providing evidence of valued capabilities or achievements, and the assignment may be less beneficial for vertical career progression.

In the first five years since the end of their volunteer assignments, 33 participants (70%) drew on their volunteer assignments in applications for new paid and voluntary work positions. These included applications for (sometimes multiple) new jobs and international volunteer positions, promotions, entry to programs of study, and/or membership on paid or voluntary boards or committees.[267]

Mostly, although not unanimously, participants believed that their program experiences were beneficial in these applications.[268] Thirteen of these (39%) believed the impact was strong. Large numbers of young participants – primarily *Launchers*, *Enhancers* and *Transitioners* – positioned their volunteer assignments as central features in these applications and found these generally well received by prospective employers.

Consistently across multiple waves of data, stronger perceived benefits were reported by participants whose pre-assignment position description (PD) accurately reflected the type of work they performed during their assignment and matched their professional training.[269] That is, volunteers whose assignments were well aligned with their professional skills were better able to benefit from their volunteer experience in subsequent professional applications.

Norma's case study, presented on page 106, illustrates how volunteering can function as a credentialing signal and a marker of sectoral commitment even where its direct contribution to skill development was disputed. The sole *Enhancer* whose assignment did not benefit their career, Norma questioned whether it had delivered genuine professional value, describing its contribution as cosmetic rather than substantive and the professional development gains minimal. Nonetheless, she recognises its 'signalling' benefits to her résumé and so to her goal of securing a permanent paid role in international development.

The box **'How does international volunteering help (or hinder) professional applications?'** on page 88 summarises some of the features that – *according to participants* - employers appeared to associate most positively (and negatively) with program experiences, and the strategies participants used to capitalise on the professional benefits of their volunteer assignment.[270] It combines data on participants' demographics, assignment features, and in-country experiences (T1-T2) with participants' accounts of these processes in subsequent applications and interviews relating to their career development (T3-T5).

Enhancers, in particular, were strategic in how they chose to use their volunteer experiences in interviews and applications. Among the strategies they reported were downplaying (or excluding) the 'voluntary' nature of the position and making the effort to translate less tangible parts of their work into specific outputs (e.g., grants won and managed, materials produced, training delivered).

Eight (25% of working participants) believed at T5 that their volunteer assignment had had no impact or a negligible one, although all eight had identified benefits in successful and unsuccessful applications in earlier interviews, suggesting some declining appreciation of the perceived value of the experience over time.[271] Across the study, four participants reported one or more application processes where they believed their volunteer assignment was *detrimental* to their job application; all four of these had reported volunteer roles that were poorly aligned with their capabilities (and with the pre-assignment PD) at T2.

The volunteers most likely to foreground their volunteer experience in applications – and to continue highlighting these for longer periods after their assignment – were those who believed their assignment was professionally developmental and fulfilling, and volunteers making applications in sectors perceived to value volunteer experiences (e.g., international development, health). When volunteers believed that their assignment lacked substance (e.g., limited genuine work), they were reluctant to foreground it, even in sectors that may have valued it.

In contrast to the numerous horizontal shifts across sector and to new roles with growing responsibilities (as illustrated in **Bronwen's** case on page 105), relatively few participants sought vertical career progression. While 12 have succeeded in securing internal promotions, just four attribute this directly to experiences or capabilities arising from their assignments.[272] In this, there is some indication that the knowledge and experiences that volunteers gained are contextual and may not always map cleanly onto organisation-specific competencies that support career progression. An illustration of this is **the case study of Germaine on page 107**,[273] who struggled to build on the (substantial) learning from her international experiences as both a volunteer and a *Non-working Partner*. Germaine's experiences volunteering and living in East Asia initially helped her to enter a government department at a mid-level position ("*I was able to come in as a Level 5 rather than starting from zero*", T5). However, the same experiences lost currency as she ascended the hierarchy.[274] Germaine's account suggests that she felt this mismatch acutely: her development background is "*not seen as transferable enough*" for senior policy roles within her department. Although not

widespread among participants of this study, it shows how international volunteering can enhance early employability yet may limit vertical progression in workplaces that privilege linear, domestic experience and knowledge.

The main exception to this is for participants whose roles now have overt international foci, including:

- **Participant #19 (Launcher)**, who has been promoted to a senior management position in recent years and is responsible for designing and managing projects relating to the host country - "*110%, definitely that [promotion] is a direct result of the experiences I gained from the volunteer process … I continue to reference my time as a volunteer (in my work)*" (#19, T5).
- **Participant #53 (Enhancer)**, who has recently been promoted to a coordination role with an international NGO based in Australia and leads the organisation's work on a major initiative linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including leading delegations at major global conferences for the past three years:

  "*My volunteer assignment was a huge part of my promotion. [My current job] is literally the same technical skill set [as my assignment]. I've got a team in [Australian city]. And then there's [team members in three other countries]. I think some of the biggest impacts that I've made in my career were [volunteering] - both with the tangible policy outcomes, but also with the people-to-people connections that you make*" (#53, T5)

How does international volunteering help (or hinder) professional applications?

What do employers value most about an international volunteer assignment? (T5)

- Evidence of cross-cultural acumen and intercultural skills.
- Professional experiences in different and/or challenging contexts as indicators of resilience, flexibility, problem-solving, and initiative.
- Evidence of professional experience in a valued sector or setting (most valued in health, education and international development).

What did volunteers highlight in applications that they believed helped their success? (T3-T5)

- The legitimacy of the role/position (to avoid conflating with 'voluntourism') or the PO, especially among volunteers working in domestic NGOs or government agencies who reported difficulty translating the context of their work, verifying their achievements, or obtaining references from PO management.
- Specific outcomes or achievements and linking these to broader goals, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- Grants, awards, or other tangible indicators of success, whether personal or organisational, stemming from their work.
- Ways that particular in-country experiences could transfer to different contexts (e.g., cross-cultural experiences being transferable to disability services, management roles, or roles involving communities from CALD backgrounds).
- Specific projects they were involved in addressing a problem that was recognisable or relevant to the application (e.g., explaining how their work supported a process of organisational change and development).
- Specific techniques or processes they used or learned that are transferable (e.g., stakeholder engagement, mentoring, sidekick manifesto).
- Additional discretionary voluntary activities they performed (and the reasons for and outcomes of this).

When is a volunteer assignment not as helpful in applying for professional positions? (T4-T5)

- When volunteers struggle to explain how the context of the work can be applied to a domestic (Australian) setting or have difficulty translating less tangible parts of their work into 'outputs'. This transition was more difficult for volunteers whose role involved less clearly defined objectives or whose PO was less well-known to prospective employers (most common for volunteers in domestic NGOs and government offices).
- When employers see little relevance in international work experiences (most common in local and State government, business, marketing and tourism, retail).
- When the skillset used in the volunteer assignment differs from that required of the job.
- When misunderstandings or negative attributes are attached to the term 'volunteer' by employers.
- When volunteers are unable to or feel uncomfortable using PO supervisors as referees.
- When employers are concerned about the potential for volunteers leaving to work abroad.
- When relevant domain-specific knowledge and skills were not used during the volunteer assignment, most common when the formal position description differed from the nature of the work that volunteers performed.

6.3 Prosocial Career Transitions

A particular sub-sample of participants entered the program seeking to transition to a career with stronger prosocial elements. For this group, the volunteer assignment has been a largely effective mechanism to achieve this transition.

At T1, 16 participants[275] from four different volunteer categories were unambiguous about seeking **both**: (i) career benefits from their volunteer assignment (i.e., career motivations), **and** (ii) a transition in some way to a career or role that had a stronger prosocial orientation[276] (see box). An additional eight[277] had career motivations and expressed broad interest in future work being more prosocial, although they had less clearly defined pathways to transition and were using the assignment to explore the viability of a possible shift. Jointly, these 24 participants comprised a cross-cutting group of **prosocial career seekers** entering the program at T1 (2019). This group comprised 51% of all participants across all volunteer groups at T1 except *Veterans* and *Non-working Partners*.

Table 15 shows the number of prosocial career seekers for each volunteer category who were seeking a prosocial career transition at T1 (column 2) and the number who have been able to achieve a transition by 2021 (T3), 2023 (T4) and 2025 (T5). It includes only participants for whom full datasets are available. As the table shows, over half the participants who wanted to transition into a prosocial work role had achieved this by T5.[278] Four additional participants moved to roles with strong prosocial features despite not seeking this at T1.[279]

» **A prosocial career** is one motivated, at least in part, by a desire to help others and produce beneficial social or environmental impacts.

» **A prosocial career transition** is one where a participant's motivations for moving to a new position, organisation, or sector are, at least in part, to better help others and to produce more beneficial social or environmental impacts. In these cases, the participant perceives that their new role, employer or sector will help them contribute to more beneficial outcomes. Examples from this study include volunteers wanting to work in a role, organisation or sector that addresses sustainability, human rights, humanitarian aid or international development issues.

Table 15: Participants seeking and achieving prosocial career transitions by volunteer type

Volunteer type (total number per group)	Number seeking at T1 (2019)	Number achieved at T3 (2021)	Number achieved at T4 (2023)	Number achieved at T5 (2025)
Launchers n = 6	5	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)
Enhancers n = 7	6	3 (50%)	5 (83%)	6 (100%)
Career Breakers n = 3	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Transitioners n = 12	8	3 (37%)	5 (62%)	4 (50%)
Imposed Transitioners n = 7	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)
Total	**24**	**10 (42%)**	**14 (58%)**	**14 (58%)**

Table includes data from 47 participants for whom T1-T5 data is available

» Main Facilitators of and Barriers to Prosocial Transitions

The participants who were able to transition to a role with stronger prosocial elements[280] came from a variety of professional backgrounds and now work in a range of sectors, mainly Health.

When compared to other participants, successful prosocial transitioners were typically young, professionally mobile (seven relocated to take up their prosocial roles), and reported career-related motives for volunteering (including all *Enhancers*), although the transition they made did not always align with these pre-assignment goals.[281] Most also had quite immersive host-culture experiences (e.g., working closely with a colleague or counterpart from the host country, assigned to a domestic NGO as the PO, reporting numerous culture-specific learning outcomes at T2), even though just two now work in roles that directly involve the host country and half do work that is primarily domestic in orientation, suggesting that they have been able to

translate these and other features of their international volunteer experiences into values-based careers in Australia.

Importantly, most of the ten prosocial career seekers who had not achieved a desired transition by T5 nonetheless reported some fulfilment.[282] Nine were employed at T5[283] and half were classified as having an assignment which was beneficial for their career. For four of these, the assignment provided insight that caused them to reconsider their prior career plans (e.g., to *not* pursue a planned career in international development).[284] Eight of the ten had reported (at T2) a PD that was inaccurate (i.e., differed in substantial ways from their pre-assignment expectations) and five raised this as limiting their learning or general experiences during the assignment ("*It probably is a little bit of a missed opportunity … it was not necessarily what I was expecting that I would do. When I was volunteering, I had that international development mindset. And it's not to say that I'm not interested anymore in that area, but it's more that I'm actually okay with the fact that it didn't go down that path*", #11, T5). Just three of these ten remained keen to pursue a career with stronger prosocial elements at some point in the future. Two have chosen career paths that provide financial stability and experiences that they hope to use for a future transition. For instance, since being repatriated, **participant #19** used contacts developed on the assignment to return to the host country and complete a contract with an INGO. For now, he uses his host-country expertise - enhanced during the assignment - in a stable local role while paying down a new mortgage. He plans to return to international development and was awaiting a decision on a job application in that sector at the time of the T5 interview.[285]

6.4 Developing Professional Knowledge and Capabilities[286]

Participants reported a breadth of assignment experiences contributing to their professional development during and in the years following their assignment, typically associated with a variety of personal, interpersonal and cross-cultural experiences during their assignment – both in and out of their workplace.

The study offers strong support for prior research highlighting the professional knowledge, capabilities, and networks that volunteers can develop through international assignments.[287] For many, the assignment was a learning-intensive experience that resulted in professionally-relevant knowledge and capabilities that have had a positive impact on their professional direction and job performance. One or more participants across four groups identified professional/career changes as the single major impact of their volunteer assignment. For two groups of (mainly younger and more career-oriented) volunteers – *Launchers* (3/5) and *Enhancers* (5/6) – it was the most commonly reported main assignment impact; these are also the groups whose careers and job performance have benefited most.

It is also clear that volunteers' careers and professional acumen and confidence benefited from developing 'soft' capabilities that support communication, relationships, and problem-solving more strongly than they did from developing technical, domain-specific knowledge and capabilities. In the current study, these gains were shaped by the structural and social features of the assignment, most prominently the how closely assignment matched their interests and expertise, the PO environment, and the program's VLJ and support activities.

6.4.1 What Volunteers Learned

Across the study, learning outcomes most frequently reported and that remain most professionally relevant at T5 fell into five broad categories, each traceable to different features of participants' in-country experiences. These are summarised in the box '**Professional knowledge and capabilities attributed to the program.**'[288] The five categories span a range of professional outcomes, from technically oriented 'domain-specific knowledge and capabilities' to broader personal and relational capabilities like 'intercultural capabilities' and 'role performance and management capabilities' that facilitate interpersonal and management roles. They also map closely to models of 'career capital' that outline the professional resources (skills, knowledge, networks, motivations) workers need to navigate across professional sectors, roles, and transitions.[289]

Professional knowledge and capabilities attributed to the program

1. **Intercultural capabilities:** Capabilities relating to working effectively across cultural and interpersonal boundaries, including awareness of how cultural background shapes perspectives, flexibility, and adaptability in culturally different environments. This category incorporates both culture-specific knowledge (such as language proficiency and contextual understanding of a specific country) and broader cross-cultural competencies (such as sensitivity to cultural difference and the ability to navigate diverse ways of working and living). The main in-country experiences that influenced these capabilities were cross-cultural collaborations with locals, adjusting behaviours to unfamiliar roles and work environments, unstructured discussions with HCNs and others, and observing through general immersion in the workplace and in the culture.
2. **Role performance and management capabilities:** Capabilities required to manage people and projects or perform work that are not specific to the professional domain. This category includes people and management skills associated with capacity development (mentoring, collaborating, role modelling) and managing interpersonal relationships, as well as communication capabilities (e.g., listening and interpreting messages) and managing social and work interactions (e.g., developing relationships). In-country experiences that contributed most strongly to these capabilities occurred in the workplace: primarily 'stretch' roles involving unfamiliar activities or responsibilities, adjusting behaviours to unfamiliar roles and work environments, and cross-cultural collaborations with HCNs.
3. **Domain-specific knowledge and capabilities:** Capabilities specific to individuals' professional field. These include expanded technical knowledge or know-how, improved performance of domain-related tasks, more strategic outlook on profession or role, and new domain-specific contacts or networks. In-country experiences contributing to these included performing 'stretch' roles involving unfamiliar activities or responsibilities, collaborating with other expatriates (inter-organisational or within INGOs and intergovernmental agencies), or observing practices and role models.
4. **Professional confidence:** Overall confidence in one's professional capabilities, status or legitimacy. In-country experiences contributing to this included taking on 'stretch' roles involving unfamiliar activities or responsibilities, adjusting behaviours and priorities to suit the local context, and coping with the challenges and stresses that the new role, setting, and culture presented.
5. **Career direction or priorities:** Changed outlook on one's professional career direction or priorities and developing processes for achieving such changes (e.g., accessing information, developing professional relationships). These changes are associated with 'knowing why' career capital that provides career direction by shaping career motivation, meaning, and identity. In-country experiences like unstructured discussions with others (including volunteers and other expatriates), taking on a new or unfamiliar 'stretch' role, and observing through general immersion in the workplace were all contributors to this.

6.4.1.1 Main Areas of Professional Development

The most impactful professional development tended to centre on 'soft' capabilities, principally intercultural capabilities and role performance and management capabilities, which participants subsequently translated with success to new settings, roles, and sectors. Domain-specific knowledge, capabilities, and professional networks were less consistently developed. Across the four post-assignment interviews (2020-2025), intercultural capabilities (24-30% of reported outcomes) and role performance and management capabilities (19-28%) together comprised more than half of all reported professional development outcomes at each interview, and these are the capabilities that participants have used most regularly in their workplaces. Both were developed and applied by participants across all six volunteer categories.

» Intercultural Capabilities

These were the most frequently reported learning episodes during assignments (T2)[290] and were linked mainly to the intercultural nature of workplaces and projects. Three-quarters of participants have benefited from using intercultural competencies developed during the assignment in professional activities (work or civic) at one or more time periods since the assignment ended; the proportion reporting professional benefits has grown across the study.[291] Two-thirds of working participants believed the intercultural competencies they developed during the assignment have improved their job performance.[292] These capabilities are used across volunteer types and age groups, in both domestic and international work settings, and are most frequently drawn on by *Transitioners*, *Imposed Transitioners*, and *Veterans*.

The most valued intercultural workplace capabilities were 'culture-general' – that is, capabilities like behavioural flexibility and global mindset (introduced in Section 4.4.2) that improve cultural awareness and cross-cultural competence without being tied to a specific country or context. These are also among the most readily translatable of learning outcomes: across T4 and T5, culture-general capabilities were reported as being used in workplaces more abundantly, and in more diverse settings and ways, than culture-specific capabilities.[293] The box '**Examples of benefiting from global mindset in professional settings**' on page 92 illustrates some of the ways participants have deployed these in teaching, managing, stakeholder engagement, consulting, and cross-organisational mediation across a variety of sectors. **The case study of Charlie on page 108** is another example. A retired *Veteran* with extensive prior international experience, Charlie found that his assignment in South East Asia challenged him to refine and use a suite of communication techniques, primarily when communicating in English with people who had different levels of fluency, involving "*making changes to how I'd normally do it, just subtle things I picked up*" (T4). As this case shows, these included techniques like language grading, suggestive dialogue, concept checking, rapport building, and the use of cultural artefacts - skills he has continued to apply and develop in multiple subsequent remote and in-country assignments across the Pacific over the past five years.

Examples of benefiting from global mindset in professional settings

- Teaching: "*Difference matters. I bring in my knowledge from the [host country] and I consider Indigenous people's rights and connections with the land, and background beliefs and colonialism, all of those things … It's a big part of most of the subjects that I teach and increasingly so in Australia … I've seen real changes over the last few years with how that's impacted on how we educate … now I myself can see how impactful that is. Like in opening up to other ways of seeing the world and being in the world*" (#01)
- Managing: "*The AVP program has also made me realise some of my biases which I think I would not have recognised had I not had that in-country experience. For example, when you're working in the field office and headquarters comes up with a project, you go okay, I've got to do this, I get that I'm receiving a bit of money, but it might or might not be one of my priorities. And you understand the broader context, that they have other in-country priorities in addition to your project and you just take a different approach to things. I think that is one really significant achievement looking back because I do think it is a different perspective … you realise when you've had that AVP experience that you just don't know what is happening in those country offices and you don't understand that experience and to really spend more time teasing out those experiences*" (#53)
- Engaging with stakeholders: "*The idea of 'face', it is a valuable thing. It's a survival mechanism for just getting on, and I realise now that it's necessary, it's not self-deception. It helps one to just do what needs to be done. Before with my […] background, I would have been inclined to dig a bit to try and find out what was really, really going on, but now I realise that those psychological defences are at an individual family, community, social level, they are necessary … I'm finding myself doing this recalibration of, well, who am I in this situation? And I am seeing myself as a […] and whoops there are many other ways of engaging and I should be careful. So yes, I am more aware. I sent an email to friends who were in DFAT and got the answer back, yes, they said, I know what you mean … that does my head in at times*" (#15)
- Consulting: "*It really brought that kind of difference [between the host country and Australia] into sharp focus … you can learn to understand about the Indigenous people of a particular place, like New Zealand, or Australia, or the United States. But I think you really need to look at Indigenous peoples in many other countries in the world as well to really understand. That's something I think I've certainly learnt from working in [the host country], for sure*" (#05)
- Mediating between and integrating views of different groups of people in an organisation or team: "*A lot of my role at the moment is reviewing reports and budgets and making sure we're meeting [donors'] and international best practice standards … It's almost like my role is translating what's happening on the ground into [donors'] language or into the language of my board. The board ask so much that I'm like, this is just wasted time. It's hard because obviously you need it written down on paper and it needs to be recorded and you need to do your due diligence. But at the same time, it does take away time from people on the ground actually doing their job. So, I think probably [the assignment] taught me that people generally have thought through things, but it's just not written down in this Westernised style …"* (#14)

» Role Performance and Management Capabilities

These comprised 17% of all in-country learning episodes (87/522 at T2) and were reported at multiple interviews by 19 participants (59% of working participants) as beneficial in subsequent work roles.[294] The most prominent capabilities across volunteer groups were mentoring and capacity development, applied subsequently in corporate, government, and non-profit organisations. Others reported leading, managing change, managing interpersonal relationships, communicating, and managing projects.[295] These capabilities were most commonly developed through cross-cultural collaborations with HCNs and through adjusting normal work practices to suit local conditions; for instance, nurturing locally-led rather than imposed change, explaining advanced "*technical skills in more easily understood ways*" (#31, T2), and building relationships as a precondition for introducing change.[296]

» Domain-specific Knowledge and Capabilities

The impact of the assignment on participants' domain-specific capabilities was equivocal and, for many, smaller than anticipated at T1. Domain-specific learning comprised 14% of in-country learning episodes.[297] This was primarily reported by participants seeking to enter international development or humanitarian aid.[298] At T2, almost three-quarters believed their assignment had contributed to their domain-specific capabilities in some way, although for many the benefit was modest.[299] Limited access to professional experts or role models, and limited opportunity to apply technical knowledge and skills, were commonly cited impediments,[300] and these conditions were associated with consistently weaker career outcomes in subsequent years.

Nonetheless, 43% of volunteers believe they accrued meaningful domain-specific benefits.[301] Those most likely to report sustained gains worked in international development (especially *Launchers*), health, and education. *Imposed Transitioners*, entering from periods of unemployment, and younger participants were also among those most likely to find the assignment beneficial in this respect. Those who worked alongside volunteers or expatriates with complementary professional expertise reported stronger domain-specific development than those working alone;[302] one participant suggested that a "*professional penguin*" from the volunteer's own field could have meaningfully supported this kind of learning during difficult phases of the assignment (see Implication 6.5).

» Career Direction and Priorities

A common theme in participants' T5 reflections was career purpose - questioning what constituted a meaningful or purposeful career for them. Although not a conventional professional development outcome,

many saw this as among the most enduring impacts of their assignment.[303] This was particularly true for *Transitioners*, who reported increased clarity about their preferred professional domain, in some cases moving toward it, in others being persuaded to abandon directions they had hoped to pursue.[304] For many, the most enduring career impact was 'knowing-why': a clarified sense of career direction and motivation rather than standard metrics like promotion or advancement. These reassessments were often accompanied by personal changes - confidence gains, cultural competence, vocational meaning, or recovery from burnout - that have shaped participants' career decisions in the years since.

» Professional Confidence

For some participants, greater professional confidence stemmed from the belief that the assignment enhanced their professional reputation or legitimacy through: (i) the international dimension of the work, (ii) performing a new or more expansive role, and/or (iii) having experience 'in the field', even when domain-specific capabilities were not strongly impacted. Around half of these participants have translated that confidence into clear career or professional outcomes in the five years since their assignment.[305] **Part 1 of the case study of Olivia ('A career asset that took time to see') on page 109** illustrates how the professional value of an assignment can be difficult to assess in the short term, and how its significance may only become apparent once volunteers find roles and contexts in which their learning can be meaningfully applied.

6.4.2 Professional Development by Volunteer Category

The pattern of professional development differed across volunteer categories in both strength and character, reflecting differences in career stage, motivation, role alignment, and the degree to which participants were able to act on their assignment experiences after repatriation. **Table 16** summarises the main outcomes by category.[306]

While within-group variation was common:

- ***Launchers* and *Enhancers*** generally experienced the strongest, most consistent (across time), and most consequential career development. All believe their assignment made them better at their current job, and both groups drew on multiple capability types regularly across the post-assignment period.
- ***Transitioners* and *Imposed Transitioners*** had more complex and variable outcomes: professional benefits were apparent but took longer to emerge, were more vulnerable to disruption by the COVID repatriation, and were more contingent on role alignment than for other groups.
- ***Career Breakers*, *Veterans*, and *Non-working Partners*** developed capabilities that enriched their work and, in some cases, renewed professional purpose, but experienced the least substantial professional development overall. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that the developmental 'premium' of an international assignment is greatest at earlier career stages.[307]

These cross-group differences are consistent with prior research on international assignments, which shows that career benefits are most pronounced for those in earlier career stages, and that the 'high-density' nature of internationally dislocating experiences, adjusting to a new culture, context, and role simultaneously, tended to generate stronger developmental outcomes than equivalent domestic work.[308] Participants' accounts (particularly at T2, although not exclusively) reflect this. Most described the assignment as more professionally developmental than a comparable role in Australia would have been, particularly in terms of personal growth and self-awareness.[309] A smaller number - mainly *Career Breakers* and *Veterans* - described it in terms more consistent with findings on older expatriates, for whom career gains may be less prominent than personal development and values clarification.[310]

Table 16: Main professional development outcomes by category

Category	Main professional impacts	Comments
Launchers 	• 'Career direction' (knowing-why) and professional confidence • A platform for initial field experience and signalling their skills • 'International development literacy' (domain-specific) • 'Professional networks' (expanding job opportunities and improved employability)	• Highest-impact group for career outcomes • All believed the assignment made them better at their job and helped them succeed in at least one job application • Few challenges transferring interpersonal capabilities to subsequent roles, including those without a strong intercultural focus
Enhancers 	• 'Intercultural' and 'role performance and management' capabilities • 'Domain-specific knowledge and capabilities' (mainly international development) • 'Professional networks' (expanding job opportunities and improved employability) • 'Professional confidence' (broader experiences and professional legitimacy)	• Richest in-country learning episodes (T2) and strongest domain-specific growth • Main impediment was under-utilisation of expertise during the assignment • Few challenges transferring new capabilities to subsequent roles, although confidence eroded when difficulties were experienced finding post-repatriation employment
Transitioners 	• 'Career direction' (knowing-why) relating to preferred work domain, sometimes away from intended path (and associated with clarifying a new professional identity) • 'Intercultural capabilities,' although unevenly transferred after assignment • 'Professional confidence' (although interrupted by repatriation, emerging later and related to finding career direction)	• Greatest within-category diversity of professional and career outcomes • Career benefits took longest to materialise (largest improvement from T4–T5) • Limited professional networks developed or sustained
Career Breakers 	• 'Intercultural capabilities' and 'interpersonal management capabilities' (mentoring, consulting, collaborating) • 'Professional confidence' (minor and temporary increase) • Clarity about career direction	• No tangible career benefits, although all acquired or enhanced capabilities that benefited their work • Limited transfer of intercultural proficiencies to post-assignment workplaces • Confidence gains largely lost (not supported by workplace)
Imposed Transitioners 	• 'Professional confidence' associated with career direction (knowing-why) • 'Interpersonal and intercultural capabilities' (although sector and location limited their transferability after the assignment)	• COVID a major constraint on ability to act on intended career direction • Poor role fit and inaccurate position descriptions hampered professional development more strongly than for other groups • Limited post-assignment window for some to apply professional development (close to retirement)
Veterans 	• 'Intercultural capabilities' • 'Career direction' (renewed professional purpose for some re-entering a professional field)	• Minor changes (affirmation, enrichment) without substantial professional development • Several moved between retirement, casual/part-time work and follow-up assignments • Few challenges applying interpersonal and intercultural capabilities to subsequent roles
Non-working Partners 	• 'Intercultural capabilities' • 'Professional confidence'	• Some professional confidence gains for those involved in discretionary volunteering, although limited application after the assignment

6.4.3 What Made Assignments Professionally Developmental

Participants' professional development outcomes were strongly shaped by the structural and experiential features of their assignment. The workplace was the context for most reported professional learning,[311] although a third of learning episodes occurred outside work through unstructured conversations with volunteers, expatriates and HCNs, or through day-to-day immersion in the host-country environment. Participants drew on experiential, social and vicarious approaches to learning.[312] Most learning was experiential - adjusting to local conditions, taking on unfamiliar responsibilities, or navigating pressure situations involving conflict or stress. Social learning occurred through collaborating, discussing issues with

and consulting others. A substantial proportion (30%) emerged vicariously, through immersion in the organisational or cultural environment and through observing role models and work practices.

Three features of the assignment environment contributed most strongly to professional development.

6.4.3.1 Role Alignment and PO Readiness

The most significant determinant of whether an assignment was professionally developmental was the degree of alignment between the volunteer's expertise and the actual work they performed. The accuracy of the PD and alignment with the volunteers' professional skills (and interests) was central to this. Where this was the case, volunteers were more likely to develop domain-specific capabilities, capitalise on their experience in subsequent job applications, and sustain the professional confidence they gained.[313]

Volunteers who described their assignments as most developmental were those whose roles made genuine use of their professional skills and knowledge. Conversely, where the formal role differed substantially from what volunteers were actually asked to do, or where the work was seen as unrelated to their professional expertise, the assignment was experienced as less meaningful and professionally developmental. Participants described these roles variously as "*unproductive*", as leaving them feeling "*under-utilised*", or as offering "*no meaningful tasks at all.*" One participant, reflecting many years after the assignment, observed: "*the assignment that I chose wasn't aligned enough with the actual skills that I could contribute and where I could be of most benefit*" (#07, T4) … "*the skillset just wasn't really comparable, I wasn't given enough to do*" (#07, T5). This misalignment had compounding effects also: volunteers in poorly fitting roles were less likely to benefit professionally during the assignment and less likely to realise career benefits in the years that followed (Section 6.2).

Closely related to role alignment was the readiness and capacity of the PO to support the volunteer's role. Volunteers hosted by domestic or international NGOs, particularly those in urban settings in East Asia and the Asian Archipelago, generally reported more developmental assignment experiences than those placed in local government offices or poorly resourced POs. The professionalism of the PO, its operational readiness to integrate the volunteer's contribution, and the degree to which supervisors actively supported the role all shaped what volunteers could learn and how. This was most noticeable in the assignments that were least developmental. Where POs were unprepared or unsupportive, professional development was curtailed; in some cases, like that of Addison on page 28, professional confidence was actively undermined.

Although exceptions existed, role alignment and PO readiness functioned as foundations of assignments that were professionally developmental, a view that strengthened for several participants across the study's duration. Other assignment features (e.g., collaborating with HCNs and taking on stretch roles) were generally contingent on these conditions.

6.4.3.2 Depth of Engagement with Host-country Nationals

The nature and quality of engagement with HCN colleagues was among the most powerful drivers of professional learning. Participants who worked closely alongside HCN counterparts, rather than operating at a distance, reported the most impactful learning outcomes. Deep engagement with HCNs was the primary learning experience for *Enhancers* and many *Launchers*, whose professional development and careers have benefited most. It was through these relationships that the 'soft' skills associated with mentoring, collaborating, and applying intercultural capabilities were most fully developed.

The case study of Nancy's experience in East Asia on page 110 offers a clear illustration: a close working relationship with an HCN colleague who became her "*cultural penguin*" (T2) not only accelerated her cultural adjustment but gave her practical insight into how work was actually performed within the sector, knowledge that formal education or the PDB alone could not have provided. **Kevin's case study (page 52)**, introduced in Section 4, offers another example: an immersive assignment characterised by sustained collaboration with HCN colleagues and friends across work and non-work settings that produced a breadth and depth of relational capabilities that have continued to generate professional benefits since the assignment ended.

6.4.3.3 Availability of Stretch Roles and Non-routine Tasks

Opportunities to perform tasks or roles that stretched their abilities and that were beyond what volunteers would typically have encountered in an equivalent role in Australia, were reported by participants across all volunteer categories. These accounted for a quarter of all in-country learning episodes and a third of those occurring in the workplace.[314] They were the primary contributor to outcomes in 'role performance and management capabilities', 'professional confidence', and 'domain-specific knowledge and capabilities'.[315] *Enhancers* and *Launchers* reported these most commonly, although older volunteers, including some *Veterans*, found that the intercultural collaborations associated with mentoring and guiding rather than purely 'doing' constituted a form of stretch role.

The most common stretch experiences involved capacity development activities (mentoring, managing change, and supporting others' learning) often arising from cross-cultural collaboration with HCNs or from being asked to apply professional skills in unfamiliar or under-resourced contexts. **Nancy**'s unexpected request to lead humanitarian coordination work during her supervisor's absence (page 110) was an

experience she described as daunting but "*an amazing opportunity*." This gave her first-hand exposure to senior-level professional responsibilities well beyond what her level of experience would normally allow. Participant #20's unanticipated involvement in an SDG-linked project proved one of the most professionally significant experiences of her assignment and directly informed her subsequent career steps. Participant #01 attributed a major change in her professional confidence and acumen to having to "*pick up bits and pieces from all different aspects of your life*" and apply these to a position requiring her to "*get to know new tasks and make [these] appropriate to the context here*" (#01, T2).

Stretch roles were most valuable when they were accompanied by sufficient organisational support and professional feedback, conditions that depended on PO readiness. One participant spoke of "*really craving*" access to "*leadership that could mentor me*" (#07, T2), and her account suggests that the absence of this support substantially limited the professional development her role experiences could offer.

Beyond these three features, the broader social and relational context of the assignment - relationships with collocated volunteers, expatriate networks, and the wider development community - contributed to learning in complementary ways, particularly for *Launchers*, for whom interactions with collocated volunteers were an important contributor to professional network development and international development literacy, and for *Veterans*, some of whom benefited from working alongside professional peers with complementary knowledge and skills within the same PO.[316]

Volunteering as professional arbitrage

One reason some participants found volunteer assignments effective portals for career entry or transition was the opportunity to capitalise on knowledge and structural asymmetries between Australia and the host country - by accumulating professional experience, and taking on levels of responsibility, that may not have been available to them at an equivalent career stage in Australia.

This has some parallels with what Seabrooke[1] terms 'epistemic arbitrage' - filling gaps between bodies of knowledge or levels of expertise in ways that fast-track entry to a field or a more senior role. Several participants were conscious of this opportunity when entering the program, and data across T1–T5 shows evidence of them actively seeking to capitalise on it.[2] *Enhancers* appear to have been best placed to do so, given their existing professional expertise and their capacity to combine technical credibility with the local legitimacy that can be achieved from sustained HCN engagement. COVID repatriations substantially curtailed many participants' ability to realise these opportunities fully; nonetheless, for a sub-set of participants this appears to have been a deliberate form of 'career crafting' - a conscious decision to use the assignment as a mechanism for accelerating professional development and building career capital in ways that a domestic role could not have offered at the same stage.[3] Seen this way, the volunteer assignment was not simply a stepping-stone to future work but an active instrument of career construction: one that allowed participants to shape both the content and the trajectory of their professional lives in ways consistent with their values and longer-term goals (Section 6.7).

[1] Seabrooke, L. (2014). Epistemic arbitrage: Transnational professional knowledge in action. Journal of Professions and Organization, *1*(1), 49-64; Seabrooke, L. (2014). Identity switching and transnational professionals. International Political Sociology, *8*(3), 335-337.

[2] Sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[3] Akkermans, J. & Tims, M. (2017). Crafting your career: How career competencies relate to career success via job crafting. *Applied Psychology, 66*(1), 168-195; Suárez-Bilbao, B., Andresen, M., Crowley-Henry, M. & O'Connor, E.P. (2023). The influence of complexity, chance and change on the career crafting strategies of SIEs. *Career Development International*, *28*(4), 359-376.

6.5 Applying Professional Knowledge and Capabilities

6.5.1 Applying Assignment Learning in Post-Assignment Contexts

All participants who found post-assignment employment identified ways they had applied new professional knowledge or capabilities at different times across the study; a figure that remained consistently high at each wave.[317] For 41%, capabilities improved or developed during the assignment have become important features of the work they do and/or how they perform it even if their career progress has not been impacted significantly; for others, the benefits are acknowledged but more moderate (and may not represent any marginal benefits from other activities participants may have performed in lieu of volunteering).[318]

The contexts for applying these included collaborating with or supervising colleagues, preparing reports, grants and proposals, liaising with external stakeholders, introducing management structures, and conducting research. Most participants working in roles with an international development focus were able to apply their domain-specific knowledge and capabilities directly to their new roles. Outside international development, just nine participants reported transferring domain-specific capabilities they had developed during their assignment in their subsequent work, primarily in health and community/social services.[319] Several frameworks, models, and relational approaches introduced through VLJ activities were transferred to domestic workplaces. Participants used these to evaluate government-sector relationships (#03, #29), map organisational stakeholders (#30, #53), build rapport with new colleagues (#20, #24, #33), provide consultancy services (#09), and manage staff (#02, #21, #44). The box **'Applying techniques introduced at VLJ activities'** on page 97 illustrates some of these in participants' own words. **Part 2 of the case study of Olivia ('Applying program lessons at scale') on page 109** offers a good example, showing how design

principles and relational lessons from both the assignment and the VLJ program were later applied (in some cases quite deliberately) to a major transnational initiative across the Asia-Pacific region.

Applying techniques introduced at VLJ activities

» The use of the 'sidekick manifesto' to listen to others' needs and to support rather than lead change

Example 1: "[At a meeting with a senior corporate finance executive] I just found it was extremely valuable [to be] the one who was picking up pearls of wisdom from this guy … it was interesting [to consciously] listen to him … I was really swung around … it was really fascinating. Really fascinating" (#22, T5)

Example 2: "I think the attitude of the hero-sidekick thing, that 'walking-alongside' aspect … it resonated. I already had that perspective because I studied international development. So, it wasn't like, "Whoa!" But the clarity of the message, the metaphor, that was fabulous … I've used that analogy quite often in talking with people" (#46, T5)

» Developing trust through being relationship-focused and attending to stakeholder engagement

Example 1: "A lot of what I try to do in our policy and advocacy is build those relational connections … it's realising that, if you try to build those relationships, have early conversations, don't go in with some brand-crazy plan or technical approach, just go in and talk to people, really, you'll get a lot more traction than if you went in with, 'This is the advocacy agenda that we're going to do.' It really does work. It absolutely works in the development world … I think I wouldn't have realised it without that practice, because it took me a good six months in [the host country] before I realised that that was what I was doing" (#53, T5)

Example 2: "It's been, you know, five or six years since we've done that, but I feel like part of the pre-departure stuff was about that grassroots, get-to-know-people-on-a-personal-level approach. Be transparent. Be open. And I use that every day. I have people in [my organisation] asking me how I can be so close to these people, and I feel like I do draw on things from that." (#19, T5)

Example 3: Participant #09

- "At the pre-departure, they push that you shouldn't worry about the role too much, you don't know what the role is until you get there, focus more on building relationships and getting into the culture. So it was different than just go in and do this task and then leave. It was go in and do the task but also see where it leads. You're not there to do a role, you're there to be available" (#09, T1)
- "I probably was more focused before the assignment on results in work and being really productive and having tangible outcomes through the work that I'm doing, and I might not have been as flexible in doing some of those relationship-building parts of my work and I can probably say that was probably one of my weaknesses at work [before the assignment]. I was quite serious and just wanted to get the job done and sit down and smash it out and I used to be quite proud that I could do two days of work in a day" (#09, T3)
- "That's had a huge impact on me, huge. [In my current job], we've got all these researchers, we've got all these great outputs, we've got all this tech, but there's a gap missing between connecting the producers and those people. And you've been able to fill that gap by building the relationships and mending the relationships between stakeholders. I think from there, that is my job. That's my skill. I don't try and have another skill" (#09, T5)

A common and particularly valuable form of transfer involved participants converting culture-specific learning from their assignment into culture-general applications in new settings.[320] Two examples illustrate this:

- Participant #09's assignment in rural Indonesia gave her strong personal and professional connections within the host community and a deep appreciation of relationship-centred ways of working - a stark contrast to her previous international experience in expatriate communities. When COVID prevented her plan to remain in the host country, she applied the principles she had developed - emphasising relationships over outcomes, prioritising process - to establish footholds in two different sectors in Australia, each involving different sub-cultural groups including migrant, Indigenous and rural communities. She now regularly and consciously deploys strategies introduced at VLJ activities to establish trust and engage stakeholders. She now views her ability to use these as a core professional strength that differentiates her from others (examples are in the box below).
- Participant #03 reported mainly culture-specific learning during his assignment, including an appreciation of the host country's lifestyle, complexity, and attitudes toward minorities. Over time, he described these cultural impacts becoming more generalised - making him better able to "*look out for your own biases*" (#03, T3), more comfortable in multicultural settings, and better equipped to manage local colleagues and navigate diverse social environments in Australia (T4). He has since commenced a new volunteer assignment in a different country, where he made a conscious decision to invest more time with HCNs in work and non-work settings - a strategy he believes has made the placement more enjoyable and more successful than his first (T5).

6.5.2 Soft Skills as Mechanism of Translation

The soft skills that volunteers report developing during their assignments are recognised as valuable in their own right for performing roles requiring social interaction, coordination, and collaboration in interdependent settings.[321] When combined with cognitive capabilities, they are also economically rewarded,[322] particularly in jobs involving high levels of interpersonal contact.[323] Yet for volunteers whose assignment is followed by work, and especially those with professional or career objectives when entering the program, these soft and intercultural skills may also be valuable mechanisms of translation*:* that is, capacities that help volunteers

gain access to the right people and information, build legitimacy, and translate what they have learned into the language and context of different organisational settings in which they subsequently work.

There is some evidence that the types of experiences participants reported, and the knowledge and capabilities they attributed to their assignments, may act as 'enablers' of this kind.[324] Theoretically, the advanced interpersonal, communication, and intercultural capabilities volunteers report accruing during their assignments might assist the transfer of other capabilities to new workplaces in at least three ways: (i) by helping volunteers reduce knowledge barriers (encouraging others to share, explain, and accept knowledge, especially in situations marked by ambiguity or defensiveness); (ii) by expediting socialisation in the new workplace through improved sensemaking and adjustment, including by establishing relationships that aid interpretation and provide models of behaviours; and (iii) by improving the overall 'transfer climate' around them through the building of social support. This set of capabilities may help volunteers reduce the 'frictions' involved in translating their highly contextual and tacit experiences to new environments.[325]

These enabling functions may be most valuable in specific conditions: where volunteers' field experiences afford them a degree of credibility or legitimacy in the new setting, where they need to negotiate access to opportunities to apply their capabilities, or in roles or workplaces requiring knowledge to be 'translated' into usable forms in different settings by re-expressing, reframing, or adapting it.[326] Such roles are often boundary-facing (working with people holding different assumptions) and situated in highly uncertain contexts.[327] Participant #09's trajectory illustrates this well: the relational and process-oriented capabilities she developed did not transfer automatically to Australian workplaces, but appear to have equipped her to create the conditions in which her knowledge could be understood and used.

The data also suggest that participants who developed stronger intercultural and interpersonal capabilities were better placed to navigate the post-assignment transition itself - adjusting to new employers, sectors, colleagues (and geographic locations) in ways that drew directly on the sensemaking and relationship-building skills they had practised in-country.[328] It is plausible, therefore, that the type of soft skills volunteers developed helped them to actively create supportive micro-environments for transfer: building relationships, accessing feedback, and reducing resistance to the application of new knowledge. In this, these soft skills may be an active resource that volunteers carried into subsequent professional life.

Even where participants developed meaningful professional knowledge and capabilities during their assignments, translating these to new professional settings was not always straightforward, and for some, the conditions they encountered after repatriation actively constrained their ability to do so. The box '**Barriers to the translation of professional knowledge and capabilities**' addresses four of these.

Barriers to the translation of professional knowledge and capabilities

- **Difficulty articulating 'soft' capability gains:** Many of the professional capabilities that participants developed were tacit in nature and thus difficult to describe in specific terms or connect to specific professional outcomes. In part, this is an inherent feature of intercultural learning (the basis for much of participants' professional development), which often operates at a subconscious level. Hence, volunteers may be unaware of what they have learned.[1] Several participants reported this as a barrier in job applications and interviews, even when the underlying capabilities were genuine and professionally relevant (Section 6.2.4). A possible role for the program in helping volunteers recognise and articulate these gains is discussed in Section 6.7.
- **Unreceptive institutional contexts and a grassroots-to-bureaucracy gap:** The receptiveness of post-assignment work environments to volunteers' international experiences varied considerably. Some participants whose roles returned them to government, corporate, or other highly structured institutional settings found their overseas experiences were not recognised or valued in the same way as equivalent domestic experience. Germaine's case (page 107, introduced in Section 6.2.4) is illustrative. A related difficulty for some participants was a 'grassroots-to-bureaucracy' or institutional level gap. Some volunteers whose volunteer role was face-to-face, community-based, and relationally driven (mainly those in domestic NGOs and government departments) found it difficult to apply these experiences to roles in government or management that were more removed from this mode of working. Settings with strict regulations or strong institutional cultures made it particularly difficult for some volunteers to transfer tacit and context-specific experiences.
- **Disconnection from domestic professional networks:** Participants' time abroad meant that many returned without the local professional contacts and contextual knowledge needed to navigate re-entry effectively (Section 6.5.3). This was compounded for some by the difficulty of verifying or contextualising their achievements from an assignment setting that was unfamiliar to prospective employers - particularly for those whose POs were less well-known or whose work was difficult to translate into recognisable Australian professional outputs.
- **Post-repatriation conditions and capability attrition:** For participants who were repatriated during COVID, the period immediately following their assignment was one in which opportunities to apply newly developed interpersonal and intercultural capabilities were severely constrained. Work-from-home conditions, restricted work opportunities, and limited social interaction meant that capabilities developed through immersive, face-to-face experiences could not readily be practised or consolidated. Some reported an attrition of professional confidence and interpersonal skills at the time they were most needed. This was most acute for *Imposed Transitioners*, several of whom had developed clear career direction and professional confidence during their assignment, only to find both eroded during an extended period of COVID-enforced inactivity and restricted opportunity after repatriation. One participant reflected this experience directly, describing how he had gone to work during his assignment with a "*jump in my step*" (#52, T2), only to find little opportunity to draw on what he had developed after being repatriated.

[1] Morris, M.W., Savani, K., Mor, S. & Cho, J. (2014). When in Rome: Intercultural learning and implications for training. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 34*, 189-215.

6.5.3 Professional Networks: Development, Use and Attrition

Section 4.3 summarises participants' ongoing relationships with host-country and expatriate communities. Section 7.5 focuses on personal relationships, including those with other volunteers. This section addresses the career impacts of professional relationships established through the program.

In general, the professional networks that participants developed during their assignments have been smaller, less impactful, and less sustained than other relationships they formed.[329] Across T3-T5, the number of volunteers who reported accruing benefits from professional networks that they established through their involvement with the program has remained constant at 20-25%, although about half of the sample who currently work reported at least one direct or indirect benefit over the five-year period.[330] Participants reporting tangible benefits were spread across four of the five volunteer types for whom career was a substantive motivation at T1.[331] Most were hosted by domestic or international NGOs in urban areas in East Asia and the Asian Archipelago. Just four reported professional networks that have been career-defining.[332]

The small number of professional networks that participants retain at T5 comprise a mix of foreign expatriates, Australians and HCNs,[333] most of whom work in the same or an adjacent professional field as the participant. These have been most beneficial for participants working in international development, or in health or government roles that are strongly internationally focused (mainly *Enhancers*). One participant noted the sector's culture as an important reason for the benefits, observing:

> *"I think there is a difference between folks in the development world and folks who have never been in the development world. I was reflecting on my own organisation and the folks that have come from the development world into [my current employer]. They bring really deep relational contacts. For example, one of my colleagues - he used to be based in Suva, and so much of what you do is, "Do you know so-and-so at that place? Will they talk to us?" And if you don't bring those relational contacts, it is really hard to do your job. It's really hard to influence governments. It's really hard to do your work. And folks in the development world bring those deep relationships and connections. And they're prepared, I think, to do more of the building of people-to-people links, because that's how you get an inroad in development work"* (#53, T5)

Among the outcomes of these are career opportunities (accepted or declined), international partnerships between POs and participants' current organisations (e.g., formal and informal skills exchanges), collaborative projects (e.g., research, educational, IT), referrals and references for work opportunities, subsequent international volunteer assignments in different nations, and consulting opportunities. Eight participants have used these to initiate one or more civics-focused partnerships between organisations in the host country and organisations in Australia or elsewhere for knowledge or resource exchanges.[334]

The bulk, however, have involved 'one-off' indirect benefits (e.g., a referee for job applications or tips about professional opportunities, reported by 10 participants).[335] Others remain loose connections via social media (e.g., LinkedIn) that have not resulted in any exchange of specific benefits, but which may yet offer future professional opportunities. To illustrate this potential, two participants reported professional benefits in 2024-25 from relationships formed in *earlier* (pre-2019) volunteer assignments. A number who reported benefiting from professional contacts soon after their assignment have since lost contact with these networks.[336]

In contrast, five participants identified the loss or absence of domestic (Australian) professional networks as impediments to finding employment following repatriation; most were *Transitioners*, the category of participants whose professional re-entry following COVID was most challenging.[337] These patterns are consistent with the data showing sustained professional networks as one of the features most strongly associated with positive career outcomes, and their absence as a compounding disadvantage for volunteers whose post-assignment re-entry was already constrained (Section 6.2).

The **case studies of Bronwen, Nancy and Kevin** all highlight different ways that volunteers have taken advantage of the professional networks that they developed during their assignment. Bronwen's case (page 105) is perhaps the clearest illustration of career-defining networks that have cascaded into a series of international roles with growing professional impact. Kevin's case study (page 52) shows his ability to convert personal relationships, gained from his deeply immersive assignment, into 'bridging' functions across different organisations and sectors and the two countries ("*I'm like the penguin on the iceberg who connects them*", T5). In contrast, Nancy's case (page 110) illustrates how the volunteer cohort itself functioned as a valuable network by circulating job leads, prompting her to request a consultancy that anchored her career during COVID, by providing the social and professional support for her relocation to an international hub, and by continuing to provide references and endorsements in support of her career.

6.6 Volunteering and Formal Education

A feature of this sample's international volunteer assignment was its interaction with participants' formal educational pathways. That is, the volunteer assignment acted as a valuable mechanism through which participants consolidated and extended prior formal education (during an assignment) and/or served as an impetus to inspire the direction and support learning of further education.[338]

Figures 15 and 16 on page 101 summarise the key features of the two pathways in which this relationship unfolded, including the benefits reported by volunteers.

The first pathway (**Figure 15**) shows how participants benefited from assignment experiences that enabled them to **improve their understanding of recent prior formal education**. For these eight participants, the volunteer assignment provided a platform to gain practical experiences in novel contexts that complemented their formal training, often closely linked to participants' explicit pre-assignment career aspirations and hence their choice of assignment or PO.

The second pathway (**Figure 16**) shows how the volunteer assignment **inspired volunteers to undertake one or more formal programs of education** in response to their volunteer assignment experiences, often linked to volunteers developing interest in a new career direction during the assignment.[339]

The clearest evidence of ongoing benefits is for participants whose assignments inspired them to pursue subsequent formal education programs (Pathway 2). Fifteen participants were inspired in this way, most motivated by career benefits.[340] At T5, 10 of these (67%) reported benefiting professionally from their post-assignment studies, despite some discontinuing their program of studies before completing it. Six identified their studies as a platform for a career transition or progression; five through using the knowledge from their studies in their work and one by being offered a job.[341]

For volunteers pursuing either pathway, the experiences on their volunteer assignment appeared to provide a learning 'premium' to the experience of their formal educational program and have resulted in outcomes that have benefited the volunteers. These benefits include outcomes like promotions and work opportunities or transferring this knowledge in ways that improved their salaried or voluntary work.

The **case study of Richard on page 111** is an example. An environmental scientist who had five years' work experience at T1 and whose "*intentions for volunteering were more pragmatic than altruistic"* (T4), Richard entered the program to "*fill a bit of a gap in part of my CV*" (T1). As the case illustrates, Richard's volunteer assignment helped to "*crystallise the work that I want to do and the pathway to achieving that … the space to understand a bit more of what the […] world looked like and what the pre-requisites were and I think I realised at a minimum because you're competing at an international level that a Master's [degree] was appropriate and necessarily, it made that choice easy*" (T3). Richard "*came home in March and was studying by July*" (T3), with his in-country experiences guiding his choice of degree and helping him perform well. He now works on a government funded science project which, he says, derives directly from his studies and says the assignment "*provided me with a focus that allowed me to pursue a field and achieve well at university, provided me with the confidence to go and study it, the focus to study it well, and the experience to draw on to apply that through my university"* (T4). Reflecting six years after he entered the program, he believes this career pivot was the biggest impact of his assignment, contributing to his success in his studies and giving him skills and credibility that have allowed him to support local businesses and, through volunteering partnerships and work, other communities in Australia and abroad.

In addition to Pathways 1 and 2, a growing number of participants undertook additional studies that arose from new career pathways or jobs that were secured after their assignment, and which, in turn, were instigated or facilitated by their program experiences. In other words, the volunteer assignment has enabled subsequent professional opportunities that have been the basis for them to extend their formal education further. This includes one completed and one ongoing Doctorate degree for participants who had been inspired by their assignment to complete an earlier post-graduate coursework degree (Pathway 2).

» Pathway 1: Consolidating and extending past formal education

Processes: The volunteer assignment consolidated or extended prior formal education by:

1. Fulfilling a pre-assignment objective to accumulate practical experience to complement recent formal education (e.g., *Launchers* gaining professional experience, *Enhancers* accumulating complementary work experience to enhance a résumé); or
2. Experiencing a new setting (e.g., culture, sector) that provides a better understanding of when, why or how formal education is transferable to a different context. For some *Enhancers* and *Transitioners* this was a pre-assignment objective; for others, it was unanticipated.

Participants: Eight participants, mainly *Launchers*: #01, #12, #19, #20, #29, #33, #37 and #54.

Outcomes:

- Having a better or different understanding of prior formal education through experiencing it in practice
- Accessing work opportunities by demonstrating practical field experiences to complement training
- Applying and sharing new experiences in professional roles after their assignment

Factors that were seen as enhancing the impact:

- The assignment's unfamiliar context (e.g., international setting, international development ecosystem)
- Opportunities to apply professional training in the formal volunteer role

Figure 15: How volunteer assignments consolidate and extend past formal education

» Pathway 2: Inspiring, guiding, or supporting future formal education

Process: Volunteering provided inspiration or guidance for future formal education to further a professional opportunity or to consolidate or build on an insight that arose during the assignment. For some, this was inspired by features of the local culture or the cross-cultural application of professional training or backgrounds.[342]

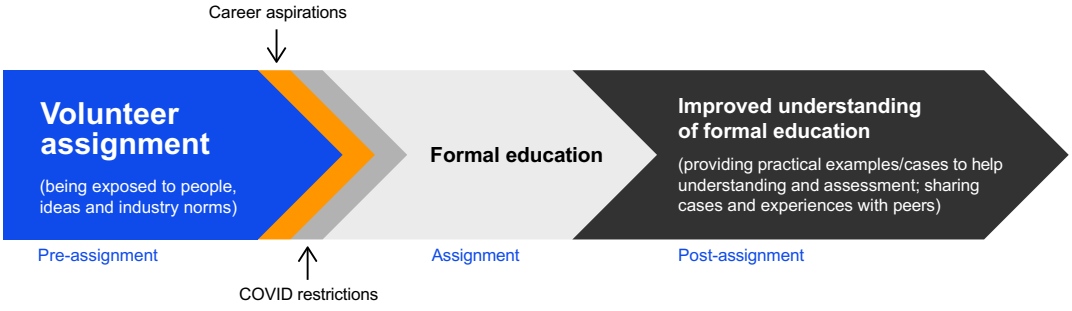
Participants: Fifteen participants, mainly younger *Transitioners*, *Launchers* and *Enhancers*: #02, #03, #06, #08, #09, #11, #12, #20, #28, #33, #37, #43, #45, #46 and #54

Outcomes: Ten of these (67%) reported direct benefits through opportunities to change career direction, being promoted or offered work opportunities, or being able to transfer this knowledge in ways that improved their salaried or voluntary work.

Factors contributing to this inspiration

- Being exposed to experts in the field (e.g., observing the skillsets of effective actors, discussing emerging areas of interest with experts)
- Being introduced to a new passion/interest (e.g., meeting someone from an adjacent professional field, being asked to perform a new role)
- Being exposed to industry expectations and norms, sparking a need or desire to develop requisite expertise or achieve formal accreditation

Figure 16: How volunteer assignments inspire, guide, or support future formal education



6.7 Key Implications

Collectively, the findings in this section make clear that a large number of participants see international volunteering as a way to actively craft a meaningful and sustainable career that aligns with their values. There is evidence of this 'career crafting'[343] in participants' regular reflections on their career and the assignment's role in it, often prompted informally by people they met, including volunteers at events facilitated by the program (e.g., learning about different sectoral roles or specific career opportunities).

There is also evidence of volunteers proactively seeking ways to develop competencies they need to create new careers. Indeed, data across all five waves shows that the volunteer assignment was, for many, one of several career construction activities that took place across the period of the study. Others included pursuing formal educational pathways, relocating for work (including speculative international and interstate moves), seeking committee or board memberships attached to their professional interests, and consciously changing a career to align this more closely with individual interests and values. External events and personal circumstances also influenced career construction opportunities and whether participants could pursue these.

The implications below build on these observations by identifying ways in which the program can better recognise, support, and respond to volunteers' efforts, as active agents, to construct careers that are meaningful and sustainable and that build on their volunteer assignments.

Implication 6.1: Improving assignment-PO-volunteer fit to ensure volunteers' professional expertise can be utilised

The single most consistent finding across all five years of data (T2-T5) is the strong impact that the degree of alignment between the volunteer's professional expertise and the assignment role has on volunteers' ability to realise their professional development goals.

Poor role designs, vague or inaccurate position descriptions, roles that do not fit volunteers' skills, and limited PO support all had negative impacts on volunteers' in-country experiences, assignment satisfaction and success (T2), and sense of meaning they attached to their assignment (T2-T5). These also limited, and in some cases actively undermined, volunteers' professional development (T2-T5), eroded confidence, reduced their willingness to foreground their experience in subsequent professional applications, and reduced interest in future participation in the program. In several cases they contributed to volunteers withdrawing, or considering withdrawing, from the assignment.[344]

The challenges of assuring the accuracy of volunteer roles and PO readiness are clear, and the chance for volunteers to re-negotiate their agreed role after commencing their assignment was well supported and seen as valuable. It is also true that many participants in the study benefited from a well-designed assignment and adequate support. Nonetheless, assuring an appropriate level of role fit for all volunteer assignments is central to supporting volunteers' career objectives and outcomes, particularly for *Transitioners* and *Imposed Transitioners* who may be more vulnerable to negative effects of poor fit.

Given the many volunteers entering the program with career-related objectives (and the strong potential development opportunities that the program's design features offer), the program should consider:

- Treating assignment design, position description accuracy, and PO readiness to utilise volunteers' professional expertise as central enablers of volunteers' effectiveness and important to achieving their professional development objectives. To support this, proportionate mechanisms should be introduced to improve quality assurance and to identify and correct clear cases of 'misfit' early in assignments.
- Taking steps to ensure that volunteers are given realistic role previews before accepting or commencing assignments, including opportunities for contact with multiple key PO personnel and current or former volunteers who have worked with the PO.

Implication 6.2: Helping volunteers understand and use 'soft' capability development as important enabling attributes

The study highlights both the potential positive impacts of an assignment on volunteers' soft and intercultural capabilities, and the potential of these to function as a mechanism through which volunteers can (better) translate their broader professional expertise to new settings. This relationship is pertinent because of the potential career and professional benefits these capabilities offer in their own right, but also because some participants struggled to explain the types of changes they experienced and to articulate the professional value of their assignment in terms that employers could recognise. In this sense, recognising and articulating soft capability development is an important 'career construction' activity that can help volunteers integrate their assignment experience into a coherent professional narrative.

To the extent that these experiences are representative of the broader volunteer cohort, helping volunteers recognise and articulate these capabilities can support their post-assignment career transitions. The program could support this by assisting volunteers to develop clear explanations of how the soft and intercultural capabilities they have developed can be transferred and applied in new professional contexts. This report contains frameworks, exemplar 'transfer narratives,' and 'micronarratives'[345] (illustrated through the 'volunteer stories') that can be introduced in volunteer preparation programs and reinforced through

structured reflection activities before and after assignments. Together, these tools can help volunteers convert tacit gains in soft skills into concrete professional evidence.

Implication 6.3: Ensuring prospective volunteers have realistic and accurate expectations about the assignment's professional impacts

The findings highlight important gaps between some volunteers' professional expectations leading into their assignments and their actual experiences in terms of the role to be performed and the professional and career development opportunities available. While the findings reveal that volunteer assignments can and do benefit some volunteers' careers and professional capabilities, they may be less effective at enhancing domain-specific expertise, building professional networks, or progressing careers in some sectors (e.g., where domestic work experiences are valued).

Volunteers who enter the program with accurate expectations of the potential benefits and the opportunity costs involved are likely to benefit more, find the assignment more fulfilling, and be less vulnerable to the career disappointment evident in some participants' accounts. This is important because the study highlights both the extent to which prospective volunteers make consequential career decisions based on largely untested assumptions about the value and transferability of volunteer experiences to their careers, and the fact that unmet expectations can sometimes have negative outcomes (Section 3.4).

Given these findings, and the high opportunity costs associated with this type of volunteering (Implication 6.4), the program should consider:

- Continuing efforts to understand the career expectations of volunteers who enter the program. This would allow the program to more accurately communicate the potential benefits and challenges associated with volunteering, and to consider whether the program provides realistic previews of careers into which some volunteers seek to move, and how the program might help volunteers (re)calibrate expectations where appropriate.
- Equipping prospective volunteers with the information they need to make informed decisions about whether, and how, the assignment can serve their career construction goals For instance, while an assignment is likely to benefit interpersonal and intercultural capabilities, its career value may vary by sector, employer, and career stage, and it may be less effective for developing specific professional skills.
- Supporting volunteers to navigate career uncertainties at all stages of the volunteer lifecycle (Implications 6.4-6.5).

Implication 6.4: Differentiating career support by volunteer type and extending its scope across the volunteer lifecycle

The professional value of the assignment was greatest for volunteers at earlier career stages, particularly *Launchers* and *Enhancers*, for whom the assignment provided field experience, career direction, and credibility that many domestic roles could not offer.[346] This may reflect a professional benefit 'premium' for volunteers who have the most to gain from its novelty, challenge, and opportunity. Recognising these differences in volunteer support would allow the program to set more accurate expectations and deliver more targeted assistance across the full range of volunteer types. This is important because of the diverse career-related motivations with which volunteers enter the program, and the many ways that their careers are subsequently shaped by the features of their assignment, their in-country experiences, and the networks to which they are exposed. The variety and unevenness of career-related outcomes, including differences in perceived value and the timing of benefits, make a 'one-size-fits-all' model of career support inadequate to serve all volunteers' needs.

The program should therefore consider tailoring support for different volunteer types. These might include, for example, sector socialisation for *Launchers* (Implication 5.4) or expanded opportunities for network formation (via introductions across sectors or structured cross-PO communities) for *Enhancers* or other volunteers in non-linear careers or fluid employment, where career progress depends on professional networks.[347] Similarly, some volunteers (most commonly *Transitioners* whose career gains were more delayed) may benefit from structured mentoring over an extended period that allows them to sustain connection with the program and not perceive delayed career benefits as indicators of failure.[348]

When considering this support, the program should also be cognisant of the professional investment volunteers make when accepting an international assignment. The opportunity costs are significant (e.g., loss of income, relationships, domestic career advancement). This investment creates risks and a form of vulnerability that may be most acute at repatriation, when most volunteers have no firm employment options and the gap between their expectations and outcomes may become clearest. For volunteers whose assignment has not fulfilled its developmental potential, or whose assignment was truncated or interrupted by circumstances outside their control, this moment may constitute a form of 'career shock', defined as a disruptive event that is influenced by external factors and that triggers a deliberate reflection on one's career.[349] A volunteer who entered the program during a period of career transition and then had an abrupt repatriation may have experienced two significant career disruptions within a year. The findings suggest that targeted, proactive support at these moments, rather than waiting to respond reactively, is likely to produce more positive outcomes for volunteers and for the program.

Implication 6.5: Helping volunteers maximise the career transferability of their international assignments

International work assignments are recognised as intensely developmental yet not necessarily beneficial for careers.[350] Among the reasons for this discrepancy are disconnection from home professional networks during the assignment, the difficulty of articulating or transferring new skills into domestic settings, and key achievements being out-of-sight or difficult to verify for prospective employers. *Non-working Partners* face similar workforce re-entry issues.[351]

The findings of this study are consistent with this: developing domain-specific knowledge and professional networks were relatively under-reported and more limited than many volunteers anticipated. An assignment appears to help volunteers enter new sectors, make horizontal transitions, and demonstrate resilience and intercultural capability to prospective employers. However, it may be less effective at helping volunteers progress within professions or sectors that value codified domestic experience and standard linear careers.

The program should consider helping volunteers and accompanying dependants to understand and manage these challenges by:

- Before the assignment, providing more explicit guidance about where the assignment is likely to be viewed favourably (e.g., sectors, contexts, roles), where it may be perceived more sceptically by employers, and tactics volunteers can use to mitigate the latter.
- During the assignment, helping volunteers maintain domestic professional currency by facilitating connections with relevant professional associations, connecting volunteers with former volunteers from within the same professional field, or creating opportunities to attain micro-credentials during their assignment. As part of this, the program could consider establishing a ‘professional penguins’ scheme (a professional mentor from within the volunteer's field) who can keep volunteers connected to their sector during the assignment, support the volunteer’s in-country work, help them identify and articulate the professional value of their in-country experiences, and support their transition back into the domestic workforce upon return.
- After the assignment, providing tailored advice about ways to present assignment experience that resonate with the specific expectations and norms of different sectors and employer types (e.g., emphasising particular professional competencies used and outcomes achieved).

Volunteer stories: Bronwen

Pivoting to an international focus

Despite having only vague ideas about possibly "*ending up [her career] in aid work*" when she applied to volunteer (T1), Bronwen's volunteer assignment has transformed her professional life. Her career is now largely structured around expertise and contacts relating to the Pacific region and to her professional domain (emergency health), both developed and nurtured during her assignment. Without these, she says, "*my life now would be very different, one hundred percent*" (T4) … "*it changed everything, in a way*" (T5).

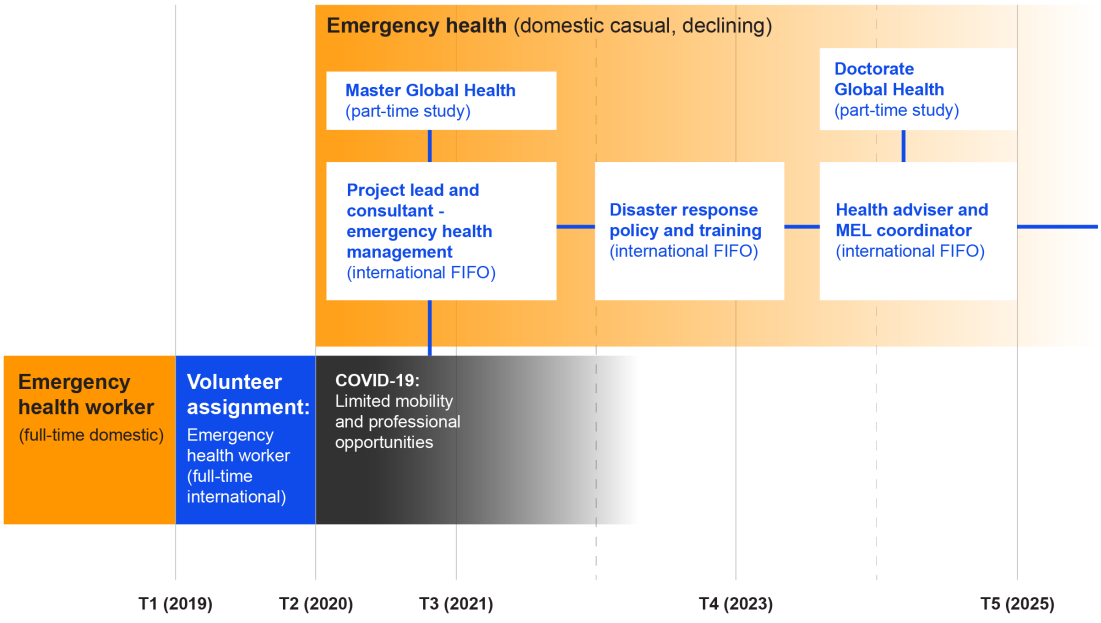
Before joining the program, Bronwen had limited involvement with community organisations or voluntary work ("*Not really to be honest, I move a lot [for work]*", T1). Agreeing to represent the PO voluntarily at a conference during her assignment changed this. It was here that she met some Australian health development workers who were facilitating workshops and providing training in new medical interventions. Through this, she says, "*they got me to help them implement it into one of the hospital wards here. Which is not strictly [my assignment] but I think having my involvement helped a lot … [now] they've actually asked me to come back [to the host country] at the end of [the month] with them. So, I will happily do that*" (T2).

Soon after completing her assignment (pre-COVID), Bronwen began a series of return visits to the host country - and later other countries in the region - to lead some of these programs ("*once we started, one thing led to another and we've just taken on more and more*", T3). These visits, arranged through her relationship with the health development workers, became a regular part of Bronwen's schedule for several years (pre- and post-COVID). They allowed Bronwen to (i) gain experience and "*street cred*" (T3) that benefits this work, (ii) deepen her cultural and professional knowledge, and (iii) strengthen relationships with colleagues and friends in the host country that were important to the next steps in her career.

Since then, Bronwen's career has pivoted to be primarily international. The main steps in her career are summarised in the career progression map below. It shows her pre-assignment role as an emergency nurse (bottom left) followed by her volunteer assignment, her first international position. This has led to increasingly more internationally focused work that has risen in complexity and responsibility in the five years since she finished her assignment (top right). As a result, her career is now strongly oriented toward international work with her domestic clinical work continuing but steadily declining in regularity. The international dimension of Bronwen's career since her assignment – shown in blue font in the map below - centres on international fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) roles in the Pacific region and is a direct result of professional relationships formed while volunteering. These networks opened several subsequent international professional opportunities - initially in the host country during COVID (2020-21) as outlined above, then in other Pacific countries (2021-2023) and now a regional health adviser and coordinator role since 2024 managing a multi-million dollar multilateral project that spans organisations in seven Pacific nations, including her former PO ("*it's a step up, a lot more managerial*", T5). The figure also shows that Bronwen's assignment was the impetus for her enrolment in globally focused post-graduate studies: initially a Master's degree inspired by and building directly on interests developed during her assignment, and now her current enrolment in a Doctorate degree, made possible by the professional and academic opportunities the assignment created.

Looking back, Bronwen believes her assignment has been "*pivotal*" (T5) to her career and life:

> *"It sparked an interest and since then I've gone with the flow … bounced off different projects. That role gave me a taste for [international work] and to know that it was something I was interested in. Looking back, I hadn't done anything overseas. So it was a taster, everything else has bounced off other people I met … I don't think I knew, pre-AVI, that it would change my whole working career. And I really do feel like it has."* (T5)



Volunteer stories: Barbara

A new career direction and still seeking passion

Barbara felt she was "*under-appreciated*" in her career in clinical health care prior to the assignment (T1) and found her initial assignment "*a transformative experience … that really crystallised in my mind that I had to move on from that [previous] role.*" Her career path since repatriation has included:

- Returning to a previous employer during COVID, where her volunteering experiences were especially important to her building much stronger relationships with colleagues and improving her workplace experience (T5), although not her clinical skills as strongly as she had hoped (T2).
- Moving to work with a government agency that expanded her experiences and which she thought would be a platform for more impactful policy-related work (T4), but which removed her from the hands-on nature of the work she had been doing previously ("*I just didn't feel like I was making a difference in that job. That's what inspired me to look at doing another volunteer position*", T5).
- In 2025, accepting a new international volunteer assignment combining her clinical and policy expertise in a different country and vastly different context from her initial assignment. The current assignment, she says, is, in part, a mechanism to take on more "*hands-on*" clinical work she had done before and during her assignment - and which, she believes, will give her more meaning in her role:

> "*I really enjoyed my time in [the host country] and being a volunteer … I feel what I'm doing now gives me more satisfaction than the job I was doing back in Australia … I've been out of clinical practice for a while now … [so I am] seeing if I want to return to doing more clinical practice work in the future … it's a case of seeing where my passion lies*" (T5)

Volunteer stories: Norma

"It looked good on a CV"

Norma stands apart as the sole *Enhancer* to express reservations about the career benefits of her volunteer assignment. Her assessment of its skills value was candid and largely negative ("*In terms of the skills on the ground, I can comfortably say none of them are relevant to my current role*", T5). Feeling "*under-utilised*" by the PO (T2), she went further in suggesting that the assignment may have been detrimental to her professional development compared to the alternatives available to her:

> *"I think it would have been better for me to do a year in corporate to get more tangible skills or a year in government, honestly, just because the pace is far faster, and there are more resources and training programs"* (T5)

This mismatch also created a degree of personal dissonance when drawing on her volunteering experiences in job applications, leaving her feeling "*a bit of a fraud, even though all [the experiences] are genuine things that I did*" (T2).

Yet Norma's case presents a paradox. Despite her reservations about skills transfer, the assignment functioned effectively as a reputational signal that opened professional doors on her return. She acknowledged that her experiences "*look[ed] good on a CV*" (T3) and had "*a trickle effect*" (T5) in the Australian labour market: "*It did help me get my initial first job [after the assignment]. Employers were like, 'Oh, that's good experience'*" (T5). Indeed, she believed at the time that she "*definitely wouldn't have gotten this job if I hadn't been [a volunteer]*" (T2). The experiences she chose to emphasise to prospective employers were not task-specific competencies but rather the demonstration of commitment and initiative ("*having been on the program and gone overseas for an extended period of time and then showing that I'm committed to the industry*", T3). One exception was a grant she had won and managed while in-country, which she identified as a tangible, work-like achievement worth highlighting.

Nonetheless, the long-term picture is one of qualified success. A short-term position after repatriation provided the additional experience needed to secure a permanent role with an Australian INGO, the sector she had set her sights on at the outset of her assignment (T1). In this sense, the assignment contributed to her career goal, though not through her professional development. As she reflected at T5:

> *"In a very loosely connected way I think being in [the host country] in some ways has helped … I know employers look at AVI as like, 'Oh that's a nice thing to have done'. But it's not really classified as work experience. It's definitely not viewed as the same gravitas that, say, a year working in a development organisation would be"* (T5)

Volunteer stories: Germaine

Volunteering as part of a "wiggledy-woggledy" career path

Germaine's time in Myanmar formed part of what she calls her "*wiggledy-woggledy career*" (T5), a path built through international experience and horizontal moves rather than ascending a traditional government ladder. She says her experiences volunteering and then living overseas helped her enter the public service at a mid-level on her return to Australia ("*I was able to come in as a Level 5 rather than starting from zero*", T5). She drew on the transferable skills she gained through development work, engagement with Australian government entities in-country, and disaster-related expertise.

Yet she believes that the same experience has become a barrier to progressing further within the government sector ("*Let's be honest … I think being outside the traditional 'government ladder' for a long period of time actually stunted my career progression*", T5). She believed that without a traditional "*policy foundation*", her development background is "*not seen as transferable enough*" for senior policy roles. She cited a recent example in which a departmental emergency-response review overlooked policy issues she had dealt with during a cyclone in Myanmar - particularly around support for vulnerable groups - highlighting, to her, how little her overseas experience was recognised. As she explained:

> *"That was probably the closest thing to what I was actually doing in Myanmar … we really took it seriously over there, it's a really big thing in lesser-developed countries and there's a real push to get developed countries on board … I guess our government just didn't care … I found it really frustrating"* (T5)

While Germaine values the international exposure, she recognises that "*after a point, [the employer is] looking for hard policy skills, and I just didn't get that*" as a volunteer (T5). At the time of her final interview, she had become "*a bit disenchanted with my job, partly as a result of not being able to get a promotion*" (T5) and was contemplating a shift out of the government sector ("*I've started thinking a bit more about where to go, and that includes possibly just going back to development [sector work]*", T5).

Volunteer stories: Charlie

An evolving and flexible communication toolkit

Charlie's volunteer assignment provided an assortment of experiences that required him to use quite advanced intercultural communication techniques that are easy in principle, but which require awareness, patience, care, and practice to deploy effectively. As Charlie explained it, these techniques became effective in two ways. First, as tools in their own right to facilitate good outcomes for his work with PO colleagues. They also provided opportunities for Charlie to role model these techniques for his colleagues and so were a valuable form of interpersonal capacity development that helped colleagues interact more effectively with international donors.

Examples of these techniques shared by Charlie at different interviews were:

- Language grading, or what Charlie referred to as "*breaking things down* (T5) … *you've got to be very, very careful that you write in very simple, plain English*" (T3). One example of this arose when Charlie's PO received official documents and emails from head office in Europe that were filled with jargon and complex English ("*they had a competition to see who could put the biggest words in their documents*", T3), which, according to Charlie, led the PO staff to politely accept policies they did not truly understand (T2). In response, Charlie became, in effect, a language-broker between the PO and its head office. In one case, he took a 30-page policy full of "*flowery English*" and re-wrote it in clear, everyday language. He then "*sat down*" with a colleague (HR manager) over multiple days to ensure key points were truly understood and to enable his colleague to translate each section into the host-country language (and later make a formal presentation on the content to others). This also flowed through to the way he uses visual aids and cultural artefacts to support communicated messages, including major changes to how he uses PowerPoint and translation apps in his work with colleagues (T5).
- Concept checking and paraphrasing to verify colleagues had understood communicated messages. For Charlie, this occurred most often during collaborative work, when he would use interactions to regularly check that everyone was "*on the same page*" (T4), although only after he believed he had established sufficient levels of trust (T3). This willingness to check in, iterate, and explain concepts in different ways to ensure that nothing was lost to polite silence or nods was something Charlie practised consistently ("*A lot of the time [my local colleagues] won't say they don't understand … so you have to be careful*" T3).
- Using suggestive dialogue by offering ideas and options in a collaborative tone rather than the task-focused and directive tone that, according to Charlie, had previously characterised his style of communication ("*it's a habit from decades in consulting",* T5). Charlie explained:

  > "*One thing I've learnt [from my volunteer assignments] is you don't tell people what to do, you make suggestions (T3) … it's no good being dictatorial … they just tune out … rather than saying 'This is wrong; do X', you learn it's better to say, 'Perhaps we could try X - what do you think?'*" (T5)

  Charlie says that patience and listening were needed during the assignment to develop these skills ("*God gave us two ears and one mouth … I use them in that context",* T3). He credits this change with garnering better cooperation and less defensiveness from colleagues in subsequent assignments (T5). The approach also has the benefit of respecting the autonomy and face of his colleagues and inviting input. This proved especially vital for subsequent remote (online) assignments, where, he says, clear, suggestion-based communication helped overcome the impersonal nature of email and Zoom.
- Building rapport and trust. Charlie's belief that strong personal rapport underpins all effective cross-cultural communication came from his time in the host country, where he found his age and experience initially earned respect ("*they're very respectful, particularly if you've got a bit of grey hair*", T2), but genuine rapport and the openness needed to be an effective counterpart required mutual trust, which was hard won and demanded conscious changes to his typical working style - socialising and "*having a bit of fun*" (T2) with colleagues by sharing morning tea chats, asking about family, injecting humour, and practising cultural humility (e.g., learning basic phrases in the host-country language despite being "*hopeless at languages*", T2). He also consciously ensured that he was not dominating discussions by allowing space for others to contribute, even if it took longer or required gentle prompting (T5).
- Personal sharing as a bridge to intercultural friendship with colleagues by, for instance, showing photos of his hometown, his family, and Australian landscapes ("*It's a way of building up a level of trust*", T5) and, in one recent assignment, confiding sensitive issues that led colleagues to reciprocate important contextual information that "*they wouldn't tell anyone else*" (T5). Charlie says that these techniques have helped him create "*a human bond*" that improves communication and encourages colleagues to be forthcoming with their questions, ideas and problems ("*they know that I 'get' it. They think, 'He can see things through our eyes'. This helps*", T4).

Charlie shared several examples of how he has used these techniques in subsequent remote, hybrid and in-country assignments. When internet issues or silence stalled discussions during a COVID-era remote assignment, he patiently waited or rephrased questions, recognising that "*patience is going to be a big thing in this*" new mode of volunteering (T3). During a remote mentoring-focused assignment, he applied language grading religiously and leaned heavily on suggestive coaching, posing ideas as recommendations to empower his protégé (T5). He consciously structured concept checking pauses into a series of recorded webinars he was asked to create for a multilingual audience in the Pacific (T5).

Charlie says that volunteering has given him "*a new lease of life*" in retirement and made him a more patient and socially conscious person (T3, T5). He also believes that these make him "*a lot better*" as a mentor now precisely because he listens more and tailors his approach to what others need, rather than sticking rigidly to his own agenda and communication preferences (T5).

Volunteer stories: Olivia (part 1)

A career asset that took time to see

Before her volunteer assignment, Olivia had conducted fieldwork abroad during her university studies and worked as a consultant in Australia on funded international development projects. She joined the program with a clear professional ambition: to shift her career "*more explicitly into … working in a space that's either connected to international development or international programs*" (T1). Although she already knew the host country, she wanted to "*live [there] for a longer period … build that deeper connection and understanding of culture and way of life*" (T1).

The assignment did build her confidence. She felt it gave her "*probably a lot more confidence to feel I could contribute in international development consulting*" (T2), but her enforced repatriation interrupted these plans, and her assessment of the assignment's professional value was initially cautious and at times mildly negative. At T3, she described it as a possible "*step back*" in conventional career terms: "*there's a chunk of time taken out … I have taken a step backwards in terms of career progression in a direct sense*" (T3). She was nonetheless pragmatic about the risk: "*one or two years doesn't really matter so you may as well spend it doing something that may or may not work*" (T3).

By T4, COVID and shifting circumstances had prompted a further reassessment. It was "*really hard to know*" whether her original plans for an international development career would have been achievable, and she was weighing whether further international placements, if she had taken them, might have tipped into "*burn out*" (T4) and whether this direction was still achievable. In the meantime, she was promoted to a new role with a stronger international focus (2022) and where she began to draw on, and find real value in, some of the cross-cultural skills and specific techniques she had picked up during her volunteer experiences.

While her current sector, organisation, and role are far different from what she had anticipated at T1, by T5 Olivia was able to articulate benefits that had not been visible earlier. Working in a government department with international reach, she acknowledged real trade-offs ("*I'm definitely in a worse financial position than if I'd tried to optimise my career for finances",* T5), and noted it can still be "*hard to remember or consider [the assignment] as full career experience*" (T5). Yet she now connects the assignment directly to her professional effectiveness: time spent outside Australian institutional norms is "*probably more useful*" because it helps her "*connect a little bit more to how our counterparts in some [international organisations]*" in work contexts where "*a lot of those structures aren't really in place*" (T5). More broadly, she reflects that the experience helped her examine workplace assumptions with fresh eyes that have proven valuable in both her domestic setting and internationally focused work: "*You can think about the 'why' a bit more clearly*" (T5). Looking back across the roles she has held since, her conclusion is clear: although not a major impact, and not the transition to the globally mobile career she had wanted, "*it definitely helped … and I think it does help now in a more general sense*" (T5).

Volunteer stories: Olivia (part 2)

Applying program lessons at scale

Now a team leader with a government department, Olivia played a central role in designing a transnational initiative involving employees from 22 jurisdictions across the Asia-Pacific region. She oversaw the process of designing the project structure, the mechanisms for consulting with stakeholders, and how international counterparts participated in decisions.

According to Olivia, her experiences volunteering with a domestic NGO in rural Asia were a strong touchstone for how she designed this initiative. Her assignment taught her that the outcomes of projects like this are rarely linear and that effective cooperation depends on time, trust, and informal conversations. These lessons now underpin the relationship-centred design of the initiative she manages: "*It's one thing I learned [during my time as a volunteer], you need that time for the relationships to build … you can only really find out about those things when you have the right conversations, not just by following a strict process … I understand what sits behind that a bit*", T5). This insight guides her emphasis on in-person engagement and allowing her partners in Asia and the Pacific the space to shape program priorities.

In designing the initiative, Olivia also benchmarked the structure and support processes that she experienced during her assignment (e.g., pre-departure training and in-country support processes used by the volunteer program) in "*fairly literal*" ways (T5). She explained:

> *"… part of what we're designing is to have Pacific members deploy into secondments in Australia. How do you support people to move in that process? That's a very literal thing around the pre-departure briefing, and getting people in-country, and the screening that happens. And that experience of [thinking about] if they've got a motivation to be there, how do you actually harness and support that motivation, rather than just look at it too literally as the job they need to fulfil when they're here? So I mean, that's a fairly literal way [that I'm using that knowledge] … I like to compare what we're doing with what the volunteer program did"* (T5)

Volunteer stories: Nancy

"Mission accomplished?" From volunteer to development professional

Entering the Sector

Nancy's assignment, with a small team in a UN-affiliated agency in Asia, focused on rural health and gender policy. The role was initially vague, but her day-to-day work quickly became a hands-on introduction to the inner workings of the humanitarian sector. She found herself liaising with government, NGOs, and UN agencies and "*attending a lot of coordination meetings … summarising key reports … and contextualising them for [the host country]*" (T2). The ambiguity of her position became an opportunity when Nancy was unexpectedly asked to "*step up to lead some of the humanitarian work*" in her boss's absence. She described this as daunting ("*I had to provide advice and I just thought, 'I'm not qualified'*", T2) but also "*an amazing opportunity*" (T2) that gave Nancy first-hand experience in coordinating humanitarian responses and the chance to operate at a professional level well beyond her years of experience.

Nancy now recognises her time in the country as a critical period of socialisation to the sector she now works in: "*Just by virtue of being there, a conflict-affected country, and working in international development … you get introduced to the sector and everything … it allowed me to see what the sector actually was and understand how to be a part of it*" (T4). She learned the practicalities of how projects are run, how organisations interlink, and who's who in the field. It also "*reinforced that this is what I'm most interested in … and something I'm capable of doing*" (T2).

Beyond the formal duties, living and working in the host country immersed Nancy in the culture of the development sector and of the country. She formed a particularly close bond with an HCN colleague ("*she became my 'cultural penguin' in the office … she explained things to me … just through our personal relationship I was able to understand why things are done the way that they're done and how I can fit into it*", T2). The program's structure was beneficial both socially and professionally. The volunteer community became Nancy's social support system ("*there were 25–30 of us there … I fostered some really, really strong friendships that will last a lifetime*", T2), helping her adjustment and, importantly, plugging her into the broader expatriate aid network. Volunteer gatherings introduced Nancy to people from other agencies and to information about different career paths in the development field.

Building a Career on Volunteer Experiences

Nancy had completed just over half her planned assignment when COVID ended it prematurely. Feeling that she had "*unfinished business – I got ripped away without being able to actually wrap things up*" (T2), within weeks of being repatriated to Australia she was able to secure a remote consultancy to continue her work with the PO: "*I asked if I could do a low-value consultancy and they just made me a consultant*" (T3) in the same role she had during the in-country assignment. This was at a time when job openings in Australia were receiving "*300 applicants*" (T3) and many of her peers were struggling to find work ("*I'm just grateful I have this role, otherwise, I'd be really worried [about my career]*", T3).

Over the next two years, Nancy pieced together a series of short-term contracts to remain in the aid sector – continuing to build a niche specialisation in gender-based violence (GBV) and drawing on her understanding of conditions in the host country, both of which originated during her volunteer assignment. Nonetheless, Nancy's employment was never secure ("*The contracts I had were only three months at a time. They kept getting extended, but there was financial insecurity*", T4). When international borders reopened, she relocated to Jakarta, initially temporarily, to reconnect with former colleagues and fellow volunteers who had congregated in the region ("*That was a very deliberate professional decision. After working remotely for so long … I went just to get back into the sector*", T4). Connecting with her former manager (now in Africa) helped her secure a new consultancy that led, after a string of extensions and increased responsibilities, to a year-long contract. She has now become the de facto focal point for her program ("*Having the institutional knowledge now allows me greater responsibility. I represent that agenda at the country level now*", T4). In essence, across the duration of the study Nancy has developed from an entry-level volunteer into a recognised GBV and host-country expert in her team.

Nancy credits the volunteer program for helping her develop the networks and confidence to navigate this path. During the pandemic, the tight-knit alumni community of volunteers shared job leads and moral support ("*We'll send each other job things that come up, we're always on the lookout for each other*", T3). It was a volunteer colleague who suggested Nancy ask for the remote consultancy role during COVID ("*Her agency [was] doing it, that's what gave me the idea to ask*", T3). Some of her closest professional contacts today are friends she made during her assignment – an eclectic mix of nationalities who have since scattered across the globe but remain connected. When she relocated to Jakarta, it was largely an existing volunteer network from the host country that anchored her socially and professionally ("*My closest friends are people that were in [the host country] at the same time as me … we have that point of connection and it's formed the foundation of my life here in Jakarta*", T5). These networks have had concrete career benefits: introductions through former volunteers and colleagues have led to consultancy work, and simply being known and trusted in the "*[host-country] circle*" has opened doors. For example, she attributes her recent addition to the humanitarian emergency roster of a major international NGO to the combination of her field experience and the endorsements from people she met on volunteer assignment (T5).

In retrospect, Nancy considers the program "*the most supportive way to enter the sector*" (T3). She believes the pre-departure briefing, in-country induction, and ongoing support gave her a safety net that helped her perform during the assignment and "*allowed [her] to just embrace the experience and grow from it … enough support that you felt comfortable to be independent … but you're not cast out on your own to figure it out*" (T3, T5). When relocating to Jakarta, she consciously applied these principles to build a community around herself. She also continues to promote the program to others seeking to enter the sector (sharing assignment vacancies with them if the vacancies match the person's interests).

Ongoing Challenges and Reflections

Nancy reflects on her journey with a mix of pride and realism. On one hand, her initial goal has been achieved: "*I owe the start of my career to the program … it gave me the ability to get into this area of interest*" (T5). Her career, which draws on the specialisation developed in the assignment, might not have materialised without the program ("*I'm the only person that's had a dedicated focus on [conflict-related GBV] in [the host country] within the [PO] continuously since then*", T5). This continuity has made her an asset: colleagues (including superiors) who have been unable to visit the country often turn to her as the [host-country] expert in her domain. In this sense, her volunteer experience still differentiates her and serves as a source of credibility.

On the other hand, Nancy's experiences highlight the challenges of turning volunteer service into a sustainable profession within a sector undergoing change. Despite Nancy's growing expertise, her position remains insecure and characterised by rolling short-term contracts without the stability or benefits of permanent employment. At the time of her final interview in 2025, there were plans to extend her project ("*but who knows how that will go? The sector feels like it's crumbling and we don't know what's to come … I don't know if I'll be employed [next year]*", T5). It is an ongoing tension: the volunteer program opened the door for her career – "*it's 'mission accomplished' when it comes to getting me into the sector*" (T5) – but forging a stable career remains an accomplishment in progress.

Volunteer stories: Richard

A volunteer experience inspiring formal education

Pre-assignment (2019)

Entered the program aiming to: (i) develop career experiences and direction, (ii) gain exposure to international career pathways, (iii) supplement résumé with broader professional experiences

> "I have made a conscious decision to shift away from [my current work] to more … international projects. This is a step in that direction. I was advised by a friend who works in the humanitarian world that the AVI program was a good way to get some runs on the board … I'm not saying it will, but the opportunity to network and open some doors is there … I think it's a longer-term experience and knowledge gathering thing for me" **(T1, 2019)**

Assignment (2020)

Despite premature repatriation, the assignment provided: (i) exposure to sector, (ii) understanding of requirements and skills needed to work internationally, (iii) experience of international dimensions of work, (iv) guidance to choose education program

> "It gave me a real perspective of the sector that I want to work in, the vast majority of them were positive insights and ideas about how I should focus my future studies, what sort of work is available to me, what sort of work would I like to do … I have been busy applying for universities … I realised that my skills are not in creating […], it is more about sharing that research and that knowledge effectively, so it clarified in my mind an ambition to work in […] as opposed to research and development … [the assignment] provided extensive exposure to a field into which I want to work and that is invaluable" **(T2, 2020)**

Post-assignment (2021)

Postgraduate studies provided: (i) opportunity to apply volunteer experiences to coursework and assessment, (ii) formal training and qualifications to supplement knowledge and experiences gained during the assignment, (iii) career clarity and professional confidence

> "I've felt a lot more comfortable with the path that I'm taking; for a long time I had an idea of … what sort of career I wanted to have and I think the program was good in helping me define that goal and the path to it as well. As a student I certainly feel more qualified to be involved in that sort of thing ... whenever I select courses or how to conduct pieces of assessment, it's very much with a focus on … using [in-country] experience as an insight into what is important in the work that I would do in that field … understanding what the pathway looks like and what the end jobs might look like really did give me a strong motivator … the comfort of having a clearer picture of what my career looks like, that's provided a level of contentment maybe or satisfaction and confidence in undertaking things that maybe wasn't there prior … the exposure that the program [enabled] gave me some professional confidence and direction" **(T3, 2021)**

Post-assignment (2023)

Full-time employment with government-funded research project: (i) developing skillset in Australia, (ii) considering international job opportunities that combine volunteering experience, formal education and professional experiences

> "[The volunteer assignment] has certainly had an important, positive impact on my career … it was the next step in a series of goals that I saw as important to achieving the sort of work that I wanted to do … I finished my [postgraduate] degree, then briefly worked for the [university] as a research assistant. My intention for doing that was to remain engaged with the networks I had developed through my study and in [the host country]. A few short weeks later [a friend] pointed out a position in a newly formed government program … seeing this, the opportunity of the job allowed me to really focus on how to [use my knowledge] … my experience in [the host country] provided me with a broad perspective of how this work happens both in Australia and overseas and an appreciation for the contextual factors that influence the work that we do … [Working in the host country], I recognised that there was a lot more to know about this … It highlighted for me the importance of [the work] and that became my focus … bringing it back to my experience and my work now has been challenging but a comfortable shift, I feel. I feel happy in this place" **(T4, 2023)**

Post-assignment (2025)

Continuing full-time employment with government-funded research project: (i) applying volunteer experiences regularly in "day-to-day work", (ii) taking on leadership role in domestic NGO with international aspirations that builds on qualifications and volunteer experiences

> "If I look back now, I just can't imagine what [my studies] would be like without [the volunteer assignment] … it really contributed to my success and motivation. It was a reinforcing situation that helped me do as well as I did. Academically, I would have been okay. But I don't think I would have got as much out of a degree, out of that experience, if I hadn't done the [assignment] … I now have credibility in that [professional space]. Although I'm a long way from fulfilling my ambition, it was very much a launching pad for having the confidence to dive into [my current career]. I'm motivated to do what I can to make my work impactful, and this is why I want to work [in this job], it's a great place to be honing skills in this area" **(T5, 2025)**

Section 7

Personal Circumstances and Capabilities

- Personal changes were among the most enduring outcomes reported across the study, identified by participants across all volunteer groups and at every post-assignment interview.
- Six categories of personal change were most commonly and consistently reported. These were oriented towards two main dimensions: personal agency (confidence, adaptive resilience, self-awareness) and relational and moral development (relational orientation, reflective appreciation, personal fulfilment).
- Rather than being a by-product of an international experience, personal changes were connected to particular assignment conditions. These fell into two broad types: stretch-based conditions (challenge and novelty) and relational and values-based conditions (meaning and connections).
- Personal changes frequently led to behavioural change and influenced participants' subsequent decisions and actions. A degree of 'prosocial spillover' is evident in these decisions and actions, with benefits expressed toward family, friends, communities, and the environment, pointing to a potential multiplier effect that expands the program's impact beyond its direct activities and stakeholders.
- The assignment's interaction with global events and social movements (e.g., COVID, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Decolonising Aid) provided some participants with a platform for engaging with these issues in more reflective ways than they might otherwise have done.
- Around half the sample reported tangible lifestyle changes, including shifts towards anti-consumption, environmental sustainability, prioritising relationships, and health consciousness, which they attributed to their assignment - specifically, exposure to different living conditions and to the consequences of different ways of life.
- The relationships participants formed with other volunteers were among the most consistently valued outcomes of the assignment, characterised by unusual depth and variety. These relationships now provide both bonding and bridging capital, and continue to function as sources of career support, emotional connection, and civic engagement years after the assignment ended.
- Health and wellbeing problems affected a substantial minority of participants, both during and after the assignment. Financial precarity, enforced repatriation, and the challenges of re-entry compounded these impacts for some participants. From the vantage point of five years post-assignment, however, the majority of participants described net positive health outcomes, often linked to quality-of-life decisions prompted by their assignment experiences.
- The main implications for the program are discussed on pages 123-125.

7 Personal Circumstances and Capabilities

7.1 Overview and Background

The fourth major outcome analysed in this study relates to the program's aim to help volunteers 'gain personally' from their assignments. It addresses the impact of involvement in the program on:

1. Participants' **personal circumstances, health and wellbeing** (Section 7.2).
2. Participants' **personal change and growth**, via the development of personal attributes and attitudes that participants identified as contributing to their personal lives (Section 7.3). A separate sub-section is devoted to the impacts of extraneous events on these changes (Section 7.3.1).
3. Changes to participants' **day-to-day habits, hobbies, and practices that we collectively refer to as 'lifestyle changes**' in Section 7.4.
4. Participants' **personal relationships** (Section 7.5), including their ongoing relationships with other program volunteers (Section 7.5.1) and family and friends (Section 7.5.2).

The key implications for the program are summarised in Section 7.6.

7.2 Personal Circumstances, Health and Wellbeing

Across the study's six-year duration, major changes to participants' personal lives shaped how they experienced, reflected on, and made sense of their volunteer assignments. These changes formed an important backdrop to participants' volunteer experiences, intersecting with the physical and emotional demands of the assignment in different ways and at different times.

Four became parents for the first time. Three became first-time grandparents. The four romantic relationships that began during the assignment have now dissolved. By contrast, five volunteers married the partner who accompanied them on the assignment.[352] All five of these believe the volunteer assignment was valuable for their relationship in different ways, despite challenging moments:

> *"My six months in [the host city] was like a boot camp for a simulation into my new family, essentially, because they've got very strong family values and religious values which I previously would have found quite challenging to navigate. But I feel I had a crash course in that while I was in [the host country] and it made me really value a lot of things far more than I did previously. It has been really relevant personally, still today"* (#43, T4)

Others began or ended relationships, underwent major surgery, faced significant health and economic challenges, and took on substantial new caring responsibilities. Sixteen relocated to a new city, State or country for personal or professional reasons.[353] Others also changed living arrangements, including with friends, partners, fellow volunteers, or extended family.

Many participants reported in-country lifestyle adjustments (e.g., patterns of exercise, stress relief, social connection, eating habits) that improved aspects of their mental and physical health, discussed in Section 7.4. At the same time, 24 experienced major health issues during their assignment. Almost half (45%) used the program's medical services, were hospitalised or were medevacked during their assignments (T2). At least five accessed *Response Psychological* services; several others considered doing so.[354]

Twelve sought specialist help to cope with challenges during or immediately after their enforced repatriation due to COVID.[355] For many, this period was characterised by a protracted sense of 'liminality',[356] during which uncertainty about professional and personal roles and identities was common, a condition amplified by circumstances surrounding their enforced repatriation.[357] Reflecting this, almost half (44%) had difficulties readjusting after their assignment; this was more common among those who were forced to repatriate due to COVID protocols and for those who were more deeply embedded in the host country (e.g., isolated location, longer assignment duration prior to repatriation). In the 12 months following their enforced repatriation, at least nine participants (mainly young *Transitioners* and *Enhancers*) sought professional health care for issues associated with their mental wellbeing that stemmed from the assignment, the challenges of readjusting in the context of COVID, or a combination of these.

Sadly, one valued participant in this study passed away soon after T3. In the five years since their assignment, more than a third[358] have been impacted by deaths of former PO colleagues, volunteers, and/or expatriate/HCN friends that they met during their assignment. The loss of one or more former PO colleagues was particularly common. One participant with strong host-country ties lost three former colleagues and neighbours in accidents or medical mishaps across a six-month period. At the time, she observed:

> *"I really thought, my god, we have lots of difference between them and us. We're very lucky we have all these security systems and alarms and things that make our life quite safe and we forget that we've got these things … it makes you realise in advanced nations just how protected we are"* (#24, T4)

Another volunteer's former direct counterpart "*passed away … quite suddenly*" on the back of "*a lot of people in my social media feed [from the host country having] passed away in the last few years, probably from COVID … there was a period when it was quite morbid*" (#29, T4). These experiences made her question the impact that she was able to make during the assignment and in her current work:

> *"I'm not sure how much I contributed [during my volunteer assignment] … I was thinking about that quite a lot because it's this situation where one of the closer relationships, the people who I probably spent the most time with, is just gone … partially there's that sense of legacy that is still definitely left and seeing how other people are constructing their sense of being [after the death] … all the [other host-country] NGOs sent out [condolences] and so you could see the impact this one person had by basically taking the time to build a lot of relationships and have the key piece of the knowledge and information that he thought was important to get out there … that's quite different to the situation I'm in [in my current work] where it is just quite bureaucratic, like in bamboo. So there's, I guess, a legacy in the sense of how you think about meaning in your own life"* (#29, T4)

Other participants explained how their ongoing contact with former POs was hampered by deteriorating health of former colleagues or other conditions in POs that made communication difficult.

Nonetheless, from the vantage point of five years post-assignment, just three participants report ongoing residual impacts to their health that they attribute to the assignment. Many participants instead described long-term positive health consequences. In general, these benefits relate to:

1. Greater happiness and satisfaction stemming from their enjoyment of the assignment, or the satisfaction or clarity (e.g., professional direction) it provided, contrasted by some with previous negative workplace or life experiences.[359]
2. Quality-of-life benefits resulting from major decisions or major changes they made during or after the assignment and that were instigated by in-country experiences, some of which were negative experiences such as isolation or disconnection from family and friends (see Section 7.4). One participant, who "*ended up seeing a psychologist for a number of months*" following the repatriation (T3), believes that "*[my assignment] definitely made me more resourceful in that you do really have to rely on other people to pull you through some of those things, you can't do it all yourself … it helped me with reaching out for support when I need it"* (T4). She has subsequently benefited, she says, from basing her professional and lifestyle decisions *"around having connections to places and friends, and prioritising being in proximity to those types of things*" (T5).
3. A sense that their assignment contributed to personal attributes like adaptability or resilience (Section 7.3) that have been beneficial in subsequent years for coping with life events like moving to a new city or coping with hardship, including the COVID pandemic and its consequences (social isolation, unemployment, health challenges).[360]

Of those participants still experiencing health challenges, the **cases of Addison and Dylan (Section 3.4, page 24)** are most extreme. These difficulties stemmed, in their view, from perceived limitations in the program support during times of acute challenge (during or after the assignment). Another participant, (#33, *Veteran*), continues to experience ill-health from a virus contracted during the assignment that necessitated medical evacuation, the ongoing effects of which have prevented him from accepting a subsequent in-country assignment. Nine participants, including seven of the ten *Veterans*, cited personal health challenges associated with ageing as reason for their reluctance towards future volunteer assignments.[361]

7.3 Personal Change and Growth

Personal changes were most frequently identified by participants as the strongest residual impact of the volunteer assignment across multiple waves.[362] Moreover, despite variation in the magnitude of reported change[363] and the terminology used by different volunteers, the types of personal changes reported were remarkably consistent across interviews. Participants were typically clear in linking them to specific activities and experiences encountered during their assignments.[364] In other words, participants were generally consistent in the personal changes they reported across T2-T5, and these changes appear to have remained salient during this period.[365] Some participants also became more confident and articulate in discussing the implications of these changes across the study's duration, with some, like **Fiona in the case study on page 54** (introduced in Section 4.4.2), describing their impact as continuing to grow many years after the assignment ended.[366]

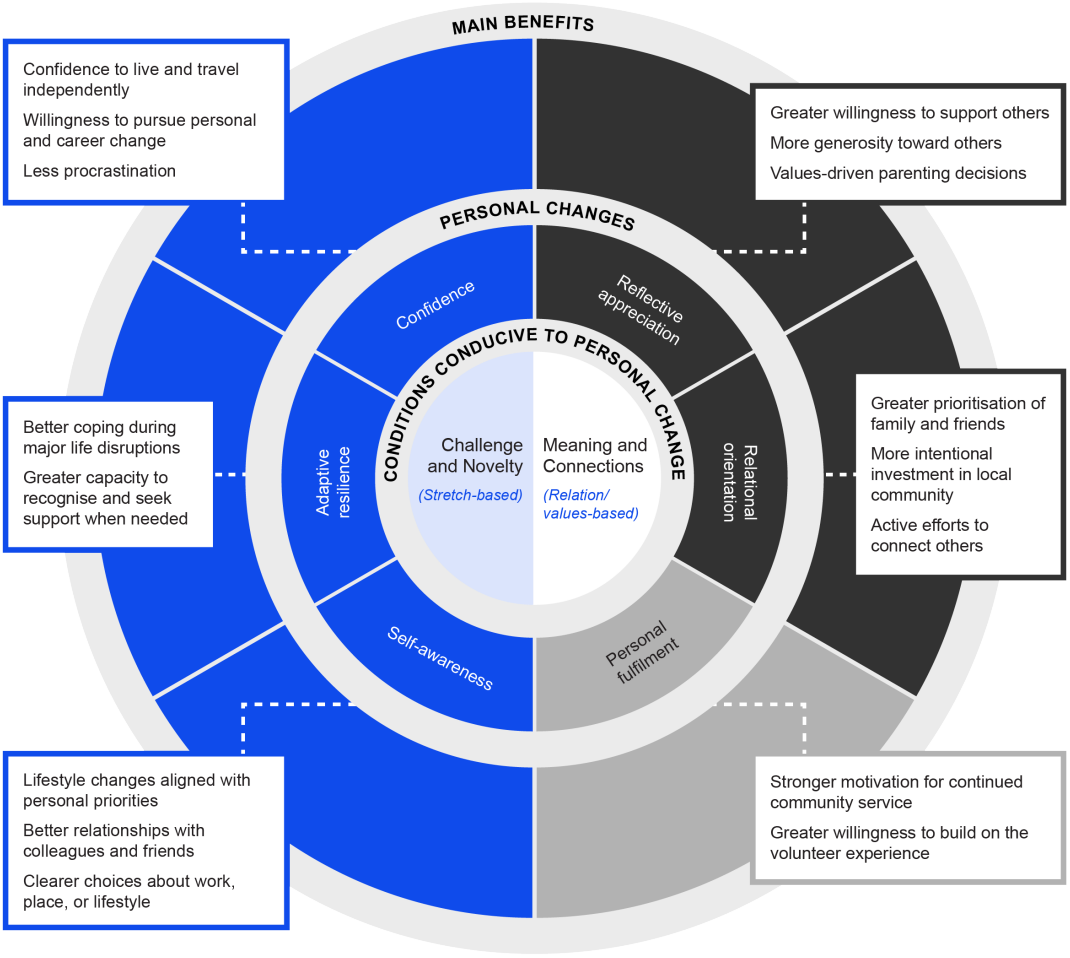
Across the study, every participant attributed some form of valued personal development to their program experiences. While the overwhelming majority were positive, two described mainly *negative* impacts *(mental health, cynicism about development funding)*, and four reported a mix of negative and positive impacts.[367]

Six categories[368] of personal changes were most commonly and consistently reported across the study and were most impactful for volunteers' subsequent lives.[369] We label these: (i) confidence, (ii) self-awareness, (iii) personal fulfilment, (iv) adaptive resilience, (v) reflective appreciation, and (vi) relational orientation.[370] These are represented by the six sections around the middle ring in **Figure 17 on page 115 and defined in the panel at the top of page 116**.[371] The six categories appear to fall into two clusters. Confidence, adaptive resilience and self-awareness (shaded blue at the left of **Figure 17**) relate to 'personal agency', enhancing participants' sense of competence, self-direction, and ability to cope.[372] Relational orientation and reflective appreciation (shaded black at the right of **Figure 17**) involve 'relational or moral' development, reflecting greater appreciation of relationships, community, compassion, and inequality. Personal fulfilment, meanwhile, bridges 'personal agency' and 'relational or moral' elements, and so is shaded grey in **Figure 17**.[373]

At the centre of **Figure 17** is a distillation of the main conditions that, according to participants, contributed to these outcomes: challenge, novelty, meaning, and connection.[374] The 'stretch-based' contributors on the left of **Figure 17** (challenge and novelty) were, in general, more strongly associated with 'personal agency' changes, whereas 'relational and values-based' conditions (connections and meaning) were more commonly associated with 'relational or moral' development on the right (relational orientation, reflective appreciation). Finally, around the perimeter of the circle in **Figure 17** are some of the different ways participants believe that each of these six changes has benefited them (T3-T5) through decisions made, changes initiated, or actions and habits adopted since their assignment.

The panel below **Figure 17** defines each of the six categories of personal change.

Figure 17: Main personal changes, enabling conditions, and benefits



Main personal changes

Reflective appreciation: Appreciation for one's own life and circumstances, often accompanied by greater awareness of privilege and inequality, emotionally complex responses such as gratitude and guilt, and increased compassion toward others.

Relational orientation: Placing greater value on close relationships, belonging, care, and connection, including stronger appreciation of family, friendships, community ties, and diverse social relationships.

Personal fulfilment: A positive sense that life is meaningful, worthwhile, and personally rewarding, combining feelings of pride, happiness, accomplishment, and personal and life satisfaction.

Self-awareness: Awareness of oneself including strengths, limits, values, aspirations, and place in the world and how this awareness shapes life choices.

Adaptive resilience: Capacity to cope with stress, respond constructively to change, persist through challenges, and feel comfort in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty.

Confidence: Belief in being able to manage situations, make decisions, and act effectively on one's own, including greater independence, self-reliance, and judgement.

The panel at the top of page 116 explains the conditions participants experienced during the assignment that were conducive to these changes (left) and the main personal changes reported by each category of volunteer (right).

Conditions conducive to personal change

STRETCH-BASED CONDITIONS

Challenge: Confronting difficulties associated with the partner organisation, resource availability, work role, interpersonal interactions, or living conditions.

Novelty: Coping and performing work (or non-work) activities effectively in an unfamiliar culture, environment, language, work role, and/or context.

RELATION/VALUES-BASED CONDITIONS

Meaning: Having work objectives, relationships, and impacts that are significant and of value personally and to others.

Connections: Collaborating, mentoring, socialising, and sharing work/social settings with colleagues, clients, counterparts, and communities.

Main changes by volunteer group

Launchers: Confidence (independence), self-awareness (values and priorities), reflective appreciation (empathy, privilege awareness)

Enhancers: Confidence (self-confidence, judgement), adaptive resilience (dealing with change and challenge)

Transitioners: Confidence (interpersonal), relational orientation (valuing community)

Career Breakers: Confidence (self-sufficiency), relational orientation, reflective appreciation

Imposed Transitioners: Adaptive resilience (coping with challenges and stress), relational orientation (appreciation of family, friends and diverse communities)

Veterans: Personal fulfilment (sense of pride in achievements), reflective appreciation (appreciation of circumstances)

Key features of participants' personal changes and the contributors to these are discussed next.

» Features of Participants' Personal Changes

- Although classified as 'personal', these changes frequently arose in work situations during volunteers' assignments, particularly non-routine tasks characterised by novelty and challenge,[375] and several have had practical utility in participants' current work situations. Overlap therefore exists between these outcomes and those relating more directly to professional development (Section 6.4) or cross-cultural capabilities (Section 4.4). Some of the outcomes, such as confidence and adaptive resilience, may be familiar to (and appreciated by) employers, while others, like reflective appreciation, self-awareness, and personal fulfilment, are more relational and ethical rather than vocational in orientation.
- Many changes have distinctly psychological underpinnings that are strongly held and were reported relatively consistently over time. An example is participants' emotional complexity, with a group of participants articulating mixed emotions over multiple interviews relating to pride and gratitude alongside grief, guilt, or frustration, particularly when host countries faced crises or when participants felt impotent to help.[376] At the same time, the outer ring of **Figure 17** makes clear that these changes altered participants' later behaviours and life choices (not just their feelings or attitudes). These personal changes, therefore, while being expressed psychologically, led to behavioural changes and influenced decisions and actions.
- The characteristics of these changes and the way they were enacted (outer rim of **Figure 17**) suggest a degree of 'prosocial spillover' is present,[377] with benefits being expressed not just for the participant but also towards their family, community, and civic life (e.g., confidence and motivation to participate in civic and community life, creating connections among the community and friends, values-based parenting decisions). In this, they may represent an additional hidden element of the program's full prosocial impact (Section 5.2.4).

» Features of the Main Contributors to Personal Changes

- The findings indicate that personal development is contingent on identifiable assignment features rather than being just a by-product of a volunteer experience or international sojourn. Different forms of personal change were connected to different combinations of challenge, novelty, meaning and connections that participants encountered.
- Beneficial change was often associated with difficulty (challenge and novelty) rather than positive experiences. Yet these conditions also contributed to negative feelings (stress, isolation, anxiety) that can hinder, rather than facilitate, volunteers performing their roles effectively and their capacity to learn. Participants' accounts of the ongoing impacts (positive and negative) highlight the importance of the right balance of assignment conditions. That is, the depth of challenge and novelty presented by the volunteer role and in-country conditions is a strong contributor to personal development (especially 'adaptive resilience' and 'self-awareness') and an impediment to volunteers' success and learning ("*language and culture [differences] were the main issues [that limited learning opportunities], just in terms of being a young woman in a regional area … it was difficult*", #30, T5). For some assignments, therefore, the right degree of challenge or novelty is likely an important determinant of both personal change and performance, and better outcomes are likely to occur when volunteers perceive that these 'stretch' experiences are worthwhile and socially embedded (i.e., when challenge and novelty are paired with meaning and connections). This also suggests that assignments with different design elements are likely to lead to different personal changes (i.e., assignments with high levels of challenge and novelty producing outcomes that differ from those prioritising meaning and connection).
- All six changes arose during informal and unplanned work or non-work situations during the assignment. Nonetheless, it is clear that PDBs and ICOPs provided valuable platforms that supported personal development. Participants have increasingly recognised the value of the learning support available before and during the assignment via the program's VLJ and other activities: "*Looking back, I was*

thinking, oh wow, I was so lucky, it's such a well-structured program, I was so well supported, you grow a lot from the experience" (#06, T5). Previously, most (although not all) participants valued the program's support in preparing for (T1 and T2) and coping with the features of the volunteer assignment (T2), and for cultivating valued relationships (T3). Participants increasingly (T4 and T5) recognised the value of the program's preparation and support mechanisms, especially VLJ activities, for their impact on learning, relationships, cultural awareness and specific techniques they have benefited from in recent years (also see Section 6.5.1).

7.3.1 The Impacts of External Events

Participants' volunteer assignments, and their continued development and application of their experiences in the years since, have not occurred in a vacuum. The impacts of two extraneous events are addressed here: global events and movements (Section 7.3.1.1) and participation in this study (Section 7.3.1.2).

7.3.1.1 Global Events and Movements[378]

Some evidence exists that participants' **assignment experiences provided a platform for engaging in different and potentially more transformational ways with global events and social movements.**

First, experiencing COVID responses and their subsequent repatriation made some volunteers more sensitive to issues of inequality and privilege.[379] Similarly, global social movements highlighting disparities of power, privilege, and justice like 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM), '#MeToo', and 'Decolonising Aid' intersected with some participants' experiences in ways that led to "*deep questions"* (#07) about power and equality in international development that comprised a large part of the outcome "reflective appreciation" in **Figure 17**.

These events all emerged or gained momentum during the assignment period, served as prominent touchstones for volunteers, and appear to have continued to shape their career and life decisions following their return. While participants' references to these events declined in later interviews, the direct personal and professional impacts manifest through subsequent personal changes. This was most pronounced among female participants, who were more likely to observe parallels between these movements' criticisms of structural inequality and "*internalised colonialism and internationalised racism"* among host communities (#46, T3), their own "*place as a white person going into different cultures"* (#07, T3), and the personal changes that they attribute to the assignment, as illustrated by participant #20:

> *"One of the most important things in the AVI program is that you're going as a person from Australia, you're going overseas to a completely foreign context, and so you get a huge appreciation for culture - all the buzzwords, 'cultural diversity' and 'differences', and learning to actually have those respectful interactions. But on a deeper level it's actually having a high interest in learning about the differences and learning why certain actions are disrespectful or respectful, and actually being able to listen more, listen closely to what people are saying, which I think has just made me a lot more tuned in to what's going on in current affairs. So especially when the Black Lives Matter movement was going on, you turn on the news and you find something in the world and I guess being able to really understand, even if you don't agree with them, really understand where they're coming from and being interested in learning more about that topic"* (#20, T4)

The accounts of these participants suggest that their understanding of these external events was shaped in important ways by their context. The experiences, relationships, and circumstances of their volunteer assignment contributed to these events being more salient and to volunteers positioning themselves within these structures of power and inequality in ways they might not otherwise have done. Although these observations were not all explicitly political, they echo Freire's concept of 'conscientisation'[380] in which people critically analyse and become aware of the political, social, and power dynamics that shape their lives, and through this are empowered to act on the inequalities they experience.

For some participants, this dynamic may have inspired action (or at least reorientation). The **case study of Christine on page 75** (introduced in Section 5.2.1.2) is one example of this**.** Four participants reported new outlooks on the role of foreigners in development/aid delivery and were wrestling with this tension in multiple interviews; for instance, one *Launcher* who majored in international development studies and who saw the assignment, at T1, as "*the start of my career*" later explained:

> *"I am still keyed into some of the debates around BLM but also the consequences of that in an international development context … if I do move into international development, what's my place there … am I the right person to be doing this? I am a young middle class white woman. Yes, I have skills. But the localisation aspect is not always something that I should be looking towards doing"* (#46, T3)

She and three other volunteers later consciously altered their career direction away from development/aid (T5), although additional reasons (not just the volunteer experiences) contributed to all these decisions.[381]

7.3.1.2 Participation in the Study

At different times throughout data collection (T2-T5), 13 participants expressed the view that their involvement in this study, and in particular the regular structured conversations about their volunteer experiences, was personally beneficial.[382] As **Table 17** shows, these benefits stemmed from the chance to articulate, clarify, share, and/or reconsider their volunteer experiences. These accounts suggest that the narrative sensemaking processes some participants undertook during interviews may have influenced how

they experienced or later reflected upon their assignment. The potential of this biasing the study's results was considered in the study's research design and how data were interpreted.[383] It also suggests that, for some, similarly structured interviews may be valuable mechanisms that offer volunteers opportunities to make sense of their good and bad experiences or re-evaluate the meaning or impacts of certain events.

Table 17: Participants' views on the benefits of participating in this study

Benefit	Illustrative quotes (T5 interviews)
A rare opportunity to feel heard and validated: Regular interviews offered one of the few spaces available to participants where they felt sustained interest in their volunteer experiences. Some participants felt that genuine interest from an outsider helped to validate their experience.	• "These conversations are the most in-depth I get to have about [the host country] … I really looked forward to them" (#23) • "There are not many opportunities to do that in life with someone who's actually following with interest" (#21) • "Just having the opportunity to articulate these things that we live with all the time but don't get to talk about" (#01)
An opportunity to reflect and make sense: Interviews provided a structured space for participants to articulate experiences and changes that are rarely sought or verbalised. Some participants believed that this helped them understand the experiences and changes that they encountered.	• "It's really nice to chat to you … a good opportunity for me to try and articulate what I got out of that experience" (#20) • "It's quite rare to have an opportunity to reflect back … and observe your own development and growth over five years" (#07) • "It's been great to reflect on it … the good and the bad - and great to think about my own values … and the way it has changed me" (#12) • "It actually helps me to put [the volunteer assignment] into context" (#15) • "You have been able to raise questions that have got me to think differently and outside the square" (#17)
An opportunity to reinterpret and integrate experiences: Repeated conversations may have helped some participants reappraise challenging or negative experiences into more balanced and/or coherent narratives.	• "Immediately after the program I had quite a few negative thoughts … but that's turned positive and I think these chats have helped me to see some of those positive sides" (#30) • "I had to actively look at it and say, 'What came out of that for me?'… I got a lot of value, but you get even more value from going back over the experience and really thinking it through. Looking at it and considering it. These conversations have helped" (#23)

7.4 Lifestyle Changes

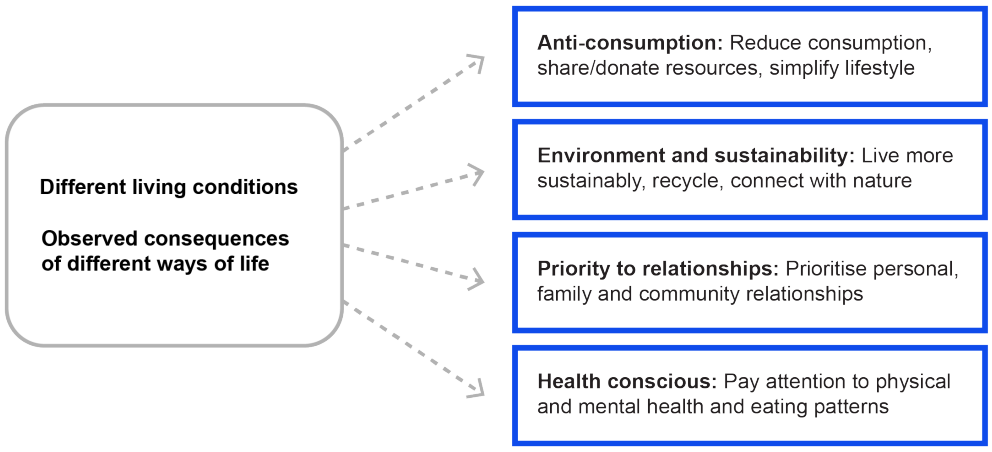
One of the most stable patterns of change associated with the volunteer assignment was participants making tangible lifestyle changes.[384] Across the past five years, around half the sample[385] has consistently reported lifestyle changes (new routines, practices, interests, or general re-orientations to a part of their day-to-day life) that they linked to experiences during their assignment.

The right of **Figure 18** summarises the four main types of lifestyle changes reported consistently across multiple time periods (T3-T5).[386] In general, these reflect participants' desire to enact practices aligned with new or strengthened values associated with relationships, the environment, community, and health. In all cases, participants identified practices or attitudes they were enacting in their lives now and which they attribute to experiences on their assignment. 'Anti-consumption' (six participants) and 'prioritising relationships' (seven participants) were most commonly reported at T5; these were also the changes that drew the most enthusiasm from participants as changes they had actively embraced in their lives.[387]

Some participants began living these lifestyles during their assignment and maintained them on returning home; others introduced them as they settled back in Australia during or after COVID lockdowns.[388] Some descriptions indicate a conscious 'project for living'[389] (notably, anti-consumption), while some seem to have been a less conscious re-prioritisation (e.g., stronger family orientation). Others reflected efforts to recreate an enjoyable lifestyle instigated during the assignment.[390] The desire to enact these lifestyle changes was a prominent (although often not the sole) determinant for a small number of participants to relocate geographically, including **Carly, whose case study is on page 126**. Carly, a recently retired *Veteran*, and her husband witnessed firsthand how the host community lived - simply, sustainably, and without material excess – and had several conversations with people about this and the impacts of climate change that she was able to observe during her time in-country. These proved to be quietly transformative and played a role in her later decision to relocate to a rural block to grow food and live the kind of life she first encountered during her assignment.

Some participants reporting lifestyle changes had expressed pre-assignment interest in certain issues (T1) that later manifested in lifestyle changes.[391] Thus, it is likely that involvement in the program amplified or inspired certain lifestyle changes rather than being the sole contributor.

Figure 18: Lifestyle changes attributed to program experiences (T3-T5)



Participants cited a number of individual experiences that provided the impetus for these changes. Broadly, these fell into two categories, shown at the left of **Figure 18**. Both relate in some way to the novelty of participants' in-country experiences. The first is **different living conditions** during their assignment. Conditions of relative scarcity were a feature of this - for instance, limited access to healthy food (→ health conscious) or open spaces (→ environment), separation from family and friends (→ priority to relationships), or living in relative privation with few household possessions (→ simple lifestyle).

The second is **vicarious exposure to the consequences of different ways of life and work.** These comprised both favourable comparisons with their past experiences, such as a host community's more communitarian values (→ priority to relationships) or HCNs' perceived happiness without material resources (→ anti-consumption), as well as less favourable comparisons, such as observing large tracts of litter, the detrimental effects of poor waste disposal (→ anti-consumption, environment and sustainability), or excessive alcohol consumption or mental health issues among expatriate communities (→ health conscious).

Lifestyle changes were reported across volunteer groups and life stages. More women than men reported lifestyle changes, although the strongest associations were with participants' development of international capabilities, especially 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities' associated with 'global mindset' (see Section 4.4.2.2).[392]

Finally, the many different direct and indirect financial implications of volunteering with the program have continued to influence participants in the years since their assignment ended. This was raised by a small but growing proportion of participants over the course of the study, mainly young *Launchers* and *Transitioners* who entered the program hoping their volunteer assignment would open a career. Participants linked their concerns about the detrimental financial implications to a combination of (unsalaried) volunteering, opportunity costs (including accumulating superannuation), and COVID's lasting impacts on global economic conditions. Three participants reported this as impinging on their post-assignment lifestyles in measurable ways (T3-T5). The box '**Financial insecurity before and after international volunteering**' on page 120 discusses some of the issues raised by participants.

Financial insecurity before and after international volunteering

Despite the decision to volunteer carrying financial costs for many participants, this was rarely raised at pre-assignment interviews (T1). Just a few participants raised the financial implications of volunteering when discussing their motivations or expectations associated with their assignment – e.g., identifying this time in their lives as suitable because of a lack of financial commitments ("*I'm a little bit financial now … less financial responsibilities, I can do this sort of thing now without too many headaches*", #03, T1), or when negotiating or choosing the assignment duration ("*I would've loved to stay longer, but because I have a mortgage and a life here, I couldn't afford to stay any longer*", #02, T1).

In contrast, one participant highlighted the relatively attractive financial support provided by the program compared to paid employment in some sectors in Australia – e.g., the stability of a long-term contract, relocation support, health insurance, and a stipend comparable with the cost of living. Some homeowners were able to generate rental income during their assignments. Nonetheless, 35 participants were forgoing regular income from paid work at T1 and 19 had resigned from a paid role solely to accept the assignment. Almost all lacked the security of a paying job to return to at the completion of their assignment.

In subsequent interviews, participants have more frequently raised issues of employment insecurity and financial wellbeing stemming from their involvement with the program. Uncertainty associated with the repatriation and COVID disruptions, local and international labour market changes, and rising costs of living (including housing) were major contributors to this at T3, and while the financial circumstances of some participants have improved ("*Financially, I've certainly caught up to where I want to be",* #19, T5), concerns persisted at T4 and T5 for some participants, like #29 who reported at different times:

> *"… it's left me in a more precarious situation. I'm living in rental accommodation, I've moved house 1-2-3 times in the last 12 months"* (#29, T4)

> *"My mortgage would be much lower. But I still don't consider [personal wealth] the most important thing in how you spend your time"* (#29, T5)

For others, the financial implications have emerged more recently ("*Now, in my late twenties, I guess I'm trying to plan my finances more in advance. And that's a newer thought that I maybe hadn't had before*", #14, T5).

Three participants experienced financial stress that has shaped their views of the program and their overall experiences. Several identified income as an important career consideration ("*I'm also needing to prioritise security, like financial security, for myself, and this job gives me that*", #07, T5). This includes those seeking careers in international development and other prosocial sectors:

> *"I think it's kind of sucky that there is no salary and super[annuation]. I think the reality is, because we do volunteering … financially, we're less better-off than had I just stayed in Australia. I think that's absolutely true. But the problem with the development world is that the career path is not linear. It's not like the corporate world. So, you almost have to do this to get into something else. So, I think we are financially impacted, and there are long-term ramifications. But I think a lot of us in the development world are prepared to pay that price"* (#53, T5)

Financial implications were regularly raised as a rationale for declining, not seeking, or deferring civic participation opportunities at T4 and T5, including in-country and remote volunteering ("*If I won the lottery, I'd be a volunteer for the rest of my life. I think it's fantastic*", #19, T5; "*If I feel financially set up, then yes, I'd do it again. But not now*", #46, T5)

7.5 Personal Relationships

The relational elements of the volunteer assignment were important and, for some, "*very surprising*" (#42, T5). In addition to the host-country relationships addressed in Section 4.3, the assignment's effects on two other groups of relationships have had the most sustained impact on participants' personal lives: their relationships with other volunteers (Section 7.5.1) and with family and friends (Section 7.5.2).[393]

7.5.1 Relationships with Other Volunteers

The strongest and most impactful new relationships that participants formed as a result of their involvement with the program were with their volunteer peers, primarily those they met through in-country VLJ activities while based in the same host country. Although volunteers entered their assignments at different life stages and with different motives, they completed their assignment with burgeoning personal (and sometimes professional) relationships with other volunteers, characterised by shared experiences and values, and incorporating different age groups, professions, and backgrounds. In this, these relationships now provide a genuine form of both bonding and bridging capital amongst former volunteers - they are tight, trust-based, and emotionally intense (bonding) while spanning age groups, life stages, geographies, and sectors in ways that generate broader social and professional connections.[394] Table 9 in Section 4.3.1 (page 35) summarises some of the features of these.

Although attrition of some relationships has occurred and the intensity and frequency of participants' contact with some volunteers has declined,[395] in the five years since the assignment, these relationships have remained the most resilient and provided volunteers with the greatest personal benefits. Forty-two (89%) continue to maintain meaningful relationships with one or more volunteers that they met during their assignment.[396] At T5, 30% identified volunteers as the stakeholder group that has had the most lasting impact on them; three identified their new relationships with volunteers as the main impact of their assignment ("*They're good mates. I think they're similar types, have similar interests and similar passions. I*

think it's probably the greatest thing I got from the volunteering program", #52, T5).[397] Eight identified other volunteers as among their best current friends at two or more interviews[398] and six continue to value close relationships with volunteers they met at previous assignments, some of which were over 20 years ago:

> *"One of my best friends - my 'best-best' friends - was a volunteer I met when I first volunteered many years ago … she was a year behind me and we clicked. And we've been friends, deep friends, since then. We go a long way back. That's profound … full and rich [relationships]. Volunteering's been quite an important part of my social life"* (#04, T5)

Even participants whose contact with other volunteers has declined view these relationships as a central part of their volunteer experience ("*They've been the people who've impacted me the most just in terms of friendships and being able to cultivate that feeling of being part of the community*", #37, T5).

The strongest volunteer-volunteer relationships are also geographically dispersed. While a shared geography was an important catalyst for developing these relationships – most strong connections were with volunteers from the same host country and were formed at ICOPs and strengthened at in-country VLJ activities - many are now inter-State and international ("*We've got a bunch of friends all over the world now as a result of our time there*", #12, T5; "*We're a very dispersed bunch, many of us are not in the same city, which is a real shame, because they're some of our closer friends*", #53, T5). Like other relationships, most are maintained mainly via social media, although several reunions with cohorts of in-country volunteers - including hosting and visiting interstate volunteers - have occurred. Two participants now live with volunteers they met through the program. Three have undertaken return visits to the host country with other volunteers. Two others have travelled abroad to attend weddings of former volunteer colleagues.

Assignment location was an important factor in participants' ability to develop relationships with other volunteers. Four volunteers in remote locations raised the difficulty, time, and costs associated with travelling to social events as barriers to their inclusion in networks of volunteers. One participant, assigned to a remote location, who now "*occasionally exchange[s] a few messages*" with other volunteers but who is "*not close with any of them*" (T5), addressed this challenge at multiple interviews, including T5:

> *"Q: What was it that made it hard [to form relationships with other volunteers] when you were in-country?*
>
> *A: I didn't have the money to travel. And because I was the only person in my town, and there were a lot of volunteers in [capital city] and a lot of volunteers in [major city], I think those of us who weren't there - the two or three of us who weren't there - we just got forgotten. They had a key group of people. All they had to do was say, 'Oh, I'm going down to the pub, do you want to come?' and everyone was there. Whereas for me to join that, I'd have to organise a bus trip and someone to pick me up, and all that kind of stuff. So that kind of thing was hard. I'd see stuff on social media when I was there, and they'd talk about, 'Remember when we went to the mud pits?', and I'd be like, 'Oh' …"* (#23, T5)

Participants' views on the reasons why their friendships with volunteers are valued and the benefits that these bring are in **the box below ('What makes volunteer networks so strong and so valuable?')**.

As the box shows, the program's pre-assignment and in-country structures act as important catalysts for the formation of these relationships, as well as touchpoints that support their development over time. If the experiences of participants in this study are indicative of broader patterns, VLJ activities like the ICOP represent a critical juncture for relationship formation. These are places where volunteers will meet lifelong friends who will help them find work after their assignment ends, advise them on personal and career decisions, sign their petitions, sleep on their sofa, share their reminiscences - and, in some cases, attend their wedding.

What makes volunteer networks so strong and so valuable?

- Shared understanding of experiences and challenges that others do not understand.
- Shared interests and values (like-minded people).
- Intensity of shared experience (challenging circumstances, limited resources).
- Access and bonding provided by VLJ activities, especially ICOPs.
- Tightness of in-country networks (regularity and intimacy of contact).
- Support given to and received from other volunteers during and after the assignment.

What benefits do volunteer networks provide?

- Access to career and work opportunities.
- Exchanging information of interest relating to the host country, international development, or other shared interests.
- Better understanding of the program's broader impacts (beyond their own experiences).
- Receiving and giving professional or emotional advice and support.
- New friendships, including across age categories and at times of life when developing new friendships may be difficult.

7.5.2 Relationships with Families and Friends

Although less widespread, relationships with partners, families and friends were also shaped in enduring ways. As with other relationships impacted by the volunteer assignment, in most instances these impacts were reciprocal - the assignment influenced some participants' relationships with families and friends, but these relationships also shaped participants' experiences during the assignment.

7.5.2.1 Relationships with Accompanying Partners

Sixteen participants (34%) were accompanied by a partner (mainly *Veterans* and *Non-working Partners*).[399] Increasingly reported in the latter stages of the study (T4-T5) is the way that participants found their experiences volunteering influenced these relationships in positive ways.[400] These were reported by volunteers - ranging from *Launchers* in relatively new relationships to *Veterans* in longer-term relationships who had completed multiple volunteer assignments with their partner - and independently by both the volunteer and their *Non-working Partner* where both participated in this study. One described the assignment as "*a big part of our relationship … it's the sediment that sits on the bottom of the foundations of the relationship*" (#12, T4).

In general, participants believe two sets of experiences strengthened their relationships: (i) being able to share memories created during the volunteer assignment, and (ii) being able to support each other to overcome challenges encountered in-country, including cultural, social, relational, and health.[401] One *Non-working Partner* described this as:

> *"… being able to debrief at the end of the day … we'd sit out on the porch and have a coffee or tea and just talk about each other's day. If there was an issue, [my partner] would just run it past me. … [on one occasion] suddenly it became counselling … it just got to the point where we made the decision to contact the AVI in-country team to [intervene]"* (#50, T5)

These participants often used plural pronouns when describing in-country challenges, achievements, or plans (T2), and spoke of the benefits and differences that being a 'team' created. A participant who had previously volunteered alone believed that "*you're a stronger team but you're not as close with other volunteers*" as her previous assignment (#53, T2). She believes that in-country experiences where it "*really forces you to operate as a team*" (T5) have been beneficial since the birth of their first child in 2023 ("*It helps with that long-term family planning, you know, 'If we do this [together], then we can do this as a family'*", #53, T5). A *Veteran*, reflecting on the five years since the assignment ended, observed:

> *"I think [my learning about the culture] is a combination of the [in-country] experience and my deep thinking about it afterwards … and talking to [my partner], too. I mean, it's great that he shares this experience because quite often I can just talk to him about something and reflect. He's a great listener. I can articulate ideas, and he can say, 'Well, was it really like that or wasn't it more like this?' … And then I can recollect a lot more clearly when I talk to him. So having [him] with me has been an asset in my growth as a volunteer"* (#49, T5)

7.5.2.2 Relationships with Other Family and Friends

Prior to their assignment, all but a few participants reported that their family and friends were supportive of their decision to take up their assignment (T1). Some also reported positive reinforcement after communicating the decision to friends ("*I think I had about 100 [Facebook] likes and about 50 comments from people all over the world … just really lovely messages of support",* #24, T1). The program's reputation, legitimacy (e.g., government funding), and particular support mechanisms (e.g., security, insurance) were important to family and friends; one volunteer reported that she "*told my parents word for word all the stuff (which was covered at the PDB) … that was a big relief for them*" (#23, T1).

Most participants maintained regular contact with family and friends in Australia during their assignment and valued this as a way to share the experience and cope with the ups and downs of life on assignment. One prepared a detailed "*diary every week*" that he "*sent back to the family*" (#48, T5), and which "*opened up a conversation, a lot of people will now talk [to me] about it"* (T3).[402] Another described how having "*constant contact"* with family and friends helped "*keep me sane*" and gave her a new appreciation of their role in her life (#47, T2). However, another described not sharing negative experiences with family and friends "*because everyone's immediate reaction is [to ask her to] come home"* (#02, T2).

Several participants hosted family and friends as visitors during the assignment. Although none of the visitors, to our knowledge, have subsequently taken up a volunteer assignment, participants believe the visits created interest in volunteering among some friends and family. Other visitors developed friendships with HCNs that have continued ("*My daughter has befriended that family. They're always asking, 'How's [volunteer name]?'*", #48, T5).[403] A small number report these visits have led family members to take pride or interest in their assignment and better relationships because of this.[404]

For others, the impact of the assignment on relationships was mixed. A few reported natural attrition of pre-assignment friendships because of their extended absence ("*From just the experience itself, I think I did change friendship groups. Not all of them, but some … it's just the time that had passed and the distance … [COVID] lockdown, loss of connection. I found new friends so it's not [bad] - it's just different*", #30, T5). Others believe that the assignment changed them in ways that strengthened these relationships:

> *"I think I appreciate my family and friends more. I feel more grateful for them … I feel like some of my friends express their gratitude for our friendship more, but that may be because I express my gratitude for our friendship, so it's reciprocated. I'm not sure. I just feel like they value my friendship, or they express that they value my friendship more than before the assignment, and I probably do the same"* (#06, T5).

One participant's assignment fractured a relationship with an immediate family member, who had been strongly supportive of their entry to the program:

> *"I experienced a lot of pressure from [a family member] to do the program because [they] thought this is what you need to get your career going. And there was, I would say, pressure bordering on coercion. And I think after I got back, because of the really massive toll that it took on my health, I was quite unwell for a while, and I think that caused a lot of strain in our relationship … I pretty much have almost no contact with [them] now"* (T5)

For two other participants, an evolution in personal beliefs and values - in both cases, directly linked to their deep immersion in the host culture - harmed relationships with some family members in Australia, at least temporarily. One described their family not "*understand(ing) most of the things that I do … the sense that I wasn't that person and then I went to [the host country] and came back a changed person*" (#12, T4). The other reported "*quite a big shift in perspective, it was a very impactful, intense experience and I think a lot of people who I was close with before that, I get the impression that they see me as quite boring now … so all the change I see as really positive, but not everyone around me has seen it that way*" (#43, T4).

These cases of relational fracture were notable but uncommon. For the great majority of participants, relationships with family and friends proved resilient and, in several cases, were deepened by the experience. Where strain did occur, it reflected the depth of personal transformation that participants had experienced. The volunteer assignment changed participants, some in major ways. The experiences of those for whom this proved hardest reinforce the value of structured reintegration support, particularly where significant shifts in values or wellbeing were involved, an issue raised in the following section.

7.6 Key Implications

Implication 7.1: Recognising the distinctive features and value of personal change among volunteers

Although many participants were motivated by personal factors such as adventure or fulfilment, few identified personal change as a primary goal or expected outcome at T1. Yet some of the most substantial and enduring changes to emerge across the study were personal in nature. These changes shared distinctive characteristics: they were often difficult to articulate but relatively stable, they increased in salience over time for some participants, and they sometimes arose from the interaction between the volunteer assignment and external events and circumstances. These features draw attention to the contextual, temporal, geographic, and social conditions that impact the changes during and after the assignment.

Many of the changes were both transformational and sustained, suggesting they may be highly impactful on volunteers' lives. This is notable as so many volunteers' motivations were primarily professional or career-oriented. The program would benefit from considering how it supports and recognises these dimensions of the volunteer experience.

Related to this is the way these changes created a prosocial spillover, with volunteers frequently directing new values, behaviours, and orientations towards family, friends, communities, and the environment. This spillover points to a potential multiplier effect, where these personal changes ripple outward to influence those around volunteers.[405]

Although the forms and impacts of this spillover were not explored in detail, they point to an additional, if indirect, element of the program's value proposition that is not currently captured in its MEL activities but which may represent a meaningful discretionary contribution that volunteers make through their engagement with the program (see Sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.4). Expanding MEL frameworks to capture these broader prosocial impacts (e.g., case studies, future VIS, or long-term follow-ups with a sub-sample of volunteers) would allow the program to more fully identify the value it generates beyond the volunteers themselves.

Implication 7.2: Helping to create assignment conditions that support personal development

As with other changes reported by participants, positive personal changes arose from a combination of assignment conditions that provided opportunities for growth. These conditions - broadly characterised as stretch-based (challenge and novelty) and relational and values-based (meaning and connections)[406] - are consistent with the conditions identified in research as learning-rich or highly developmental,[407] and with the conditions associated with participants' professional development (Section 6.4). The configuration of volunteer assignments and in-country support that currently forms the backbone of the program, therefore, appears well placed to create opportunities for personal growth and development during the assignment.

These conditions, however, carry risks. The same features that fostered growth, particularly challenge and novelty, were also associated with stress, isolation, and anxiety that impeded performance and learning for some participants. Insufficient meaning and connection in volunteers' roles were similarly viewed as detrimental in some assignments and were a factor in at least one of the most acutely negative experiences documented in this study (Addison, Section 3.4). While the optimal mix of these is unique for each volunteer, there is likely value in trying to balance these conditions to ensure assignments provide sufficient challenge

in the right combination to stretch participants, novelty to disrupt routines and assumptions, meaning to ensure participants view their contributions as important, and connection with others.

In light of this, efforts to support volunteers' personal development more intentionally, without compromising other program priorities, may represent a practical way to enhance both volunteer wellbeing and program outcomes. These efforts might include:

- Prior to the assignment, helping volunteers and POs understand the conditions conducive to personal development, and preparing both to recognise and make use of stretch experiences.
- During assignment design and role negotiation, attending explicitly to the balance of challenge, novelty, meaning, and connection in volunteers' roles, including helping volunteers connect their contributions to broader program goals or frameworks like the SDGs.
- At key points across the assignment, monitoring whether these conditions have become unbalanced, particularly in the early phases, during role renegotiation, or at times of significant challenge (and intervening where appropriate).
- Ensuring VLJ activities create regular opportunities for structured reflection on personal changes, particularly during or after periods of significant challenge or transition.

Implication 7.3: Being proactive in supporting health, wellbeing, and financial vulnerabilities

The health and wellbeing impacts of volunteering were substantial for some participants, both during and after the assignment. Although the COVID pandemic created unique conditions for this cohort, other findings suggest that international volunteer assignments present recurring moments of psychological vulnerability. During assignments, experiences of social isolation and physical ill-health were commonly reported. Returning after an assignment may be an especially challenging time,[408] given the depth of some volunteers' cultural immersion. Career uncertainty and financial precarity may characterise both stages, while sustained exposure to bereavement (reported by a third of participants) may be especially acute when volunteers establish deep ties with communities facing greater health and safety risks. Liminality, transition, uncertainty, and disruption, therefore, may be prominent features across the volunteer lifecycle, including while awaiting deployment.[409] These vulnerabilities co-exist with evidence that the personal growth outcomes participants reported, such as greater happiness and satisfaction, more intentional lifestyle decisions, and increased resilience, are associated with certain types of wellbeing and psychological capital.[410] Supporting volunteers through moments of vulnerability may therefore not just reduce harm but also create conditions in which these longer-term benefits are more likely to emerge.

Program support that addresses these concerns could include:

- Before the assignment, preparing volunteers for social and psychological challenges by normalising liminality, uncertainty, and disruption, and by setting realistic expectations about the challenges of establishing meaningful social connection, particularly in remote or isolated settings.
- Before the assignment, providing transparent and realistic information about the financial implications of volunteering, including its opportunity costs (e.g., foregone superannuation contributions and income), the long-term financial ramifications, and the uncertainties of post-assignment employment.[411]
- During the assignment, ensuring volunteers in remote or isolated locations have equitable access to in-country networks, support structures, and VLJ activities, and providing proactive and targeted support at moments of particular vulnerability, including bereavement, which volunteers may experience when working in communities facing greater health and safety risks.
- After the assignment, continuing to offer structured psychological and practical support proactively and not just in acute cases, recognising that re-entry is a period of particular vulnerability for volunteers and those around them. This could include proactive outreach at key milestones after an assignment, peer connection with recently returned volunteers, and targeted support for those whose assignments were interrupted or who are experiencing financial precarity or career uncertainty on return.

Implication 7.4: Facilitating structured reflection to promote and consolidate personal development

Many participants found it difficult to articulate personal changes, and their appreciation of these changes evolved over time. This difficulty may partly reflect the relative absence of frameworks for thinking about personal development compared to other types of change (e.g., professional development), where structured tools and language are more readily available. It may also compound feelings of disorientation and so contribute to the psychological vulnerability some participants experienced (see Implication 7.3), particularly following disruption or repatriation. Conversely, the assignment conditions participants encountered (Implication 7.2) appear especially conducive to reflection and sensemaking, suggesting that structured opportunities to reflect may be valuable in this context.

Research on narrative sensemaking and reflective practice highlights the benefits of structured opportunities to verbalise and reappraise experience, which can serve as catalysts for learning and growth, particularly following complex or emotionally demanding experiences.[412] Consistent with this, a large number of participants reported benefiting from the interpretive interviews conducted as part of this study, describing them as valuable opportunities to make sense of their experiences and the changes they had undergone.

The program's current support mechanisms and VLJ activities appear well-placed to embed structured reflection more deliberately across the volunteer lifecycle.[413] The frameworks of learning outcomes and change identified in this study (including **Figure 17**) may have particular value as tools to guide volunteers' reflections on their personal development and the conditions in which that development occurred.[414]

Specific opportunities to encourage structured reflection might include:

- During the assignment, incorporating guided reflection prompts into VLJ activities that help volunteers name and articulate what they are learning personally, drawing on the personal change frameworks developed through this research as scaffolds.
- At key transition points (including pre-return, post-return and follow-up intervals), formalising structured reflection-on-action conversations that help volunteers process challenges, identify transferable learning, and connect their experiences to their current and future lives.
- Using end-of-assignment briefings to reinforce the strategic impacts of the program so volunteers can better recognise the broader contributions that their volunteer assignments have made, and thus better understand its tangible and strategic impacts.
- After the assignment, creating alumni engagement opportunities that enable volunteers to continue processing and building on their experiences in the years that follow (e.g., peer conversations, written reflection prompts, or alumni events).

Implication 7.5: Recognising and investing in volunteer-volunteer relationships as developmental assets

The relationships formed with other volunteers were characterised by shared experience, mutual trust, and deep connection that many participants described as among the most significant outcomes of their assignment. Volunteer networks also functioned as sources of professional advice, career opportunities, emotional support, and ongoing civic engagement, making them assets that extend past the assignment. This is consistent with studies showing that extended time abroad in contexts of cultural immersion and personal challenge can produce meaningful shifts in values and worldview, and shared exposure to these experiences can create bonds of unusual depth and longevity.[415]

Importantly, the structures the program puts in place during the assignment lay the foundations for these networks to continue to generate personal, professional, and civic value for many years after an assignment. In-country VLJ activities were critical junctures for these relationships to form. The program's alumni structures and ongoing touchpoints are one way to help keep 'ICOP cohorts' of volunteers connected to each other and to the program.

These volunteer peer networks can serve as informal sources of wellbeing support (Implication 7.3), reduce isolation that can impede learning and performance (Implication 7.2), and provide trusted spaces for the kind of reflective conversation that supports sensemaking and personal development (Implication 7.4). In this sense, continuing to invest in volunteer-volunteer relationships is a useful way to increase the program's outcomes across multiple areas.

A significant equity issue is also worth highlighting. Volunteers in remote or rural locations were disadvantaged in their ability to form and sustain relationships due to the costs and logistics of travel to shared events and VLJ activities. For these volunteers, geographic isolation compounded other vulnerabilities and, in some cases, resulted in lasting exclusion from networks that others took for granted. Addressing this inequity - through dedicated outreach, subsidised travel, virtual participation options, or structured social events in rural locations - is one way to ensure that the relational benefits of the program are more equitably distributed.

Specific actions the program might consider include:

- Before the assignment, exploring ways volunteers can share relevant content with those closest to them to build realistic expectations about the personal changes that they may experience.
- During the assignment, ensuring that VLJ activities (particularly ICOPs) are structured to maximise relationship formation across the cohort, and that volunteers in remote locations have equitable access to these activities through logistical and financial support.
- Across the assignment lifecycle, providing regular prompts and check-ins that encourage volunteers to maintain and invest in peer relationships.
- After the assignment, sustaining alumni structures that enable volunteers to continue drawing on peer networks for support and reflection, recognising that these relationships can become more valued over time.

Volunteer stories: Carly

Planting seeds abroad and at home

Reasons for Volunteering

A recently retired *Veteran*, Carly started her assignment with a desire to "*give back to society, it's my passion for social justice … I've always wanted to volunteer overseas, it was one of my retirement plans*" (T1). She believed that her "*very privileged life*" had made her take "*many things for granted"* and that with "*migration crises and refugee crises and climate crises … we really need to support people to be able to live lives in their own countries*" (T1). At the time, Carly had few plans beyond her volunteer assignment, but saw herself being "*back in [her home capital city], age isn't on our side … perhaps continuing to volunteer, building on what I've already been doing"* (T1).

Encountering Inequality and Climate Change

Carly and her partner were based in a Pacific island capital city. The assignment exposed them to some of the "*disadvantages and the inequalities in the world … the contrast between where we live and how our neighbours live, without sanitation and power*" (T2). She reported a number of major changes in perspective arising from her experience, including a better understanding of climate change sparked by "*some really fantastic experiences talking to people when travelling … one of the places we went to, they grew crops, the ground is too hot, there's too much water, and [the crops] go rotten in the ground before they can pull them out*" (T2). In discussing how this impacted her, she said:

> *I actually see climate change affecting these people, you know, they talk to us about climate change affecting [them] – these are poor people who live off what they can grow, many of them, and they live without power, they live without sanitation, and climate change is affecting how they can grow their crops, what they sell. I've seen poverty and hardship … but this is another step beyond that (T2)*

At the time, Carly noted that "*it makes me angry. It makes me feel, what can I do? If I go out on the streets and march against climate change, yes, I go and march for justice for refugees … I do try to be a voice where I can, but …*" (T2).

Returning Home and Reassessing the Everyday

Carly continued supporting her PO (including a formal remote assignment) in the year following her assignment. She also "*put a lot of energy into the Twitter political sphere*" (T3), repeating that "*I'm ashamed of the way we behave in the world in our political sphere … I'm ashamed of our stance on climate change*" (T3). While pessimistic ("*I fear for my grandchildren's future*", T3) she believed that "*seeing that you can live a simple life, you don't have to have all the trimmings*" (T2) during her assignment helped her cope through the COVID pandemic because "*I think [the host city] prepared us for this … we don't actually miss [things] in lockdown … we don't miss going out for a coffee, we don't miss being able to go out for a meal. It's not important … so personally, perhaps the experience, because of what we've done, has helped me cope with having a more simple lifestyle*" (T3). As an example of this, she recounted a particular experience *"the first week I was back*" from the volunteer assignment when:

> *"I went up to Kmart … I had to get out of the shop. I couldn't stand all the lights, the brightness, the affluence, the wealth, the self, the privilege. I had to get out; I couldn't cope with it. So personally, I think yes, I've changed my view on many things"* (T3)

Choosing a Simpler Life

Since 2021, Carly and her partner have relocated from a capital city to a large rural block. She explained:

> *"This is partly because of [the host country], partly for our view on life. We just wanted … some space around us and we could just live a basic, simple life. We're growing our own vegetables, I'm revegetating the garden … we're doing food production and native vegetation … we saw how simply people lived in the [host country] and how contented they were and I think it's just an accumulation of so many things over time from the [host country] and over life because climate change and the environment are huge concerns and we can't change it, but we can do our little bit"* (T4)

Carly describes the major impact of her time as a volunteer as "*making me less materialistic … focusing on what we need rather than what we want*" (T5). She believes the decision "*to move to a simpler life*" came from "*seeing daily the people, the simplicity of life. It was lovely, actually. You don't need all these material things … it just touched my heart*" (T4). She joined a local walking group and volunteers locally ("*the community we're in is quite an active community*", T4).

A Lasting Legacy

Carly's desire to continue living "*a basic, simple life … not such a cluttered lifestyle*" (T4) has remained intact. She and her partner still live "*a very contented, very simple life*" (T5) with chickens, gardening, and small-scale food production, and she remains clear that the move continues to be connected to her volunteer experience: "*Yep … if in the [host country] people can live this simple life, we can live it"* (T5). She also linked her observations of climate vulnerability in the host country more directly to her present life, reflecting that she and her partner were now "*learning at the moment all about climate change that people over there have already experienced*" (T5) - through drought and heat at home.

While her direct contact with the PO and host country has declined, Carly still sees the experience as deeply formative ("*Loved it! I learnt a lot from it",* T5). According to Carly, her partner believes the assignment "*had a huge impact*" on them both (T4). Five years on from the assignment, she takes pride in her volunteer experience, believing that "*you might plant some seeds and do some things, but it possibly won't develop until later in people's lives or in a country"* (T5). In this sense, a visible legacy of Carly's assignment is the changes it helped consolidate in how she and her partner now live at home, not just what she contributed during her time in-country.

PART IV

Conclusion and Distilled Recommendations

8 Conclusion and Distilled Recommendations

8.1 Conclusions

This report has tracked the personal and professional journeys of 55 participants from the commencement of their volunteer assignments in 2019 to five years after their return (2025).

Across five waves of interviews and four outcome areas - (i) global literacy and connections, (ii) civic participation and international development literacy, (iii) career progression and professional capabilities, and (iv) personal circumstances and capabilities - the findings offer one of the most detailed longitudinal accounts of the impacts of international volunteering on volunteers to date.

The study's strongest overarching finding is that for the large majority of participants, involvement in the program produced genuine and valuable impacts, some of which grew in value over the study. For most participants, their volunteer assignment was not a temporary 'meaningful break'[416] or a bounded period of 'doing good' that ended at repatriation. Relationships, learning, and civic commitments formed during the assignment continued to evolve and generate value for volunteers, POs, host communities, and others after volunteers returned. In this sense, the experience is better understood as transnational rather than purely international in nature (i.e., involving ongoing flows of people, relationships, and knowledge across borders). The 55 volunteer assignments reported here were the start of a collection of ongoing exchanges, in which volunteers were shaped by their host countries as much as they sought to contribute to them. The connections and capabilities volunteers developed in-country continued to inform how they worked, contributed, and engaged with the world long after the formal assignment ended, often in ways they had not anticipated.

At the same time, outcomes were uneven and the conditions producing the strongest positive impacts - well-designed roles, prepared and committed POs, immersive placements, and targeted support - were not uniformly present. For a minority of participants, the assignment produced limited professional benefit, or left lasting personal costs that the program was unable to adequately address. The factors most commonly associated with weaker outcomes - poor role fit, vague position descriptions, inadequate in-country support, and the absence of authentic post-assignment care - are within the program's capacity to address.

8.2 Distilled Recommendations

Consolidating the results reported in Sections 3-7, we see opportunities for the program to align volunteer support and program management activities across the full volunteer lifecycle to further volunteers' personal and professional development.

Table 18 distils the various action items or recommendations that follow from these findings, collated from the implications presented in the report's main sections. **Table 18** organises these into thematic areas and across three broad phases of the volunteer lifecycle (pre-assignment, during assignment, and post-assignment).

Not all recommendations will be compatible with the program's direction or resourcing capacity, and it will be important to determine which represent worthwhile investments and which are not a good use of resources. More pertinently, some may distract from volunteers' and the program's main purpose of supporting locally-led capacity strengthening within POs. The program should therefore be deliberate in this assessment, ensuring that decisions about how to operationalise the study's findings are weighed against the extent to which they might limit, rather than enhance, the program's core function, and focusing on action items that are most pressing, pertinent, and practical within the program's current operating environment.

Table 18: Program recommendations by volunteer lifecycle phase

Phase and area	Recommendations
Pre-assignment	
Assignment and role design	• Treat position description accuracy, PO readiness, and volunteer-PO-role 'fit' as important quality safeguards. • Continue designing structures that provide opportunities for collaboration and 'counterpart-like' interactions with HCNs where appropriate, and that provide the right balance between novelty, challenge, meaning, and connections. • Ensure realistic role previews are available to applicants and candidates, including pre-assignment contact with a range of PO personnel and/or current or former volunteers.

Volunteer preparation and support	• Normalise liminality, uncertainty, and disruption as features of the volunteer lifecycle. • Communicate financial implications and opportunity costs. • Set realistic expectations about professional benefits and career risks (including where assignments may be perceived favourably or sceptically). • Highlight assignments as potential precursors to further professional and personal development and help volunteers be attuned to these. • Provide guidance on role boundaries and risks of extra-role (discretionary) activities.
During assignment	
Assignment and role design	• Monitor and correct poor volunteer-PO-role 'fit' early and support role renegotiation where needed. • Attend to individual volunteers' roles for the balance of challenge, novelty, meaning, and connection. • Where feasible, assist POs to maintain stable key contacts during assignments. • Support POs and HCNs to develop capabilities that make volunteer relationships mutually developmental. • Expand MEL frameworks to capture prosocial spillover and discretionary contributions across all assignment phases.
Volunteer learning journey activities	• Structure VLJ activities to maximise relationship formation and ensure equitable access for volunteers in remote locations. • Recognise ICOPs as foundations for post-assignment engagement, not just in-country function. • Incorporate guided reflection into VLJ activities using scaffolds like the frameworks in this report (e.g., to help volunteers understand personal change or assess their fit with sector norms and values). • Offer optional structured socialisation opportunities for volunteers seeking international development careers (e.g., realistic views of structures, constraints, and career pathways).
Volunteer support	• Monitor assignment conditions and provide proactive support at moments of vulnerability. • Help volunteers connect their contributions and their PO's outputs to broader goals (program, SDGs), including at end-of-assignment briefings. • Expand network formation opportunities such as cross-sector introductions, cross-PO communities, and 'professional penguin' relationships to support volunteers' domestic currency. • Help volunteers recognise and articulate soft and intercultural capability development using scaffolds like the frameworks in this report. • Use alumni volunteers to support in-country or incoming cohorts. • Provide regular prompts encouraging investment in peer relationships.
Post-assignment	
Assignment and role design	• Facilitate sharing by ICMTs of host-country news and events with alumni and POs to prompt re-engagement. • Encourage POs to document impacts of continuing volunteer relationships in their development impact measures. • Where feasible, reduce technological and resource barriers for volunteers and HCNs (e.g., accessible social media presence, recommended platforms per host country, digital literacy).
Volunteer learning journey activities	• Create alumni engagement opportunities that support continued sensemaking and sustain host-country connections, engagement, and learning. • Use alumni structures to keep ICOP cohorts connected to maintain the strongest volunteer-volunteer networks. • Advise alumni on presenting professional experiences in different hiring contexts (sector, employer type). • Normalise delayed career benefits as a recognised pattern for some volunteers after their return.
Post-assignment support	• Treat repatriation as a vulnerable period and provide proactive support for volunteers experiencing high levels of vulnerability (early return, assignments with poor 'fit', significant career uncertainty). • Provide differentiated career support by volunteer type (e.g., *Launcher, Enhancer, Transitioner*). • Connect returning volunteers with civic opportunities aligned to their experiences and interests (INGOs, advocacy, governance).
Program development	• Use 'positive realist' alumni as mentors, advocates, and program reviewers. • Recognise and profile bridge-building and transnational contributions via alumni channels. • Evaluate VLJ activities for their role in shaping the quality and direction of volunteers' post-assignment contributions (including civic).

Endnotes

Endnotes

[1] Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Inception Report (April 2019), Table 3, Section 3.4.4.

[2] More details regarding interpretative, longitudinal qualitative interviews as a research technique, including strengths and weaknesses of the approach, are included in the LSAV (Phase One) Inception Report (April 2019). Also see: Fee, A. (2025). Using longitudinal qualitative interviews to advance human resource management scholarship: A scoping review, *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, *63*(4), e70039; Hermanowicz, J.C. (2013). The longitudinal qualitative interview, *Qualitative Sociology*, 36, 189-208; Saldaña, J. (2003). *Longitudinal Qualitative Research: Analyzing Change through Time*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

[3] The study's recruitment and engagement strategy is outlined in Section 3.2.1, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019) and Section 3.4, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Inception Report (April 2019).

[4] One hundred and forty-four volunteers attended the four PDBs at which participants were recruited in 2019: 01-03 May, 22-24 May, 12-14 June and 03-05 July.

[5] The retention rate was well above the rate anticipated at the study's outset. Of the eight respondents who commenced the study (T1) but were not interviewed at T5, five were unable to be contacted, one passed away, and two advised that personal circumstances prevented their participation at this time. Respondent attrition was not correlated with any demographic or assignment features, although the proportion discontinuing who had completed their assignment prior to enforced COVID repatriations (50%) is larger than the sample average (25%). That is, respondents no longer in the study at T5 tended to finish or depart their volunteer assignment earlier than those who remained in the study.

[6] Statistical comparisons showing the study to be representative of recent program volunteers can be found in Section 3.2.3, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019). Analysis of the participants leaving the LSAV since it commenced (n = 8) reveal no significant differences between them and remaining participants on demographic or assignment features.

[7] Analysis for this classification of volunteer types was undertaken in Phase One of the study based on T1 interview data and through discussions with participants at subsequent interviews. Details of the development of this classification can be found in Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019) and Fee, A., Devereux, P., Everingham, P. & Allum, C. (2025). Integrating international development volunteering with a meaningful career: Australian development volunteers in the Asia-Pacific, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 08997640251386775.

[8] A copy of the online survey is included as Attachment 7 in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Inception Report (April 2019). The survey was used to reduce the length of interviews.

[9] Sample copies of the full interview schedules used at each wave of data collection and the foundations of these can be found in the reports from these phases in 2019, 2020, 2022 and 2024.

[10] Interview transcripts were stored using protocols approved by UTS Human Research Ethics Committee and consistent with UTS "Guidelines for the Management of Research Data."

[11] Average interview transcript length: T1: 8093 words, T2: 10699 words, T3: 11429 words, T4: 8303 words, T5: 7746 words. Average interview duration: T1: 58 minutes, T2: 73 minutes, T3: 79 minutes, T4: 56 minutes, T5: 54 minutes.

[12] A summarised version of the draft of this report was provided to participants for comment on 14 April 2026. Responses were received from seven participants. The full text of the seven responses received are: (**1).** My reflections on the LSAV Report as a Veteran Volunteer and Four Time Participant: Having taken part in this longitudinal study and having completed four Australian Volunteers Program assignments over my career, reading this summary felt validating. It captures many of the realities that volunteers experience—some uplifting, some challenging, all deeply human. I feel that the LSAV report captures the breadth of volunteering. One of the observations in the report: "Some important impacts became more, not less, visible over the study period." - From my experience, this rings true. The deepest shifts—how we think, how we relate across cultures, how we lead—don't necessarily appear during the assignment. They emerge later, shaped by reflection, new roles, and ongoing relationships. I appreciated that the study recognised this temporal dimension rather than treating the assignment as a discrete event. Relationships as the Real Legacy: The report notes that: "The strongest, most lasting and most beneficial volunteer HCN bonds occur with PO colleagues with whom participants worked closely and intensively" Across my four assignments, this has been the constant. The technical work matters, but the real legacy is relational. Some of my closest professional collaborators today are people I met in-country years ago. Those ties have outlasted job changes, organisational restructures, and even the pandemic. They are the quiet, enduring threads of development work. Alignment and Role Quality Matter More Than Anything: The study's emphasis on alignment—between volunteer expertise, role design, and partner organisation readiness—reflects what many of us have learned through experience. When these elements line up, the assignment becomes a powerful platform for contribution and growth. When they don't, even the most seasoned volunteer can feel underutilised or ineffective. The report's line that: "Being well utilised and productive are essential parts of the volunteer experience" captures something fundamental. I didn't volunteer to fill space; I volunteered to apply my expertise learnt over time in meaningful ways. Even when the assignment criteria [sic] was different in-country I was fortunate to adapt to the changes and contribute to the PO objectives. The Harder Stories Deserve Attention - The cases of Addison and Dylan were difficult to read, but necessary. Their experiences highlight what happens when expectations, support, or role clarity break down. Addison's description of: "to be doing something full time but to feel like we're not really contributing to anything" these experiences are troubling, and unfortunately do not appear to be isolated. Dylan's description of "smoke and mirrors" volunteering is confronting. They make one point unmistakably clear: strong cultural and personal relationships can't compensate for structural failures that leave lasting damage to volunteers' wellbeing and their trust in the program. A Mature, Nuanced Understanding of Development I was encouraged to see the report describe participants' evolving outlook as a form of: "positive realist" This is exactly the mindset I arrived with—and one that others develop through experience. It balances hope with humility, recognising both the value and the limits of development work. It's a perspective the program should actively cultivate. Looking Forward - Overall, the report reflects a program capable of producing profound, long-lasting impacts professionally, personally, and civically—when the conditions are right. It also acknowledges, candidly, where the system falls short. As someone who has volunteered four times and participated in this study, I see this report as an important step. It honours the depth of volunteers' experiences, including the difficult ones, and it offers a roadmap for

strengthening the program so that future volunteers—of every type—can thrive. (**2).** Suggested Improvements: Reads clearly and covers a wide range of experiences, many with a common thread. Other comments: Thank you for your input into this. Hopefully something positive will come from the findings. Did the report address all relevant aspects of the personal & professional impacts of volunteering? Yes – comprehensively. How clear was the draft final report? 5.00 (**3).** So great to see this crossing the finish line after you've put in so much work. It's a really great read. I'm thankful for our chats over the years, especially in the dark days of the lockdowns. (**4).** Suggested Improvements: N.A. Other comments: - Did the report address all relevant aspects of the personal & professional impacts of volunteering? Yes – comprehensively. How clear was the draft final report? 5.00 (**5).** This looks great to me! No comments. Great work on pulling this all together. Looking forward to seeing the final report. (**6).** Thanks for sharing. This was a great read. No feedback from me, but just wanted to say thanks again, it was great to participate - I can't remember if I ever said it before or not, but doing the interviews after returning home added an extra layer of depth to the experience overall. I don't think I would have reflected so much otherwise! So thank you for your time, care and effort throughout the study. (**7).** Thanks for the copy of the report. I had a quick read and seems good. I have had particularly good experiences with all my assignments. The report provides a broader perspective of both good and not-so-good experiences for other volunteers. I have seen this firsthand where other volunteers have had significant issues. As your report has identified, issues have related to the inability to adapt to sometimes not so accurate Position Descriptions, changing roles once in-country, unreal expectations and inability to adapt to changing expectations from POs, lack of support from the POs, inability to adapt to the cultural environments, and difficulties during unexpected repatriations (such as during the Covid-19 period). I expect these are outlined in more detail in the final report, since they are great learnings for the Program to take on board and adapt their approach. The more general challenges also relate to capability building and ensuring sustainability when the Volunteers complete their assignment.

[13] Although VIS respondents are broadly representative of the program's alumni volunteer cohort on data available for comparison, they were significantly older than the program's typical volunteer cohort (e.g., being twice as likely to be ≥ 60 years old and four times less likely to be < 40 years old) and more likely to have been completed by volunteers whose most recent assignment was in-country (66%) rather than remote (26%) or hybrid (8%). The most notable under-represented groups of respondents in the VIS were respondents under 40 years of age and respondents completing remote/hybrid rather than in-country assignments.

[14] Although comprising a small number of overall reflections, examples of some of the less favourable responses reported by participants are: (i) Challenges experienced during the assignment: "When people ask me about it now, what I do say is that I had a really good time in general. But it was very challenging in terms of the work and the culture and expectations, I guess. It is something that I recommend to people, but I guess being aware of different placements and the individual circumstances of each assignment. I think when I look back, sometimes I don't see all the challenges that I went through. It's kind of like, overall positive" (#30); (ii) The lack of closure created by the abrupt repatriation: "It still feels like last year. It was a very abrupt ending because of COVID. I never really got that closure, so it still feels relatively recent. I'm really glad I did that" (#20); (iii) limited opportunity to make an impact: "It feels quite distant. I think, partly because of just all the shit that's happened in [the host country since we left]. Honestly, it all feels very impenetrable. I've still got the same background guilt, I would even say. It's like a type of survivor's guilt or something like that, where we were able to leave and have this amazing life here, and it's just like - there's just no relief [in the host country]. It also still feels like there's nothing we can do; that's something I think about quite often. It still feels like, yes, we spent all this time there, yes, we did volunteer assignments, and it was part of Australia's aid, but none of it makes a difference now, because there's just been that magnitude of suffering that's followed it" (#21); (iv) mixed feelings associated with their view about the personal financial implications: "I did get a lot out of it, even though there were some aspects that were quite challenging. I think perhaps a newer thought that I've had in the last couple of years is that it was a working year where I wasn't earning essentially a full salary and so now, in my late twenties, I guess I'm thinking about trying to plan my finances more in advance. And that's something - not that I'm behind on, but I wonder. Yeah, that's a newer thought that I maybe hadn't had before. But in general, yeah, I look back on it as like a big adventure that I had" (#14).

[15] Data for this table was drawn from the following question asked at T5 interview in 2025: 'In hindsight, what do you think the biggest impact of your assignment has been on you?', 'What was it about your experience that you think contributed to that?' Coding was undertaken jointly by two members of the research team. Seven of the 47 participants were unable to identify a single outcome and instead identified multiple outcomes. Each of these was coded equally to multiple categories; these are included in the table.

[16] Twenty-four participants (51%) identified outcomes categorised as 'international' as the major impact of their volunteer assignment. This includes some participants who identified more than one category as the main impact. The proportion of volunteers reporting 'International' outcomes as the main impact was largest among the three oldest categories of volunteers: *Non-working Partners* (3/5, 60%), *Veterans* (7/12, 58%) and *Imposed Transitioners* (4/7, 57%).

[17] For example, at T4, participants believed that the main impact on them from their involvement with the program were 'personal' (40%) - such as sense of life satisfaction and pride, confidence, and new personal relationships - and 'international' (26%), which included broader worldview and 'global mindset', relationships with HCNs, and culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.

[18] The term 'psychological contract' refers to the unwritten expectations and perceived mutual obligations between an individual and an organisation - Rousseau, D.M. (1989), 'The 'problem' of the psychological contract considered', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 19: 665-671. For a history and review of the concept, see: Conway, N. & Briner, R. B. (2009), 'Fifty years of psychological contract research: what do we know and what are the main challenges?', *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 71-130. For a previous study examining psychological contracts and perceived organisational support with program volunteers see: Fee, A. & Gray, S.J. (2022), 'Perceived organisational support and performance: the case of expatriate development volunteers in complex multi-stakeholder employment relationships', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 33:5, 965-1004.

[19] Also see participants' descriptions of their in-country support in Section 5.5.2 of the report: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[20] For a detailed account of the repatriation experiences of participants in this study, see: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[21] For example: Section 6.2.3 and the case study of Olivia, Part 1.

[22] For example: Section 7.3 and the case study of Fiona.

[23] For example: Section 4.4 and Figure 5 in Section 4.4, Section 4.4.2.

[24] For example: Table 7, Panels 1-7, Section 3.4.

[25] For example: Table 8 and the case studies of Addison and Dylan.

[26] For example: Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, and the case studies of Martha and Josie, Kevin and Nick.

[27] For example: Section 4.4.2 and Section 7.3.

[28] For example: Section 5.2.4, Implication 4.3 and 5.1, and the case study of Nick, Parts 1 and 2.

[29] For example: in the current study, Implication 4.1; Implication 4.3. In previous studies involving the program: Fee, A. & Gray, S.J. (2022). Perceived organisational support and performance: The case of expatriate development volunteers in complex multi-stakeholder employment relationships. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *33*(5), 965-1004; Fee, A. & Gray, S. (2020). Expatriates as catalysts: What and how Vietnamese locals learn from self-initiated expatriates, *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management Journal*, *27*(3), 389-416; Heizmann, H., Fee, A. & Gray, S.J. (2018). Intercultural knowledge sharing between expatriates and host-country nationals in Vietnam: A practice-based study of communicative relations and power dynamics. *Journal of International Management, 24*(1), 16-32.

[30] For example: Section 4.3.2 and the case study of Martha and Josie.

[31] It is true that some participants had begun researching their host country prior to and during the PDB, which preceded T1 interviews. Nonetheless, for most participants these efforts were relatively ad-hoc and their initial engagement with events and people in the host country at T1 remained low. The primary exceptions to this were volunteers who had undertaken previous assignments in the host country or who were in the process of (re-)commencing a follow-up assignment with the same PO.

[32] For T1 data in this figure, ratings about participants' host-country engagement are based on the following criteria: participants rated with high levels of host-country engagement were those with prior experience living in the host country and those who reported strong ongoing connections with the country or people from the country at the time of the interview; participants rated as some engagement were those who had travelled previous to the host country, who reported past connections with the country or people from the country, or whose responses reflected a degree of understanding of current events in the host country. For T2 interviews, ratings about participants' level of host-country engagement were more difficult to discern as most participants were interviewed during or immediately after their repatriation from the host country.

[33] Seventeen (36%) exhibit high levels of engagement with the host country and/or region. This is roughly the same as T4 (18/50, 26%) and T3 (20/54, 37%).

[34] The 2024 VIS showed that around eight in ten alumni volunteers (80%) reported staying engaged with host countries since their assignments ended, although engagement was correlated with the assignment's recency – i.e., alumni who had completed their assignment more recently reported higher levels of engagement.

[35] For instance, several participants whose responses indicated moderate levels of engagement at T5 also raised in passing recent events or changes in the host country (e.g., political, environmental, general interest) that showed an awareness of these (e.g., "*There are a couple of [host-country] sites I follow on Facebook. I'm not so actively tracking down everything about them. But then there's just enough news at the moment that I don't want to read about, so I don't think I'm actually following any news as much … They had an election, which was interesting, because it was just the same time as the UK election. So, I was interested in how that's gone. They're always tied between China and Russia, and it feels like their position on Ukraine is a bit interesting there as well*", #44).

[36] ABC News online: 'International COVID-19 border closures to end, full reopening by February 21', Monday 07 February 2022.

[37] Five participants were unable to re-visit their host country, Myanmar, because of visa restrictions on any travel. Two others were experiencing health complications that had prevented any form of international travel for an extended period. The 12 participants who had returned to the host country in the period 2022 to 2025 were: #01, #02, #04, #07, #09, #19, #28, #29, #41, #44, #45 and #46.

[38] A core of 10 participants - about 20% of the sample - have been continually classified as 'highly engaged' across T3 to T5. This included 7 of the 13 participants who had previously lived in the host country (prior to the assignment). The 18 participants highly engaged at T4 were: #01, #02, #04, #09, #12, #19, #23, #24, #27, #28, #33, #40, #42, #45, #48, #49, #52 and #53. The 17 participants highly engaged at T5 were: #01, #02, #04, #06, #10, #17, #19, #24, #26, #28, #33, #37, #41, #42, #45, #46 and #53.

[39] For example, 14 participants who had previously been rated as 'moderately engaged' were largely passive in their monitoring efforts at T5 – not seeking out information but recognising that they did pay greater attention when they see news – participants #08, #11, #14, #18, #22, #23, #25, #29, #32, #39, #40, #50, #52 and #54. This finding supports the results of the 2024 VIS which shows that following events in a former host country declines over time (volunteers who completed a more recent volunteer assignment are more likely to be following events in a former host country).

[40] It is also true of some participants who had negative in-country experiences or who experienced isolated incidents (e.g., experiencing crime) or who felt unsupported by the PO or program during their assignment were more likely to disengage with events in (that) country. Participants who discontinued engagement with the host country following a negative in-country experience are #15, #16 and #52. The notable exception to this is #41, who had prior experiences working in the host country and who developed strong personal friendships outside the PO during the assignment, despite an overall negative experience.

[41] Other studies have shown similar patterns of voluntary service leading to international connections (McBride et al., 2012) and that these can continue for 2-3 years (Lough et al., 2014). This study is the first to track these connections over a longer period. Sources: McBride, A.M., Lough, B.J. & Sherraden, M. S. (2012). International service and the perceived impacts on volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *41*(6), 969-990; Lough, B.J., Sherraden, M.S., McBride, A.M. & Xiang, X. (2014) The impact of international service on the development of volunteers' intercultural relations. *Social Science Research,* 46, pp. 48-58.

[42] Some participants were unable to identify one group. Hence, the total does not equal 100%.

[43] Network theorists differentiate between interpersonal networks based on: (i) their relative strength ('weak' or 'strong' ties) according to whether the relationship is more psychologically distant/close and require less/more investment of energy and resources, and (ii) who those networks connect – people who share similar demographic characteristics ('bonding capital') or more expansive outward-focused ties with those who differ in identity or profession ('bridging capital'). See, for example, Gittell, R. & Vidal, A. (1998). *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy*. Sage;

Granovetter, M.S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360-1380; Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster.

[44] Examples of the classification of participants' descriptions of their HCN connections are: (1) Strong ongoing connections: *"I haven't talked to [my former counterpart] for a while, actually. I feel like I keep in contact with her son, just on Instagram … but no, I actually don't keep in contact with [her]. If she wants something, she'll contact me - if the kids are doing an assignment at school and need some help with English, she'll give me a call. She'd be there if I wanted to talk to her, I could ring her. She probably wouldn't call me, but she'd message me … one of my friends - it would have been a couple of weeks ago, when [the host country] and Australia were playing in the soccer. He was at a café watching it, and I was watching it here. We were just chatting over, you know, "You've never scored a goal," blah blah. We were just talking, and he was like, "When are you coming back?" And I was just like, "Well, I don't have any money, mate, so I'm not coming back … we were on WhatsApp video, we have video calls. That was the last time I talked to him. And then probably - what, 2, 3 months ago, again, a colleague of mine had passed away. So people were sending me messages: "[name] has died." And I was sending them messages, because [he] and I, we were coffee buddies. He had four beautiful children, and I would visit their house and things. So everyone knew I was friends with [him]. I had all my 'husbands', that was the joke. I had coffee with my husbands in the morning, and he was one of my coffee husbands. So people were communicating with me about that. My good friend [name] - she got remarried … so she was wanting me to go on a holiday with her, and I'm like, "Well, I don't have the money to get there, so I can't really go. I keep in contact with about four people"* (#26). (2) Some ongoing connections (weak-moderate): (i) *"I haven't been able to maintain too much of a relationship with the people that I used to work with. Every now and then it is useful to talk to someone else I knew. But I don't have too much of a connection anymore with the people I worked with. The last time would have been last year, I think. Although there is one colleague from [the capital city]. I get to talk to her a fair bit, more often, but we don't tend to practice [the host-country language] too much, unfortunately"* (#20), (ii) *"My old boss messaged, I think, last week and asked what I was doing. I replied that I worked for […] and he hasn't responded since then. So I might follow up. I'm still in some of the group chats where occasionally things happen. Like, yeah, when I was in […], someone saw that I'd posted on Instagram, and we chatted for a bit. Yeah, but very light-touch things like that"* (#29). (3) No ongoing connections: (i) **"***I'm Instagram friends with a few of them, but not anything that I would call a genuine friendship anymore. I think with time passing, those types of friendships can be challenging to maintain"* (#14), (ii) *"I occasionally get emails from people in Indonesia seeking advice on a particular aspect of research or Australia, which I reply to, but nothing more sustained than that"* (#43)

[45] Participants who have strong connections with one or more HCNs at T5 are: #01, #02, #04, #09, #19, #24, #26, #28, #44, #45, #46 and #53. Participants who have moderate or weak connections with one or more HCNs at T5 are: #08, #12, #15, #16, #17, #20, #21, #22, #23, #29, #33, #37, #40, #41, #48, #49, #52 and #54. It is also worth noting that the six participants whose assignments were based in Myanmar have been restricted in their ability to communicate with former HCNs. None of these have retained strong connections to HCNs.

[46] Participants identifying HCNs met outside the PO as the main stakeholder group that impacted their lives included: (i) friends formed outside work (#45, #46), former clients (#08), business partnerships formed during the assignment (#09) and HCN volunteers (#46). Two participants (#04, #18) also identified the personal or professional benefits gleaned from HCN connections as the single major impact of their assignment. Contact with the program's in-country management teams (ICMT) remained low across all four waves (T2-T5). While there has been occasional contact during in-country visits or in subsequent assignments, participants who remain most regularly in touch are those who visit the host-country for work or use ICMTs as sources of information/updates about events in former host countries. Participants retaining some ongoing contact with ICMTs include: (i) during in-country visits: #46, (ii) during subsequent assignments: #20, (iii) visiting the host-country for work: #02 and #19; (iv) as sources of information/updates about events in former host countries: #33 and #48. Other relationships that were classified as 'strong' included pre-existing contacts (prior to T1) that were reinforced during the assignment and have continued, and those revolving around ongoing professional contacts sustained through specific project work or shared sectoral interests. Examples of strong relationships with HCNs were: (i) specific project work or shared sectoral interests - #02, #19 and #53, (ii) close peer-to-peer work relationships like counterparts - #24, #26, #28 and #46, (iii) pre-existing contacts (prior to T1) that were strengthened during the assignment - #01 and #04.

[47] Eight of the 12 *Veterans* sustained personal and direct connections with one or more HCNs; none of these relationships was strong. Four of the seven *Enhancers* sustained HCN relationships, all of which were rated as 'strong connections.'

[48] Nineteen respondents, comprising 48% of responses at T5. Participants who identified their former PO colleagues as the stakeholder group that has had the strongest impact on them are: #10, #15, #17, #19, #22, #24, #26, #28, #33, #43, #44, #49 and #53.

[49] Participants who identified other HCNs (not former PO colleagues) as the stakeholder group that has had the strongest impact on them are: #05, #08, #09, #42, #45 and #46.

[50] These influences have been largely unchanged across the past three interview periods. Member checks with a sub-sample of the study's participants after T5 supported the factors identified in box, although some wording was modified during this process. Data supporting the findings in this figure (all T5): (i) Living in capital city: Participants sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 7/12 (58%) lived in capital cities. Participants not sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 15/35 (46%) lived in capital cities. (ii) Accompanied by a partner: Participants sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 11/12 (92%) were unaccompanied. Participants not sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 20/35 (57%) were unaccompanied. (iii) Prior experience living in the host country: Participants sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 7/12 (58%) had prior experience living in the host country at T1. Participants not sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 6/35 (17%) had prior experience living in the host country before the assignment. (iv) Able to speak a common language: Participants sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 5/12 (42%) spoke the host-country language prior to starting their volunteer assignment. Participants not sustaining strong connections with HCNs: 4/35 (11%) spoke the host-country language prior to starting their volunteer assignment. Eight of the 12 participants sustaining strong connections with HCNs continue to use the host-country language (67%), compared to 7/35 (20%) participants not sustaining strong connections with HCNs.

[51] While connection with former POs shows a downward trend, some participants report losing contact while others have re-connecting after a lull, suggesting a degree of inconsistency in the regularity and recency of contact. In other words, lost connections are not necessarily permanent.

[52] 28/42 volunteers; excludes *Non-working Partners*.

[53] Participants reporting regular contact with PO colleagues and/or the PO at all four post-assignment interviews (T2-T5) are: #01, #02, #04, #07, #08, #17, #19, #22, #23, #24, #26, #28, #29, #33, #40, #43, #44, #45, #48, #49, #53 and #54.

[54] This finding supports the results of the 2024 VIS which shows that volunteers' connections with their partner organisation tends to decline over time (since completing their volunteer assignment).

[55] 9/42 volunteers, excluding *Non-working Partners*.

[56] Since 2023 (T4), participants whose assignments were completed prior to the enforced COVID repatriations have shown higher levels of PO contact than those who repatriated: At T4, 85% of non-repatriated participants reported contact compared to 67% of repatriated participants. At T5, these percentages were 83% (non-repatriated) and 60% (repatriated). These differences were not apparent at T2 or T3, where repatriated participants (T2 = 82%, T3 = 91%) showed slightly higher levels of contact with POs than non-repatriated participants (T2 = 81%, T3 = 81%).

[57] At T5, all seven participants working in 'international' POs retained contact with their POs (100%); for six of these (86%), the contact was direct (person-to-person) rather than secondary (generic social media feeds). For those in 'local' POs, the percentage retaining contact was 76% (domestic NGOs) and 78% (government departments) – the proportions retaining direct contact were 59% and 66% respectively. This pattern is consistent with data reported in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022) at T3, although this pattern was not found at T4, suggesting some variability across time. As reported in Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024), at T4, the overall rate of participants' ongoing contact with 'local' POs (29/38, 76%) was higher than the level for those based in 'international' POs (international NGO and multinational agencies): 71% (5/7), although this difference was not statistically significant.

[58] Volunteers whose assignments were based in capital cities retained higher levels and generally stronger forms of ongoing PO contact than those working in remote areas or large non-capital cities, although this pattern has fluctuated across the period T3-T5 and so we are cautious about drawing strong inferences from this. At T5 21/22 (95%) of volunteers based in capital cities retained some PO contact; for 16 of these (73%) it was personal/direct contact. This compares with 81% (9/11) for volunteers in rural/remote locations and just 44% for volunteers in large non-capital cities. This pattern is consistent with results reported at T3, suggesting that volunteers in capital cities may be more inclined, or find it easier, to sustain their contact with POs. No relationship, however, existed between participants' PO contact at T5 and their pre-assignment contact with the PO during the interview process. Participants who had pre-assignment contact with one or more members of their PO as part of the selection process for their assignment showed an identical level of ongoing contact with their PO at T5 (67%, 8/12) as those who did have contact with their PO during the selection process (67%, 28/42). Similarly, no relationship existed between participants' PO contact at T5 and whether they were accompanied by a partner during their volunteer assignment. Participants who were accompanied by a partner during their assignment showed a similar level of ongoing contact with their PO at T5 (64%, 7/11) as those who were unaccompanied (68%, 21/31).

[59] The proportion of volunteers who retained contact with their PO at T5 was slightly higher for volunteers who had completed or were undertaking a subsequent volunteer assignment – including remote only assignments (77%, 10/13) or in-country/hybrid assignments (70%, 7/10) - than those who had not undertaken any remote assignment (62%, 18/29) or in-country/hybrid assignment (63%, 20/32). These figures were largely unchanged for volunteers who had completed multiple assignments.

[60] Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[61] Seventeen participants (36%) reported that they continue to nurture and benefit from close expatriate networks at T5: #01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #07, #08, #12, #19, #20, #21, #28, #37, #39, #40, #53 and #54. This compares with 13 (26%) at T4 - participants #01, #02, #10, #19, #28, #31, #35, #37, #40, #46, #52, #53 and #54.

[62] At T5, participants reporting strong connections with one or more expatriates are: #02, #19, #37, #46, #53 and #54. Accounting for one participant withdrawal, these are the same participants reporting strong connections with one or more expatriates at T4. In contrast, expatriate networks that are weak or moderate in strength are more dynamic, with few being the source of consistent connection and/or benefit over the study and, instead, the relationships appearing to ebb and flow in the five years since the participants' assignments concluded. For instance, of the 13 participants reporting connections at T4, eight had continued those at T5. Only six of those eight – all with consistently strong relationships – reported connections at T3. At T4, six participants reported dramatically decreased contact with expatriates or expatriate groups that they had previously considered close contacts at T3. Participants reporting losing contact with formerly close expatriate networks between T3 and T4: #05, #11, #15, #32, #33 and #44. At T5, this number was five – participants #10, #24, #32, #46 and #52. Other features associated with stronger connections with one or more expatriates were: (i) working in a PO staffed by expatriates (intergovernmental agencies and INGOs), (ii) being based in the host-country's capital city, and (iii) being younger (especially *Launchers*, *Enhancers* and *Transitioners*).

[63] The participant in this research project who is the focus of this case study, 'Robin', gave written approval for the inclusion of some identifying features of this case in order for these to be available to readers. Other parts of the case have been modified to ensure confidentiality.

[64] Participants reporting no ongoing connections with either expatriates or HCNs at T5: #06, #10, #11, #14, #18, #25, #30, #32, #36, #38, #42, #43 and #50. Seven of these also reported no ongoing connections with either expatriates or HCNs at T4 (#06, #18, #25, #36, #38, #42 and #50).

[65] Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge University Press; Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity. Cambridge University Press.

[66] Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster; Woolcock, M. (1998). Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework. *Theory and Society*, *27*(2), 151–208.

[67] Participant #02.

[68] Online community projects: participant #45; small businesses: participants #04 and #09.

[69] For example, participants #03, #22, #28, #29 and #44.

[70] Connecting former colleagues or other HCNs to support and/or professional or educational opportunities through contacts and resources in Australia: participants #05, #09, #28 and #53.

[71] Mentoring HCNs on 'Western' norms to help their interactions with donors or clients: #09, #42 and #53, giving advice about managing relationships with expatriate colleagues: #02 and #33, helping them adjust to living overseas: #53; assisting them to apply for or enrol in international studies: #22 and #45.

[72] Other studies have suggested, without empirical support, that social media may allow volunteers on short-term assignments to continue connections with POs. The current study is the first, to our knowledge, to make this connection clear and to explain its benefits. Source: Lough, B.J. & Tiessen, R. (2018) 'How do international volunteering characteristics influence outcomes? Perspectives from partner organizations', *Voluntas*, *29(*1), pp. 104–118.

[73] Fifty-five percent (11/20) or 23% of the full sample.

[74] Participants whose main engagement with the host country is via new contacts formed during the assignment are: #02, #03, #06, #09, #10, #17, #24, #26, #33, #37 and #44.

[75] While social media was reported as being used to 'connect' and 'inform' across all waves of data collection, albeit with declining intensity (T4-T5), its use to 'advocate' and 'coordinate' activities on behalf of the host country declined sharply in the same periods, indicating that these behaviours tended to be enacted when engagement and contact with the host country was at relatively high levels.

[76] The results in this section are broadly consistent with the outcomes of the 2024 VIS which show that over 80% of former volunteers believe they continue to benefit from the cultural-related knowledge and skills they developed during their assignment.

[77] Australian Volunteers Program (2019) Terms of Reference: Request for Quote (RfQ) – Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers.

[78] Twenty-four participants (51%) identified outcomes categorised as 'international' as the major impact of their volunteer assignment. This includes some participants who identified more than one category as the main impact. The proportion of volunteers reporting 'International' outcomes as the main impact was largest among the three oldest categories of volunteers: *Non-working Partners* (3/5, 60%), *Veterans* (7/12, 58%) and *Imposed Transitioners* (4/7, 57%).

[79] Learning outcomes associated with 'globally literate and connected' include the following outcomes: cultural capabilities, communication capabilities, self-awareness, situational or contextual awareness, sector-specific knowledge and skills, personal development, and interests and hobbies.

[80] The divergence between culture-specific and culture-general capabilities reported here is based on participants' self-reported accounts across T2-T5. The pattern was endorsed by several participants at T5. Nonetheless, the growing prominence of culture-general capabilities over time may also partly reflect retrospective reframing - that is, participants re-evaluating and reinterpreting their experiences in light of subsequent use and application, rather than being an objective change in the capabilities themselves. It is possible that the two processes – developing capabilities and evolving appreciation of these - are mutually reinforcing (although no evidence of this is available in the current study).

[81] For example, culture-specific knowledge and capabilities (e.g., culture-specific knowledge and understanding of features like lifestyle, history, politics, diversity, host-country language skills) accounted for 70% (69/98) of the learning episodes coded as 'cultural capabilities' at T2.

[82] For instance, participants from six of the seven categories of volunteers expressed plans to return to work in the host country and/or continuing to use and develop these capabilities. The only group without a participant expressing this intention was *Non-working Partners*, although two of these reported being open to returning to the host country with partners who expressed this intention.

[83] At T4, participants were twice as likely to report culture-general knowledge and capabilities as the major impact of their volunteer assignment (n = 6) as culture-specific knowledge and capabilities (n = 3). At T5, the ratio was 16:3. This compares with 70% of in-country learning episodes coded as 'cultural capabilities" at T2 being culture-specific knowledge and capabilities.

[84] The number of participants linking culture-general knowledge and capabilities to their volunteering experiences and providing specific examples of how they apply and benefit from these has grown in number and variety in the years since the assignment ended. At T5, 24 participants identified improved job performance stemming from culture-general capabilities that they attributed to their volunteer assignments: #01, #02, #03, #05, #06, #08, #09, #12, #17, #19, #20, #22, #23, #24, #25, #28, #29, #33, #39, #40, #45, #48, #49 and #53. At T3, 52% of the sample (28/54) identified examples of culture-general knowledge and capabilities that they attributed to their volunteer assignment. At T2, just 20 of the 522 learning outcomes described by participants (4%) were classified as 'culture-general awareness' or 'culture-general skills.'

[85] It is also worth noting that the divergent paths of culture-general and culture-specific knowledge and capabilities suggest that, on balance, it is participants' in-country experiences (intercultural challenges and dilemmas that prompt reflection), supported by the program's VLJ resources, that have the strongest impact on preparing participants for the growth in culture-general knowledge and capabilities. In other words, the findings suggest that culture-general knowledge does not simply arise from participants 'converting' their culture-specific knowledge and capabilities, but from them applying and reflecting on the relevance of these insights after their assignment. Two datapoints support this. First, (limited) prior research suggests that the disorienting dilemmas that volunteers deal with, rather than just the 'conversion' of culture-specific knowledge and capabilities, can activate these outcomes. For example, one study (Pless et al., 2011) showed evidence that business participants in well-supported corporate international development volunteering program can develop outlooks akin to 'global mindset', as defined in this study, through resolving cultural and ethical paradoxes. It should be noted that this study provided no evidence of the expansion or longevity of these changes after the period volunteering. Second, in the current study these culture-general changes and growth patterns were evident in participants whose culture-specific knowledge and capabilities were more constrained (in-country) and declined most quickly (post-assignment), notably two *Non-working Partners* (but others also), suggesting that different experiences may have prompted and nurtured the continuation of their culture-general knowledge and capabilities. Source: Pless, N.M., Maak, T. & Stahl, G.K. (2011) 'Developing responsible global leaders through international service-learning programs', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *10*(2), pp. 237–260.

[86] Five participants identified culture-specific knowledge and capabilities as among the major impacts of the assignment: participants #12, #21, #36, #38 and #41.

[87] Sections 4.2.2 and 5.2, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[88] The 21 participants who reported at T2 continuing some form of ongoing formal language classes after their ICOP were: participants #01, #08, #09, #14, #17, #18, #19, #22, #23, #24, #26, #28, #30, #31, #35, #37, #39, #44, #46, #49 and #51.

[89] Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020), Section 3.2.1. Five percent (24/522) of all learning outcomes during the volunteer assignment – and nearly a quarter of all reported 'cultural capabilities' - related to learning the host-country and/or local language or dialect (T2). Of these, 17 (71%) were attributed

to formal learning programs, either via the ICOP or through private language classes that were funded, in part or full, by the program.

[90] Participants who reported using the host-country language regularly and in the month preceding the interview were: T2 = 21/55, 38%; T3 = 13/54, 24%; T4 = 11/50, 22%; T5 = 14/37, 30%. The groups with the largest proportion of participants using the host-country language were *Enhancers* (3/6, 50%), *Imposed Transitioners* (3/7, 47%) and *Transitioners* (4/12, 33%). Participants who reported using the host-country language regularly and in the month preceding the T5 interview were: #01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #12, #19, #21, #26, #28, #29, #41, #45 and #46.

[91] Examples of participants reporting a deeper understanding of host-country features at one or more interviews were: geopolitical dynamics (#01, #24), history and politics (#15, #16, #22, #36), relationships with neighbouring countries (#12, #32), security infrastructure (#29), social dynamics (#12, #15, #33), government structures (#15, #16, #17), religious practices (#10, #20, #23), positive and negative cultural traits (#12, #21), and attitudes towards foreigners (#36, #52).

[92] Eighty-one learning outcomes were classified as 'Culture-specific knowledge and understanding'. These represent (81%) of the learning outcomes classified as 'Cultural capabilities' at T2, and 15% of the total learning outcomes.

[93] Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020), Section 4.2.2 and Attachment 8.

[94] This point was reinforced at multiple interviews by several participants who had prior international work experiences in corporate and non-profit sectors (#09, #15, #17, #22, #32, #36, #40).

[95] Section 5.2, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[96] Several participants who commented on the beneficial contribution of program support and VLJ activities at T5 had been critical of the design or content of these in earlier interviews and who have subsequently had a conscious re-evaluation of these. Section 5.2.1, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020), highlights participants' feedback on these at T1 and T2.

[97] This supports an earlier study showing that cultural immersion predicts higher levels of intercultural competence development among international volunteers. Source: Lough, B.J. (2011) International volunteers' perceptions of intercultural competence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *35(*4), pp. 452–464.

[98] Volunteers in rural and remote destinations in the host country were generally more critical of the in-country support they received from the program and were more likely to withdraw from their assignment (or consider withdrawing from their assignment). They were also more likely to report challenging repatriations and to seek support from *Response Psychological* than expatriates whose assignments were in urban areas or in POs staffed by international employees. Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[99] Volunteers whose assignments were with 'local' POs (domestic NGOs and government departments) or in remote locations that restricted access to other expatriates and where English was less commonly spoken, tend to believe that these conditions were important contributors to them developing culture-specific knowledge and capabilities. It is also true that participants reporting negligible or limited culture-specific knowledge development experienced less cultural immersion. This includes volunteers working in POs staffed largely by expatriates, and *Non-working Partners* and volunteers in locations that restricted their movements or living arrangements (and therefore HCN interactions) for security reasons.

[100] Volunteers completing multiple assignments in different types of POs and locations supporting this view: participants #06, #17, #40 and #53. One example illustrating both the PO type and location (rural/urban) is participant #06, who followed an assignment in an urban domestic NGO, staffed solely by HCNs, with a large, European-funded international NGO (INGO) in a remote setting: *"I'm [now volunteering] in a place called […], it's quite small and isolated. So it's more just a case of trying to connect with the local people. Also, because there's not much to do here I've been trying to find an outlet … and potentially an opportunity to practice my [host-country language skills] as well, so it makes me want to immerse myself more in the local community … But I preferred working for a local organisation in [the previous host country]. It's different from working for an INGO, it's a totally different experience. [Working for an INGO] just feels very Western in a way. Even the local staff that work here, I feel like they're a bit more Western, if that makes sense. When you're working for a local organisation, you can see the cultural differences, the way they dress and interact. Whereas I just feel like when you're working for an INGO, I suppose it's like you're still experiencing Western culture. Even the local people become a little bit westernised working in that organisation, so it's just different experiences"* (#06, T5).

[101] After a small recovery at T3 following the removal of COVID lockdown protocols.

[102] Reflecting this increased confidence, 10 participants described, at different times, using their volunteer experience in efforts to instigate contact with HCN diaspora: participants #01, #12, #15, #21, #25, #30, #33, #37, #45 and #54.

[103] Participants reporting use of 'culture-specific knowledge and capabilities' at T5: (i) in roles that directly deal with or focus on the host-country: #02, #19 and #37, (ii) through working with colleagues or clients from the HCN diaspora: #08, #28, #41 and #45, and/or (iii) via work with neighbouring countries that share similar linguistic or cultural patterns: #02, #03, #17, #29 and #40.

[104] The extract from participant #02 on the previous page may be an example of this. The extract from participant #03 in Section 4.4.2 – although described by the participant in ways that suggest culture-general application – may be an example where these two concepts blur.

[105] At T5, 41/47 reported using their 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities' in some aspect of their life, primarily in work situations. The participants who reported not using these attributed this to a lack of opportunity (e.g., not working, living in a culturally homogenous community). At T4, 39 participants (78%) reported instances of applying cross-cultural knowledge and capabilities they developed during their volunteer assignments: around two-thirds of these in the workplace (63%), and a third (37%) in non-work settings that included study, volunteering, and socially.

[106] Participants reporting 'culture-specific knowledge and capabilities' as the main impact of their volunteer assignment at either T4 or T5: #03, #04, #16, #17, #21, #22, #31, #32, #39 and #49.

[107] At T4, 67% of working participants (25/37) reported this: #01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #08, #09, #12, #14, #15, #16, #19, #21, #25, #29, #33, #37, #39, #40, #43, #44, #45, #46, #48 and #53. At T5, the figure was 21/32 (66%): #01, #02, #03, #04, #08, #09, #14, #19, #20, #23, #24, #28, #29, #33, #37, #39, #45, #46, #49, #52 and #53.

[108] Of the 32 participants employed at T5, 11 (34%) identified one or more culture-general knowledge or capability outcomes as a significant contributor to their job performance (responses to the questions: Are you now better at your job as a result of your volunteer assignment? In what ways?). Participants: #01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #08, #20, #33, #39, #45 and #53.

[109] Participants identifying 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities' as an important feature of applications for jobs, promotions or membership to committees: #02, #17, #20, #24, #28, #40, #45 and #53.

[110] Participants reporting using their culture-general capabilities in full-time international volunteer assignments since their assignment ended are: #15, #16, #17, #40, #48 and #49.

[111] Participants reporting using their culture-general capabilities in domestic volunteering (formal or informal) since their assignment ended are: #04, #10, #22, #25 and #38.

[112] Participants with extensive prior international work experience who did not attribute the current volunteer assignment to major changes in their culture-general knowledge and capabilities were: #36 and #42 ("*No, not that much, because I already did it. I'm not your fish out of water. When I went to [the host country] … I was aware that there were going to be those differences. [I'm not] the fish out of water, who's lived in suburban Sydney all their life … that wasn't me, because I've integrated … I'm the sort of person that fits in. And I'm also aware that there are going to be those differences, and you have to adjust. And I think it would have been confronting if I was a different type of person*" - #42, T5).

[113] Participants reporting no substantial use of their culture-general capabilities since their assignment ended are: #18, #26, #36, #44 and #50.

[114] One example of this is participant #20, who drew on the cross-cultural communication skills and knowledge of cultural differences (reported at T2) in post-graduate studies relating to educational policy that were inspired by her assignment (T2 and T3). She then used them in her dealings with international clients and colleagues in two different workplaces (T3 and T4), and more substantially in policy work and intercultural contacts as her career has developed ("*when you're writing policy, it's not just writing rules, it's about communicating the intention of that policy*" T5). She "*definitely*" believes that she is better at her job – and better positioned in her career – because of her cross-cultural experiences: "*Compared to my colleagues, I have a better understanding of how people might feel and maybe connect a lot better [with international staff]. If I hadn't gone through this route and gone overseas, and instead had done, like, a graduate role, I think I wouldn't be able to put those life experience into what I'm doing now"* (#20, T5)

[115] Young volunteers – *Launchers*, *Enhancers* and *Transitioners* – were most likely to report benefiting from their cross-cultural knowledge and capabilities in workplaces. *Veterans* and *Imposed Transitioners* reported using these more commonly in civic participation.

[116] *Translatable*, rather than *transferable*, is used deliberately to signal that these capabilities require active interpretation and recontextualisation (rather than straightforward application) when applied to a new setting. Source: Johnson, J.P., Lenartowicz, T. & Apud, S. (2006). Cross-cultural competence in international business: Toward a definition and a model. *Journal of International Business Studies*, *37*(4), 525-543.

[117] Learning outcomes coded to this category comprised 8% (44/522) of the in-country learning episodes coded at T2, or 40% of the 'culture-general knowledge and capabilities'. All but 9 of these occurred in the workplace, and 43% (19) involved unstructured interactions in non-routine situations, typically when volunteers were involved in interpersonal capability development activities (collaborating, mentoring) with HCNs. Section 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, Attachment 8.2, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[118] Examples of participants who reported at two or more interviews (T2-T5) that behavioural flexibility benefited their communication capabilities were: #01, #02, #03, #07, #12, #14, #17, #19, #20, #24, #25, #28, #33, #37, #40 and #48. Examples of participants who reported at two or more interviews (T2-T5) that behavioural flexibility benefited their relationship development (rapport, trust, connections) were: #05, #06, #07, #08, #09, #12, #17, #19, #20, #24, #25, #27, #37, #40, #41, #45, #46, #53 and #54. Examples of participants who reported at two or more interviews (T2-T5) that behavioural flexibility benefited their collaborations were: #02, #03, #25, #28 and #40.

[119] Participants #12 and #29. Source: Bochner, S. (1981). The Mediating Person: Bridges Between Cultures, Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Publishing.

[120] Participants who reported using their cultural acumen in their work directly with refugees and/or migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds were: #04, #07, #09, #25, #35 and #45. Participants who reported using their cultural acumen in their work with Indigenous Australian colleagues and clients are: #01, #02, #04, #05, #35 and #39.

[121] Examples of participants reporting using behavioural flexibility in their current work and life at T5: (i) language grading when communicating with colleagues or clients from CALD backgrounds: #04, #12, #19, #21 and #53, (ii) general sensitivity to intercultural issues when collaborating as managers: #23, #53, (iii) mentoring: #15 and #53, and (iv) providing services to clients: #19, #35, #45 and #46.

[122] Participants who reported benefiting from behavioural flexibility during follow-up volunteer assignments in new countries: #03, #06, #15, #16, #17 and #49.

[123] '*Micro-practices'* is used to indicate small, unremarkable actions or routines that are enacted as people apply competencies in their everyday interactions. Source: De Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[124] The term 'global mindset' is widely used in academic literature. While definitions vary and have evolved in recent years, it is generally used to describe someone with "a highly complex cognitive structure . . . characterized by an openness to and articulation of multiple cultural and strategic realities on both global and local levels, and the cognitive ability to mediate and integrate across this multiplicity" (Levy et al. 2007, p. 244). Source: Levy, O., Beechler, S., Taylor, S. & Boyacigiller, N.A. (2007). What we talk about when we talk about 'global mindset': Managerial cognition in multinational corporations. *Journal of International Business Studies*, *38*(2), 231-258.

[125] Participants' descriptions of this change were initially most analogous to 'cognitive cultural intelligence', a term used by social psychologists - see, for instance, Ang, S. & Van Dyne, L. (2015). *Handbook of Cultural Intelligence: Theory, Measurement, and Applications*. Routledge; Yari, N., Lankut, E., Alon, I. & Richter, N.F. (2020). Cultural intelligence, global mindset, and cross-cultural competencies: A systematic review using bibliometric methods. *European Journal of International Management*, *14*(2), 210-250. These descriptions also shared some similarities with terms used by volunteer researchers in previous studies of development volunteers: for instance, what Starr labels as 'attitude' changes (e.g., attitude to the home country) and what others term 'cultural awareness' or 'global citizenship.' Sources: Baillie Smith, M. & Laurie, N. (2011). International volunteering and development: Global citizenship and neoliberal professionalisation today. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *36*(4), 545-559; Clark, J. & Lewis, S. (2016). *Impact Beyond Volunteering: A Realist Evaluation of the Complex and Long-term Pathways of Volunteer Impact*, VSO; Starr, J.M. (1994). Peace Corps service as a turning point. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, *39*(2), 137-161;

Tiessen, R. (2017), *Nature, Trends and Impacts of Canadians Who Volunteer Abroad: A Study of the Literature*, Prepared for ESDC (unpublished).

[126] Participants from all seven categories reported one or more of these 'global mindset' changes at multiple interviews (T2-T5).

[127] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #01, #02, #12, #25, #26, #43 and #45.

[128] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #05, #20, #21 and #46.

[129] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #12, #26, #28 and #33.

[130] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #01, #11, #14, #22, #23, #37, #43 and #44.

[131] Empathy was reported multiple times (T3-T5) by participants #01, #05, #06, #11, #12, #15, #18, #19, #20, #21, #24, #28, #29, #31, #33, #36, #37, #46, #49 and #54. The definition of "cognitive empathy" is adapted from: Park, H., Lea Abbott, J. & Werner, S. (2014). A perspective-taking model for global assignments. *Journal of Global Mobility*, *2*(3), 280-297.

[132] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #01, #04, #06, #07, #09, #11, #14, #24, #36, #37, #45, #46 and #53.

[133] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #03, #17, #20, #21, #23, #25, #28, #37, #40, #44, #45, #46 and #54.

[134] Participants reporting this at multiple time periods (T3-T5) were: #16, #26, #28 and #33.

[135] Of the in-country learning episodes coded to 'global mindset' at T2, 65% (48/74) occurred outside the workplace.

[136] At both T3 and T4, but not T5, participants highlighting the benefits of 'global mindset' outcomes were those whose position description articulated a formal mentor role. By way of example, at T4 14/27 participants who reported developing capabilities and attitudes associated with 'global mindset' had position descriptions articulating a mentor role. Just 3/22 of those not classified as developing a 'global mindset' did.

[137] For example, people living with a disability, people from different parts of Australia, Indigenous Australians, or people living with HIV: #01, #04, #09, #23, #26 and #45.

[138] Examples of participants who believe that a more 'global mindset' led to them providing improved services for customers: #01, #05, #08, #19, #20, #29, #33, #41, #45 and #49. Examples of participants who believe that a more 'global mindset' led to improved policies: #01, #04, #08, #19, #20, #25, #37 and #45. Examples of participants who believe that a more 'global mindset' led to them being more comfortable engaging with people from different cultural backgrounds as part of their work: #03, #06, #08, #28 and #45.

[139] Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.

[140] Fee, A., Heizmann, H. & Gray, S.J. (2017). Towards a theory of effective cross-cultural capacity development: the experiences of Australian international NGO expatriates in Vietnam. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *28*(14), 2036-2061; Pettigrew, T.F. & Tropp, L.R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(5), 751–783.

[141] In the current study, these came from volunteers' accounts of the ongoing support relationships they established with POs and particular HCNs that, as described by volunteers, are likely mutually beneficial beyond the assignment tenure. It is worth noting that other studies have reported on the developmental benefits for POs, as perceived by POs, of close and strong volunteer-HCN working relationships that are similar to those of 'counterpart models.' Some of these studies involve quite specific contexts and were cross-sectional. Nonetheless, they suggest that the benefits gleaned by volunteers may be reciprocated by their HCN counterparts and colleagues. Sources: Fee, A. & Michailova, S. (2021). Host country nationals' interaction adjustment as a social exchange: A theoretical model. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *42*(5), 684-698; Tiessen, R., Rao, S. & Lough, B.J. (2021). International development volunteering as transformational feminist practice for gender equality. *Journal of Developing Societies*, *37*(1), 30-56; Lough, B.J. & Tiessen, R. (2018) 'How do international volunteering characteristics influence outcomes? Perspectives from partner organizations', *Voluntas*, *29(*1), 104–118.

[142] This trend is consistent with cross-cultural studies highlighting that benefits of intergroup contact (including attitude changes and relationship depth) require ongoing meaningful interactions to be sustained. Pettigrew, T.F. & Tropp, L.R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783.

[143] Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, *94*, S95-S120; Woolcock, M. (1998). Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework. *Theory and Society*, *27*(2), 151–208.

[144] Bennett, M.J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R.M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Intercultural Press.

[145] Supporting this, three repeat volunteers suggested, at different times, that their second volunteer assignment was more developmental for cross-cultural outcomes like global mindset than their first because they felt better prepared (culturally) and so better able to attend to and make sense of specific experiences. However, the data was not sufficiently strong to show a clear pattern of differences between first-time and repeat volunteers across the full dataset.

[146] Several participants at different times throughout the study have expressed a desire to contribute more strongly through opportunities to mentor or support (future) volunteers, or questioned why the experiences of former volunteers were not called on more often. These findings are reported in earlier reports: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020) and Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022).

[147] Australian Volunteers Program Global Program Strategy 2018-2022.

[148] Interviews and analysis forming this section of this report operationalised "civic participation" using the same set of behaviours, attitudes and knowledge used in previous phases of the LSAV. Namely, participants': (i) involvement in community service and civics issues such as attending meetings or protests, raising or donating money, volunteering labour or skills, and (ii) direct contributions to discussions or discourse on civics issues, such as posting to social media, overtly advocating for positions, making written submissions or raising issues for discussions in various community settings. The analysis includes participants' civic participation: (i) as individuals or as a part of a group; (ii) in structured settings (i.e., with a community organisation) or in unstructured and informal settings (e.g., helping neighbours); (iii) with a local, national or international focus, including remote and/or international volunteer assignments with the program or other volunteering agencies; and (iv) outside their main paid work/employment. On the latter, although most civic engagement activities discussed here were undertaken voluntarily, the analysis does include some activities that were

not participants' primary source of income but for which some financial expenses were compensated (e.g., remote and in-country volunteer assignments).

[149] The indicators used to identify participants' knowledge of and capabilities relating to the international development sector are modified from a model initially presented in Figure 7, Section 3.5, of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022).

[150] The distinctive context of this cohort's experiences made the longitudinal analysis complex. The continuity of participants pre-assignment civic activity was disrupted greatly by COVID, which prevented several participants from engaging or re-engaging with (pre-assignment) civic participation activities or instigating new activities, and derailed plans of 15 participants (of the T1-T2 sample) who had extended their assignments or were in various stages of preparing for a follow-up assignment. Personal, family, and work changes also had dampening effects that limited some participants' ability to commit energies toward civic participation, at least in the short-term.

[151] Australian studies show that two thirds of all Australians participating in voluntary service discontinued their voluntary work during the first wave of COVID, the time when most participants were repatriated to Australia. These studies estimate a combined loss of over 12 million volunteer hours across Australia per week since the commencement of COVID. Sources: Volunteering Australia (2020). Reengaging volunteers and COVID-19. Also see: Biddle, N. & Gray, M. (2020). The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, ANU Centre for Social Research & Methods. May 2020. For post-COVID studies, see, for example: Biddle, N., Boyer, C., Gray, M., & Jahromi, M. (2022) Volunteering in Australia: The Volunteer Perspective. Volunteering Australia; Tran, K., Occhipinti, J-A., Buchannan, J. & Hickie, I.B. (2022). The Decline in Volunteering: What does it mean for Australia's mental wealth?, November 2022. University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre Mental Wealth Initiative; Nesbit, R., Paarlberg, L.E., & Jo, S. (2025). The decline of volunteering in the United States: Is it the economy?. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *54*(3), 583-613.

[152] Participants involved in formal or informal voluntary service at T5: #01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #06, #07, #09, #10, #14, #15, #16, #17, #18, #19, #21, #22, #25, #26, #28, #33, #36, #38, #40, #42, #44, #45, #46, #48, #49, #53 and #54. At T4, 38 participants (76% of the T4 sample) were involved in formal or informal voluntary service.

[153] T2 is excluded because most participants had just been repatriated from the host country at the time of the interview.

[154] Participants whose civic participation activities indicate a general increase from T1 to T5: #01, #02, #03, #04, #06, #09, #10, #17, #18, #20, #22, #25, #33, #40, #44, #45, #46, #48, #49 and #54.

[155] Participants whose civic participation activities indicate a general decline from T1 to T5: #08, #11, #29, #30, #37, #39, #41 and #52.

[156] All ten *Veterans* were involved in some form of voluntary service at T4 and T5. At T5, all six *Enhancers* were volunteering – four had increased their civic participation since T1. Three *Non-working Partners* were volunteering, up from 1 at T3 and two at T4 (although the intensity of this activity did not change).

[157] The 13 participants performing no voluntary service at T5 comprise 11 volunteers and two *Non-working Partners*. These were: #08, #11, #12, #20, #21, #23, #24, #29, #32, #39, #41, #50 and #52.

[158] Evidence that participation in the program led to different patterns of voluntary service was evident in 29 participants at T4 and 23 at T5. Participants at T5 whose post-assignment volunteering was influenced by their 2019 assignment were: #01, #02, #04, #06, #09, #14, #17, #18, #19, #22, #25, #28, #33, #36, #40, #44, #45, #46, #48, #49 and #54. In several cases, participants were explicit about the role that their assignment played as an impetus for this change; in other cases, participants were more ambivalent about attributing causality.

[159] Examples of participants who recognised and acknowledged a shift towards more internationally-oriented volunteering across the period T3-T5 are: #01, #02, #03, #06, #12, #17, #19, #20, #21, #22, #23, #28, #33, #36, #40, #44, #45, #49, #53 and #54.

[160] An additional three participants who contributed data from T1 to T4 (not T5) would also fall within this group.

[161] Participants who: (i) facilitated partnerships between international civic organisations to promote knowledge exchanges: #25, #36 and #54, (ii) sought and commenced (voluntary) positions in internationally-focused professional associations: #28 and #44, (iii) working groups with explicitly international concerns: #01 and #02, (iv) INGO: #53, (v) NGO with explicitly international concerns: #03.

[162] Participants involved in advocating for or practically working on issues like multiculturalism, anti-racism or migrant/refugee issues include: #04, #07, #08, #15, #21, #33, #36 and #53. Participants who expressed a view to support localised international development initiatives include: #07, #20, #30, #43 and #48.

[163] Participants #08, #19, #21, #22 and #24.

[164] It is noticeable that some participants' involvement in domestic volunteering declined in order for them to take on internationally-focused opportunities.

[165] The participant in this research project who is the focus of this case study, 'Nick', gave written approval for the inclusion of some identifying features of this case in order for these to be available to readers. Other parts of the case have been modified to ensure confidentiality.

[166] Sixteen participants reported being aware of using professional skills that were influenced by their volunteer assignment in their post-assignment voluntary activities during at least two interviews (T3-T5) were: #01, #02, #03, #04, #09, #15, #22, #28, #40, #44, #45, #46, #47, #48, #49 and #53.

[167] Volunteers who applied for or accepted voluntary roles as members of boards or executive committees for not-for-profit organisations: #02, #03, #05, #09, #16, #22 and #53.

[168] Participants who sought out local volunteering roles enabling them to use cross-cultural knowledge or skills that were developed during their assignment at multiple time periods (T3-T5) are: #01, #04, #05, #22, #25, #33 and #54.

[169] The participant in this research project who is the focus of this case study, 'Christine', gave written approval for the inclusion of some identifying features of this case in order for these to be available to readers. Other parts of the case have been modified to ensure confidentiality.

[170] Participants reporting voluntary service influenced by changing interest or values sparked by their assignment at multiple interviews (T3-T5) are: #01, #02, #08, #09, #14, #21, #30, #33, #43, #46 and #49.

[171] The participant in this research project who is the focus of this case study, 'Deirdre', gave written approval for the inclusion of some identifying features of this case in order for these to be available to readers. Other parts of the case have been modified to ensure confidentiality.

[172] Examples of participants whose voluntary service built on professional and/or civic interests that were instigated or developed during their assignment: (i) social enterprises: #09, (ii) gender equality: #14, (iii) issues specific to their former host-country: #01, #02, #45 and #54.

[173] Section 5.3.2, Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019).

[174] This excludes ongoing support for POs that most volunteers continued when their assignments were interrupted due to COVID repatriations in 2020.

[175] Participants completing a remote volunteer assignment since their assignment finished: #03, #08, #09, #10, #17, #19, #23, #33, #37, #40, #46 and #48. Six participants completed a remote volunteer assignment in the same host country and with the same PO as their 2019 in-country assignment: #03, #10, #17, #33, #37, #46. Participants completing multiple remote volunteer assignments: #03, #17, #33, #40, #46 and #48 (range 1-5 assignments). One volunteer completed a hybrid assignment involving a remote assignment and subsequent in-country placement with the same PO (#40).

[176] The estimated duration of these remote assignments accounts for several volunteers completing multiple assignments and one that was ongoing at the time of the T5 interview.

[177] These reasons (i.e., remote volunteer assignments being less rewarding, more challenging, and less effective than in-country assignments) were also the most commonly provided explanations for participants not undertaking remote volunteer assignments.

[178] Section 5.3 highlights participants' increasing understanding of and engagement with international development issues, including greater appreciation for the value of the theory of change in models of international development volunteering. Tiessen and Lough (2021) have also referred to international development volunteering as a form of "alternative public diplomacy." Source: Tiessen, R., & Lough, B.J. (2021). International development volunteering as alternative public diplomacy. In *Handbook of Development Policy* (pp. 283-292). Edward Elgar Publishing.

[179] The ten participants who have completed at least one in-country international volunteer assignment are: #03, #06, #15, #16, #17, #19, #28, #40, #48 and #49. The COVID pandemic halted the program's in-country assignments in 2020 (when participants were repatriated from their assignment) and prevented in-country international assignments until 2021. This figure excludes participants who had extended their volunteer assignment at the time of their repatriation. An additional participant (#27) was completing an in-country volunteer assignment at T4 but was unable to participate in the study at T5 for personal reasons and so is excluded from this number.

[180] Additionally, two *Non-working Partners* accompanied their partner on a follow-up assignment in the period 2022-2025: #18 and #50.

[181] The estimated duration of these assignments accounts for three assignments that were truncated because of issues associated with the PO-volunteer relationship and three assignments that were ongoing at the time of the T5 interview.

[182] Although some assignments were available in 2021, access to most in-country assignments re-commenced in 2022 after COVID. In-country assignments undertaken in the period: from T2-T3 = 1, from T3-T4 = 5, from T4-T5 = 7.

[183] Just two of these in-country volunteer assignments were in the same host country and with the same PO - #19 and #28.

[184] Half of the 10 in-country assignments have been undertaken by *Veterans* (n =5), all of whom were in semi- or full-retirement.

[185] All ten participants who completed subsequent in-country volunteer assignments had their initial assignment truncated due to COVID repatriation.

[186] Interest in a future volunteer assignment was lowest at T2 (38%) but grew sharply in 2021 and has plateaued since, rising very slightly from 69% at T3, to 70% (T4) and 72% (T5).

[187] Seven participants expressed conditional interest in future assignments: three based on health (#10, #25, #33), two finances (#19, #46) and two age (#09, #20).

[188] Participants reporting their interest in future international volunteer assignments being curtailed in the medium-term by: (i) family commitments: participants #12, #21, #24, #36 and #53, (ii) study: participant #12, (iii) challenges associated with age/health: participant #05, #10, #15, #16, #33 and #48, and (iv) difficulties finding roles to suit their expertise: participants #06, #26 and #44.

[189] The reasons expressed by some *Veterans* reflect elements of Erikson's concept of "generativity" through wanting to influence future generations and leave a lasting legacy. Source: Erikson, E.H. (1950). Childhood and Society. New York: Norton.

[190] Among participants' suggestions to improve the experiences of remote assignments at multiple interviews (T3-T5): (i) Help volunteers overcome the absence of contextual awareness, relationships with PO staff and feedback that are available during in-country assignments, (ii) Better align the 'remote' mode with the program's core philosophy, which tends to emphasise contextual awareness and peer solidarity that are difficult to achieve remotely, (iii) Support volunteers and PO staff to improve their digital literacies and so improve efficacy and enjoyment, (iv) Take extra effort to ensure roles and expectations are clear within the PO, (v) Set up multiple points of contact in the PO (i.e., avoid relying on a single person), and (vi) Streamline the approval process (e.g., police checks) to make it easier for former volunteers to apply or accept assignments.

[191] Formal support for POs since the assignment has mainly been via remote assignments, although it also included two in-country assignments after these re-commenced in 2021.

[192] The findings support the VIS (2024) findings that volunteers who completed a more recent volunteer assignment are more likely to be supporting the PO.

[193] At T5, the eight volunteers continuing to provide support to their POs were: #01, #08, #16, #22, #24, #33, #43 and #44, all informally.

[194] At T4, 18 volunteers (18/45, 40%) were providing support to their POs - seven (16%) via formal assignments.

[195] Five of the eight volunteers continuing to provide strong support to POs were connected through a strong counterpart relationship #01, #22, #24, #33 and #44. Three of these eight were also providing some form of financial support to the PO: #08, #16 and #22.

[196] In addition, small numbers of volunteers at each wave of data reported continuing to assist particular PO staff (including former counterparts) on individual personal and career issues, from preparing professional résumés or applying for further study opportunities.

[197] Participants #22, #28, #33 and #53.

[198] 'International development literacy' is a multifaceted indicator of participants' understanding of, engagement with, and attitudes towards international development work. 'Understanding' includes participants' knowledge of the values, practices, assumptions and relationships that exist within international development work. These include: (i) recognising the complexities and diversity of international development, including its multiple objectives and geopolitical dimensions, (ii) developing a practical understanding of the development landscape (roles of and relationships between main stakeholders), (iii) recognising how their skills and interests fit within the sector, (iv) understanding specific development issues more deeply, and (v) recognising challenges of achieving development outcomes and strategies that are suited or adapted to effectively develop capacity. 'Engagement' with international development issues is indicated by participants' monitoring and consumption of news, media reports, social media and/or policy announcements relating to international development policy or practice. 'Attitudes' towards international development are indicated by participants' evaluative orientations towards international development work, including the extent to which they see it as worthwhile, meaningful, legitimate and important, and whether they express support for or commitment to its aims despite awareness of its complexities and limitations.

[199] An earlier and more detailed version of this table is presented at Figure 8 in the report: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022). It also contains details of participants reporting each of the 'key contributors during assignment', 'post-assignment enablers', 'main outcomes' and 'outcomes applied to'.

[200] Examples of participants reporting each of the 'main outcomes' at multiple time periods (T2-T5) include: (i) increasing interest in & engagement with global development issues: #01, #09, #17, #18, #22, #24, #26, #29, #31, #32, #40 and #51, (ii). appreciating the distinctive role of development volunteering as an effective form of development practice: #01, #07, #15, #16, #24, #25, #29, #33, #36, #42, #47, #49 and #52, (iii) recognising the complexities and diversity of international development, including its multiple objectives and geopolitical dimensions: #03, #04, #05, #07, #08, #12, #19, #23, #24, #26, #28, #30, #34, #42, #44, #46, #47, #48, #50, #52, #53 and #55, (iv) developing a practical understanding of the contours of the development landscape (roles of and relationships between main stakeholders): #08, #10, #20, #23, #27, #37, #51 and #53, (v) recognising how their skills and interests "fit" within the sector: #07, #37 and #51, (vi) understanding specific development issues more deeply: #08, #10, #11, #17, #29 and #52, (vii) recognising challenges of achieving development outcomes and strategies that are suited or adapted to capacity development: #01, #02, #10, #15, #20, #29, #34, #40, #42, #43, #49, #51 and #52. Examples of participants reporting each of the 'outcomes applied to' at different time periods (T2-T5) are: (i) professional work roles: #01, #02, #03, #08, #09, #19, #21, #29, #31, #33, #35, #37, #40 and #46, (ii) career decisions: #02, #03, #04, #08, #09, #19, #28, #37, #40, #51 and #54, (iii) voluntary service, including international remote volunteering: #01, #03, #04, #09, #21, #26, #28, #44, #46 and #49, (iv) advocacy efforts within the community or with national and state governments: #10, #12, #15, #16, #20, #21, #26, #28, #35, #46 and #54, (v) donations and sharing resources: #08, #12, #15, #16, #22, #29 and #43.

[201] Examples and illustrative extracts of some of these themes can be found in earlier reports: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022) and Fee, A. & Lizier, A. (2024). Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024), Prepared for the Australian Volunteers Program.

[202] Participants who attributed increases in their overall ID literacy to their experiences during this volunteer assignment at multiple interviews (T3-T5) were: #01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #07, #08, #09, #10, #11, #12, #14, #16, #17, #18, #19, #20, #21, #22, #23, #24, #29, #32, #36, #37, #40, #42, #43, #44, #48, #49, #53 and #54. 'Sector-specific knowledge and skills' relating to international development and humanitarian aid also accounted for 9% of the in-country learning outcomes (45/522) reported at T2. These were reported by participants from all seven groups, primarily among *Transitioners*, *Veterans* and *Enhancers*. For nine participants, the in-country experience confirmed pre-existing favourable views about Australia's commitment to aid and development in the region (participants #10, #11, #15, #17, #18, #33, #44, #50 and #51). For a smaller number of others (participants #06, #14, #41 and #50) it reinforced sceptical views about the value of foreign aid, with participants observing situations that they felt reflected bureaucracy ('*box-ticking*', #14), and myopic (#20) or ineffectual impacts (#41 and #47). Source: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020), Section 4.3 and EndNote 92.

[203] The study found partial support for the findings of the 2024 VIS that volunteers' engagement with international development issues tends to decline over time (since completing their volunteer assignment). No support was found for the 2024 VIS finding that volunteers who have spent a longer time volunteering (including multiple assignments) report stronger civic benefits from their assignment/s.

[204] 'Cognitive engagement' refers to participants' ongoing psychological and behavioural connection to the international development sector and issues. It is evident through behaviours such as monitoring news and media, viewing content, attending or organising events, or informing themselves about international development issue via study, social media or other sources.

[205] Participants reporting ongoing active monitoring of international development issues: #02, #04, #08, #09, #14, #15, #16, #19, #23, #27, #29, #31, #37 and #53. Participants who are interested in and engage with international development issues without actively seeking it out regularly: #05, #17, #21, #24, #39, #45 and #48.

[206] In-country experiences that contributed to participants' increased geopolitical awareness include meeting people or contacting organisations involved in the sector, the visibility of foreign donors and actors in the host country, and discussions with other volunteers.

[207] All six *Enhancers* remain cognitively engaged in international development; four of these strongly.

[208] Among the most common of these changes were the recognition of structural inefficiencies in international development (seven participants) and the value of public diplomacy or geopolitical objectives associated with development (five participants).

[209] Participants #08, #09, #10, #16, #28, and #49.

[210] Participants #01, #02, #04, #05, #14, #16, #17, #21, #22, #23, #24, #25, #28, #29, #32, #33, #36, #37, #39, #40, #44, #45, #48, and #53.

[211] In general, actively engaged participants used social media as a prominent source of information about development issues; less engaged participants relied more on mainstream media covering development-related topics.

[212] Participants reporting accessing information about international development issues mainly via former volunteers and friends: #01, #07, #11, #24, #26, #28, #29 and #53.

[213] Examples of participants who engage with specific aspects of development that are relevant to their work are: social enterprises (#09, #46), development and public health (#02, #27, #45), specific programs in which they have been involved (#54), development issues in specific nations or regions (#01, #02, #05, #08, #19, #28).

[214] This finding is consistent with studies in 2025 showing a rise in favourability among Australians towards foreign aid. According to the authors of one of these (Wood & Hill, 2025), this change partly reflects the country's improving economic conditions (at that time). However, it was also associated with cuts to USAID made by the United States Government in 2025. Experiments using control/treatment groups showed that reading about the cuts impacted respondents' favourability. Sources: Wood, T. & Hill, C. (2025). Have Trump's cuts made Australians kinder? 2025 aid attitudes survey. Development Policy Centre, ANU; Neelam, R. (2025). 2025 Lowy Institute 2025 Report.

[215] No support was found for the finding of the 2024 VIS that volunteers who complete more volunteer assignments tend to report having a greater appreciation of the distinctive benefits of international development volunteering than those with fewer or single assignments.

[216] The definition of sector-level socialisation was adapted from: Cooper-Thomas, H.D., & Anderson, N. (2006). Organizational socialization: A new theoretical model and recommendations for future research and HRM practices in organizations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *21*(5), 492-516; Tharenou, P. & Kulik, C.T. (2020). Skilled migrants employed in developed, mature economies: From newcomers to organizational insiders. *Journal of Management*, *46*(6), 1156–1181; Woodrow, C. & Guest, D.E. (2020). Pathways through organizational socialization: A longitudinal qualitative study based on the psychological contract. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *93*(1), 110-133.

[217] For example, participants #14, #19, #29, #37 and #53.

[218] Participants #07, #11 and #20 – two *Launchers* and one *Transitioner*.

[219] Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[220] Other potential research avenues the program may want to investigate include the extent to which the disengagement reflects volunteers' difficulty establishing a structured transition from active to more occasional support resource, and the implications of this for POs, which may experience an abrupt loss of support when a new volunteer arrives.

[221] The features of the changes that the study documents (international, skills-based, values-driven) suggests the potential for more expansive, higher value and more sustained voluntary service, a proposition made in earlier reports for this study: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022)

[222] Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press; Van Maanen, J. & Schein, E.H. (1977). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 1, 209–264; Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

[223] Several studies in Australia and elsewhere highlight the career/professional motives of international development volunteers. These include: Brook, J., Missingham, B., Hocking, R. & Fifer, D. (2007). *The Right Person for the Job: International Volunteering and the Australian Employment Market*. Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements & Australian Volunteers International, Monash University; Meneghini, A.M. (2016). A meaningful break in a flat life: The motivations behind overseas volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *45*(6), 1214-1233; Okabe, Y., Shiratori, S. & Suda, K. (2019). What motivates Japan's international volunteers? Categorizing Japan overseas cooperation volunteers (JOCVs). *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *30*(5), 1069-1089. Schech, S., Skelton, T., Mundkur, A. & Kothari, U. (2020). International volunteerism and capacity development in nonprofit organizations of the global south. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *49(*2), 252-271.

[224] See Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019), Section 4.1, and the research publication arising from this: Fee, A., Devereux, P., Allum, C. & Everingham, P. (2025). Integrating international development volunteering with a meaningful career: Australian development volunteers in the Asia-Pacific. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 08997640251386775.

[225] Biermann, K.Y., Breitsohl, H. & Meijs, L.C. (2024). Occupation-related volunteering: A qualitative systematic literature review, conceptualization, and directions for future research. *SAGE Open*, *14*(2), 21582440241255834.

[226] This considers only professional/career work and does not consider the financial costs and benefits of their assignments. As Section 7 shows, several participants believe that are less financially secure because of their involvement in the program.

[227] Participants who returned to some work with a previous employer were: #01, #02, #05, #06, #29, #30, #40 and #44. Two of these were *Career Breakers* on leave (#30, #44), two others had continued performing some remote part-time work with the employer during the assignment and were able to continue this (#29, #40). One returned to a self-managed consultancy via a former employee (#05). Participants #37 and #53 reported seeking work but were unsuccessful.

[228] Excludes respondents who were retired and who did not seek full- or part-time work during this period.

[229] Results in each column of the table report verifiable data from all participants who contributed to the study at that point in time. On the data available (prior to these participants' withdrawal), no discernible differences were found in the employment status or career path of participants who withdrew from the study, although it is worth noting that 6 of the 8 withdrawing participants expressed 'career' objectives for their assignment as T1, including 5 identifying it as the primary objective.

[230] Throughout the study's three post-COVID phases (T3-T5), efforts were made to distinguish (in both interviews and analysis) those features of participants' career decisions, trajectory, and progress that stemmed from their volunteer assignment experiences, the conditions created by COVID, and other personal/social influences. This included dedicated interview questions to address this issue with participants (T2 to T5).

[231] Participants working part-time: at T3 - #04, #11, #27, #35 and #37, at T4 - #04, #05, #37, #41 and #45, at T5 - #01 and #26.

[232] The two retirees work part-time in casual roles relating to their professional field are #33 and #40.

[233] Six participants entered the program as full-time students, having completed degrees relevant to their volunteer assignment. Of these, four remained in the study across the six years (T1-T5). All four now work full-time in the career of their choice (#11, #19, #20, #37). Participant #11 changed the focus of their career because of their assignment experiences.

[234] Of the three who were in careers that were unrelated to their professional interests, #12 was working part-time in a former career while enrolled in a full-time study program that was inspired by the volunteer assignment (and balancing being a new parent), #26, who worked part-time, had left a full-time position in regional Australia for a combination of personal

and lifestyle reasons, while #42 worked full-time but had been unable to find stable work that built on his volunteer experiences or prior professional career of 35 years. The number of participants working in roles outside their main professional interest (i.e., 'plan B' careers) declined from five at T3 to one at T4 to two at T5. Participants working in roles not directly related to their preferred profession at T3 were #11, #12, #20, #21 and #27. The participant working in a role not directly related to their preferred profession at T4 was #42. At T5, the three participants were: #12, #26 and #42.

[235] This uses just the 47 participants for whom data is available at T5.

[236] For the two participants not employed full-time: participant #12 was studying full-time on a degree that was inspired by the volunteer assignment. Participant #40 had retired from paid work by choice, having completed multiple subsequent international volunteer assignments. Soon after the T5 interview, #40 commenced a third assignment since her initial assignment (email, 2025).

[237] Six participants were working overseas prior to their volunteer assignment. Of the six working abroad at T5, four were completing in-country volunteer assignments (#03, #06, #17 and #49) and two were in paid employment (#02 and #37), including one in a fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) international role. An additional two participants were living in retirement overseas at T5, accompanying spouses who were working.

[238] Participants working in roles with explicit international/global foci (e.g., managing international projects from an Australian base) and which require international business travel in some form: #14, #19, #29, #39 and #53.

[239] This detail was disclosed by participants and not part of the scheduled interview. It includes two retirees who had applied for international volunteer assignments, but whose assignment commencement had been delayed due to the participants' health.

[240] Illustrative extracts from Bronwen's interviews (T2-T5) that support the connection between the career steps identified in the figure and the volunteer assignments are: 2020: "Networking wise, I've met so many wonderful opportunities and I'm so grateful for a lot of people I've been able to link with. I think that will shape my ongoing work for at least the next few years" (T2). 2021: "The biggest impact has been meeting people and learning about all the other cool jobs that exist … it definitely opened my eyes to think, actually, there are so many of my professional skills that can be used for so many other things" (T3). 2023: "It's not overstating it to say it changed the trajectory of my career … I feel like I've built up a pretty niche set of skills that people [in my profession] don't generally have" (T4). 2025: "I feel it changed everything in a way. I suppose the networks are probably the main impact but also the passion. Until I got there and started doing this kind of work, I thought it would be a side hobby that I would do from time to time, a bit of a working holiday, go over and do a volunteer stint every now and then. I don't think I knew, pre-AVI, that it would change my whole working career. I really do feel like it has" (T5).

[241] At T1, 20 participants reported having some interest in pursuing an international career associated with their volunteer assignment. Six were working internationally at the time they accepted their assignment. Three of these were undertaking in-country volunteer assignments to which they were returning as an extension.

[242] These are participants #01, #07, #09, #20, #24 and #46.

[243] All but three had left previous employment upon entering the program, many for the specific purpose of accepting the volunteer assignment and exploring alternative professional opportunities.

[244] Includes employed participants only (excluding students and participants not working or seeking work).

[245] Just 10 participants (including four *Non-working Partners*) were retired at both T1 and T5 and eight participants have moved between retirement and employment (part-time or full-time) at various times between T2 and T5; two others who were working or seeking work at T1 have transitioned to retirement (#04 and #40).

[246] For one *Career Breaker*, the increased satisfaction comes from ongoing voluntary contributions she continues to make to the PO and to relatively minor professional opportunities that her assignment experiences created for her (#44). For the other (#30), the assignment provided "*a refresher for me*" (T5). At T4, she explained: "*I'm pretty sure I'll still be working in policy [in the future]. I've had a lot of thought about it … I think this is what I enjoy and I like the public sector, being able to help people and do something meaningful. So I think it doesn't have to be overseas, doesn't have to be volunteering, but I can still do something meaningful in public sector … the shift in the work [since the volunteer assignment] I do because [the work I did previously] didn't feel that inspiring. So doing policy to me is more interesting … I know that long-term there's something [meaningful] … I don't think I would have moved [to a new role without the volunteer assignment] because you don't – I mean, it seems fine when you're doing it, but then you don't realise, well actually there's other things I could be doing, so I think that gave me a bit of a refresh"* (T4).

[247] Analysing the impacts of participants' involvement with program on their careers combined data on participants': (i) stated pre-assignment objectives and motivations (T1), (ii) current employment status relative to T1 for all four post-assignment waves, (iii) descriptions of the use of assignment experiences, knowledge, capabilities or networks in their current work/career (including job or promotion applications) (T3-T5), and (iv) participants' overall evaluation about whether and how their present employment and/or professional status was affected by their involvement in the program (T5). Significant career events that participants linked clearly to their assignment were given greater weight.

[248] T2 is excluded because most participants had just been – or were in the process of being - repatriated from their assignment due to COVID at the time of the interviews (2020).

[249] *Non-working Partners* are excluded from the data in the bar chart. Those who were classified as "Benefited career and had expected or hoped it would" included four *Launchers* (#19, #37, #46, #51), four *Imposed Transitioners* (#01, #23, #28, #40), five *Enhancers* (#02, #03, #09, #45, #53), and six *Transitioners* (#08, #12, #24, #29, #39 and #54). Those who were classified as "Benefited career although had not expected it to" included two *Transitioners* (#04, #06) and five *Veterans* (#05, #17, #25, #33 and #49). Those who were classified as "No major benefit to career and no expectation that it would" included five *Veterans* (#10, #15, #16, #22 and #48), one *Transitioner* (#07) and two *Career Breakers* (#43 and #44). Those who were classified as "Did not benefit career despite expecting or hoping it would" included two *Transitioners* (#41 and #52), one *Career Breaker* (#30), one *Enhancer* (#14), three *Imposed Transitioners* (#26, #36 and #42), and one *Launcher* (#11).

[250] This includes 26/42 participants, excluding *Non-working Partners*. It comprises the 19 participants (45%) who benefited and had hoped it would, and the seven participants (17%) who benefited although they had not expected it to.

[251] 10/11 (91%) participants identified 'career' as their primary motive for volunteering and 18/26 (65%) identified some career-related motive at T1. The latter includes participants reporting 'career' as a second or third motivation as well as those for whom 'career' was the primary motivation.

[252] Participants reporting career impacts as the biggest impact of their volunteer assignment were: #02, #08, #09, #19, #28, #29, #37, #53 and #54. This includes four of the six participants identifying career benefits as the biggest impact of their volunteer experience at T4. These were #08, #37, #53 and #54.

[253] Direct career advantage: Participants #02, #03, #06, #08, #09, #11, #14, #19, #20, #23, #24, #28, #29, #36, #37, #39, #45, #46, #53 and #54.

[254] Indirect development without strong recognition: Participants #01, #07, #12, #21, #26, #40, #41, #42 and #52.

[255] Continuity and some enrichment without reinvention: Participants #04, #05, #10, #15, #16, #17, #18, #22, #25, #30, #33, #43 and #44.

[256] For 'impacts on perceived job performance', responses were to the direct interview question at T5: Do you think you're better at your job (or 'profession') now as a result of your time as an international volunteer? What do you think it was about the assignment that influenced that most strongly?

[257] Participants who were working at T5: 21/32 (66%). Participants who were working or studying full-time in their chosen fields (21/29, 72%).

[258] Eighteen of the 27 participants who reported 'career' related motivations at T1 also reported being better at their current job as a result of their experiences with the program at T5 (67%). Eight of the 11 participants who identified 'career' as their primary or sole reason for entering the assignment also reported being better at their current job as a result of their experiences with the program at T5 (73%).

[259] Participants #07, #08, #09, #11, #12, #19, #20, #21, #23, #24, #26, #28, #29, #36, #39, #40, #42, #46, #52 and #54. This includes participants using their professional expertise in full-time volunteer roles.

[260] Participants whose career transition was inspired by experiences during their volunteer assignment were: #09, #11, #12, #19, #20, #23, #28, #46 and #54.

[261] Excludes participants who are not seeking work and *Non-working Partners*.

[262] On average, *Transitioners* took 7.5 months after repatriation to find employment. This was longer than *Launchers* (4 months), *Enhancers* (5.7 months), *Career Breakers* (0 months), and *Veterans* (1.5 months for those wanting to work). Only *Imposed Transitioners*, on average, took longer (8 months). While these averages are moderately correlated with age (although not gender identity), it is worth noting that many factors are likely to have influenced the time taken to find work, including the type of work that participants were willing or able to perform during the COVID period.

[263] For example, the proportion of *Transitioners* reporting career benefits rose from 27% (3/11) at T3 to 73% (8/11) at T5. Over the same period, the number reporting no benefit from the assignment or that the assignment was detrimental to their career fell: (i) No benefit: from 5/11 (45%) at T3 to 2/11 (18%) at T5, (ii) detrimental: from 3/11 (27%) at T3 to 1/11 at T5 (9%).

[264] The eight participants who had expected or hoped at T1 that their involvement with the program would help their career but have yet to realise a tangible benefit are: *Imposed Transitioners* (#26, #36 and #42), *Launchers* (#11), *Enhancers* (#14), *Career Breakers* (#30) and *Transitioners* (#52).

[265] Two of these had to forego informal commitments for future work that they had been offered in the host country when they were evacuated.

[266] Participants motivated by 'career' at T1 who report that the assignment did not contribute to them being better at their job at T5 are: *Transitioners*: #07, #12, #41, #52 and #54; *Imposed Transitioners*: #26, #36 and #42; *Career Breakers:* #30 and #44.

[267] No firm support was found for the 2024 VIS finding that women are more likely to refer to their volunteer assignment in applications for jobs or promotions than men.

[268] While the assessments by participants about the impact of their assignment during job applications are largely subjective, those reporting benefits in the application process did also report stronger career benefits (T5). They were also more likely to report career-related motivations for their assignment (T1).

[269] Responses on the accuracy of pre-assignment PDs were available from 33 participants at T2 and revisited (confirmed) at subsequent interviews: nine reported generally accurate PDs, 27 reported generally inaccurate PDs. Others chose not to, or were unable to, comment. Over half (57%) of participants whose assignment design was accurate (at T1) reported that their volunteer assignment was strongly beneficial during professional applications. Just 27% of volunteers who had inaccurate position descriptions felt the same.

[270] Examples of illustrative interview extracts supporting these findings can be found in earlier reports, including the box in Section 5.3.1 (page 54) of: Fee, A. & Lizier, A. (2024). Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024), Prepared for the Australian Volunteers Program.

[271] Figures exclude participants for whom this was not relevant. Thirteen reported strong impact on job or promotion applications (participants #02, #05, #08, #09, #19, #23, #29, #37, #39, #40, #46, #53 and #54) and another eight reported moderate or some impact (participants #03, #06, #17, #30, #24, #28, #33 and #48). Participants reporting no or negligible benefit were #01, #11, #26, #30, #36, #42, #43 and #44. This supports results of the 2024 VIS that volunteers who completed a more recent volunteer assignment report a greater likelihood of benefiting from professional networks and referring to their assignment in job applications.

[272] Participants who have been internally promoted since their volunteer assignment are: #02, #07, #19, #23, #24, #28, #29, #30, #39, #41, #46 and #53. Those who believed that capabilities they learned or experiences that they had during their volunteer assignment had a direct impact on this promotion: #02, #19, #24 and #53.

[273] The participant in this research project who is the focus of this case study, 'Germaine', gave written approval for the inclusion of some identifying features of this case in order for these to be available to readers. Other parts of the case have been modified to ensure confidentiality.

[274] This experience conforms with research highlighting how progression in some work contexts (like government) depend on codified policy knowledge and certain 'in-house' experiences rather than generic global experiences. This research draws on the ways that 'institutional logics' – macro-level structures within certain professions or sectors - influence careers. Institutional logics are "socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). These logics are believed to create expectations among actors within a field about the legitimacy or value of certain experiences and skills over others. Sources: Cai, Y. (2025). Institutional logics analysis of management and leadership in higher education. In *Organisational and Management*

Theories in Higher Education (pp. 131-165). Edward Elgar Publishing; Pietilä, M. & Pinheiro, R. (2021). Reaching for different ends through tenure track-institutional logics in university career systems. *Higher Education*, *81*(6), 1197-1213; Thornton, P.H. & Ocasio, W. (1999). Institutional logics and the historical contingency of power in organizations: Executive succession in the higher education publishing industry, 1958–1990. *American Journal of Sociology*, *105*(3), 801-843.

[275] Participants #01, #04, #07, #08, #11, #14, #19, #20, #23, #24, #26, #29, #37, #52, #53 and #54. Includes only participants from whom T5 outcomes are available.

[276] For more reading on volunteering as prosocial action see: Snyder, M. & Omoto, A.M. (2009). Who gets involved and why? The psychology of volunteerism. In Liu, E.S.C, Holosko, M.J. & Lo, T.W. (Eds). *Youth Empowerment and Volunteerism: Principles, Policies and Practices* (pp. 3-26). City University of Hong Kong Press. For more reading on prosocial careers see: Duffy, R.D. & Raque-Bogdan, T.L. (2010). The motivation to serve others: Exploring relations to career development. *Journal of Career Assessment, 18*(3), 250-265.

[277] Participants #02, #03, #09, #30, #39, #40, #45 and #46.

[278] Participants who had sought (at T1) and who had achieved a prosocial transition by T3 were: #02, #03, #04, #08, #09, #19, #23, #37, #40, #46 and #54. Participants who had sought at T1 and who had achieved a prosocial transition by T4 were: #02, #04, #07, #08, #09, #14, #23, #24, #27, #28, #29, #37, #40, #45, #46, #53 and #54. Participants who had sought (at T1) and who had achieved a prosocial transition by T5 were: #02, #03, #08, #09, #14, #23, #24, #29, #37, #40, #45, #46, #52 and #53. While the total numbers have remained relatively stable from T4 to T5, some individual changes are evident as participants move between positions or retirement.

[279] Participants #06, #12, #28 and #33 had transitioned into work with stronger prosocial features at T5 despite not seeking this at T1.

[280] Includes the 14 prosocial career seekers who achieved this transition by T5 (included in the table) and four additional participants who had moved to roles with strong prosocial features despite not seeking this at T1 (#06, #12, #28 and #33).

[281] Other features common to most volunteers who made a successful prosocial transition are: being unaccompanied during the assignment, viewing their assignment experiences favourably, reporting professional and international changes as the main impacts of the assignment on them.

[282] Participants who were seeking but had not achieved a prosocial career transition by T5 were: #01, #07, #11, #19, #20, #26, #30, #39 and #54.

[283] Two are employed part-time; one has retired.

[284] Participants #07, #11, #20 and #30.

[285] Others returned from their assignments to changed family circumstances that required them to live and find employment locally (#01, #24). For at least three participants, heightened financial insecurity – amplified for many people during COVID (Cao & Hamori, 2022) and in two cases linked directly to volunteering – led to different career trajectories ("*I'm definitely in a worse financial position than if I'd tried to optimise my career for finances*", #29, T5). Source: Cao, J., & Hamori, M. (2022). Adapting careers to the COVID crisis: The impact of the pandemic on employees' career orientations. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *139,* 103789.

[286] Analysing professional learning outcomes and the impacts of these: The data in this section are drawn from all five waves of interviews, notably T2-T5. At T2, participants recounted specific learning episodes that they experienced during their volunteer assignments and that they believed were important personally or professionally. Each learning episode was coded for what was learned (learning outcome), main contributor (learning trigger), and context in which it occurred (learning context). On average, each participant was able to identify more than nine learning outcomes that they attributed to their in-country experiences (total = 522). These were classified into one of ten sets of learning outcomes, each comprising between two and 11 sub-outcomes. Descriptions of these can be found in *Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (*December 2020). In subsequent interviews, participants were invited to share the main experiences, knowledge and capabilities that they believed the assignment had contributed to their professional capabilities (and why) and the value that they derived from these (e.g., how they used these in their professional lives). They also shared specific, tangible examples of the impacts of these. Where outcomes differed from accounts of learning episodes reported at T2, respondents explained the assignment's contributions to these and commented on any enduring impacts of learnings that had been reported earlier. The final interview (T5) focused on knowledge and capabilities that participants had found most beneficial and their reflections of the overall professional contribution of the assignment to their current bank of professional knowledge and capabilities. The summary presented here focuses on outcomes and contributors where clear links exist between in-country experiences and outcomes that have proven to be professionally relevant across the sample and for each group of volunteers.

[287] Fee, A. & Gray, S.J. (2011). Fast-tracking expatriate development: The unique learning environments of international volunteer placements. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. *22(*3),530-552; Fee A. & Gray S.J. (2013). Transformational learning experiences of international development volunteers in the Asia-Pacific: The case of a multinational NGO. *Journal of World Business*. *48*(2),196-208.

[288] Terminology used in this classification has evolved across the study to reflect the priorities given by participants to different features and how these use these professionally. For example, the category 'Intercultural capabilities' was adapted from earlier categories of 'Cross-cultural knowledge and capabilities' and other relatively minor categories at T2, T3 or T4 (e.g., 'Communication skills' and parts of 'Personal development'). 'Professional confidence', initially a sub-category within the 'Personal development', was created as a stand-alone category because of its increasing importance and the growing number of participants across categories referring to this.

[289] 'Career capital', identified by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), includes three dimensions of resources that, in unison, provide capabilities needed to succeed in a range of career contexts: (i) 'knowing-how' refers to capabilities, expertise, and ways of working. It is reflected in interpersonal and intercultural capabilities, role performance and management capabilities, and professional confidence; (ii) 'knowing-what', or the knowledge and networks within a professional domain, is captured primarily through domain-specific knowledge and capabilities (and partly role performance and management capabilities); and (iii) 'knowing-why', encompassing professional purpose, values, and meaning from work, is captured in career direction and priorities. Source: Defillippi, R.J. & Arthur, M.B. 1994. The boundaryless career: A competency-based perspective. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 15*(4), 307–324.

[290] 'Intercultural capabilities' comprised 19% of all reported learning episodes coded at T2 (101/522). The largest proportion of these was 'culture-specific capabilities' (81 outcomes), comprising a richer understanding and appreciation of the host

country's lifestyle, history, values, language or diversity), with fewer reports of learning classified as 'culture-general capabilities' (20 outcomes).

[291] Participants who reported benefiting from the application of 'intercultural capabilities' in the professional settings (work or civic participation): 35/47 (74% of the sample). At each post-COVID interview (T3-T5), more than half (and up to 80%) of participants reported using and benefiting from intercultural competencies that they formed or enhanced during the assignment in professional activities (work or civic): T3: 26 participants (55%), T4: 38 participants (80%), T5: 37 (79%).

[292] Participants identifying 'intercultural capabilities' as a factor in their assignment contributing to improved job performance: 21/32 (66%).

[293] At T4, the ratio of participants reporting the use of culture-general versus culture-specific knowledge and capabilities in the workplace was 5:1. At T5, it was 6:1.

[294] Participants who reported benefiting from role performance and management capabilities at multiple interviews (T3-T5) were: #02, #03, #04, #06, #08, #09, #15, #17, #19, #23, #24, #28, #33, #35, #37, #43, #44, #46 and #53.

[295] Examples of participants who reported applying 'mentoring' capabilities from their assignment in their work following their assignment at multiple interviews (T3-T5) include: #02, #03, #04, #09, #15, #17, #19, #35, #43, #44, #46 and #49. Participants who reported applying 'capacity development' capabilities from their assignment in their current work are: #09, #15, #24, #28, #29, #53 and #54. Activities that these were used for include: (i) leadership and managing change - #02, #03, #09, #23, #28, #29, #43 and #52, (ii) managing interpersonal relationships - #03, #06, #16, #17, #24, #31, #33 and #49, (iii) communicating - #11, #23, #24, #27 and #33.

[296] Thirty-seven in-country learning episodes of 'role performance and management capabilities' were reported at T2. These included 'managing and implementing change' (18) or 'supporting others' learning' (5). The primary contexts in which these occurred were: undertaking 'stretch' roles, cross-cultural collaboration activities with HCNs (8), and adjusting normal work practices (8).

[297] Domain-specific knowledge and capabilities accounted for 72/522 (14%) of learning episodes reported at T2. These included expanded technical knowledge or know-how by applying skills in new contexts or ways (41 outcomes), greater professional confidence (15), and establishing new domain-specific contacts/networks (7).

[298] Volunteers working in health and social/community services sectors also reported substantial numbers of domain-specific learning outcomes at T2.

[299] Thirty-seven participants (69% of the full T2 sample) believed that their involvement with the program contributed to their professional (domain-specific) capabilities in some way, although for a third of these (11, 20%) the benefit was relatively modest. Excluding *Non-Working Partners*, whose assignments involved no or few professional activities, almost three-quarters (73%) of participants believed the assignment offered some contribution to their domain-specific expertise; for just over a half, the contribution was strong.

[300] Over a third of domain-specific learning stemmed from performing 'stretch' roles (24/71). Just 13% (9/71) came from collaborations or consultations with others, and 4% from being able to observe (positive) role models.

[301] Enhanced domain-specific knowledge and capabilities were reported by 23 participants at T3 (43%): #01, #04, #08, #09, #10, #17, #19, #20, #23, #26, #28, #29, #31, #33, #35, #37, #39, #40, #42, #46, #48, #53 and #54. At T4, 14 participants (28%) reported benefiting from domain-specific knowledge and capabilities developed during their assignment: #01, #08, #09, #14, #19, #20, #23, #26, #31, #37, #38, #40, #53 and #54. At T5, 20 participants believed the assignment had benefited their domain-specific knowledge and capabilities in some way, representing 43% of the sample and 45% excluding *Non-working Partners:* #01, #02, #04, #05, #06, #08, #09, #17, #19, #21, #28, #29, #33, #37, #40, #45, #46, #49, #53 and #54.

[302] Participants: #17, #25, #38, #40 and #44. Three of these experiences were subsequent volunteer assignments, allowing the participant to compare alternative models.

[303] This is not unusual. Studies have shown that expatriates employed in other sectors and roles also begin to question their professional values and rethink their relationship with their employers. Source: Dickmann, M. & Harris, H. (2005). Developing career capital for global careers: The role of international assignments. *Journal of World Business*, *40*(4), 399-408.

[304] *Transitioners* who were persuaded *against* a new career direction they had hoped the assignment would help to facilitate were: international development (#07), education (#12) or government (#52). *Transitioners* who reported personal changes accompanying their professional career clarity and which influenced subsequent professional decisions were: confidence gains (#54), cultural competence (#08), finding a meaningful vocation (#08, #24), or burnout recovery (#07). Conversely, others experienced challenges (physical health, mental health, traumatic repatriation) that made professional transitions less smooth.

[305] At T2, 10 participants (20% of volunteers) reported legitimacy benefits from their assignment: #01, #02, #04, #14, #27, #28, #35, #44, #46 and #47. Three of these reported no noticeable improvement in domain-specific capabilities at the same interview: #14, #44 and #47. Of those remaining in the study at T5, 3/7 have realised objective career progress from their volunteer assignment (#02, #28 and #46). For others, the impacts are less clear.

[306] The summary in Table 16 draws on responses at T2 (reported learning episodes) and participants' reflections on the key professional learning, the strength and benefits of these outcomes, and importance of different assignment features and developmental outcomes to their professional development (T3-T5).

[307] Myers, B. & Thorn, K. (2023). From career to "coreer": SIE and personal transformation in later life. *Journal of Global Mobility*, *11*(2), 159-178.

[308] These high density features include three dimensions: (i) the degree to which the work involves physical mobility (mobility), (ii) the degree to which the expatriate needs to adjust thought patterns and scripts to interact with people and adapt to demands across cultures (cognitive flexibility), (iii) the extent to which the role requirements disrupt or interfere with employees' normal routines/activities (non-work disruptions). Sources: Mello, R., Suutari, V. & Dickmann, M. (2023). Taking stock of expatriates' career success after international assignments: A review and future research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, *33*(1), 100913; Shaffer, M.A., Kraimer, M.L., Chen, Y.P. & Bolino, M.C. (2012). Choices, challenges, and career consequences of global work experiences: A review and future agenda. *Journal of Management*, *38*(4), 1282-1327.

[309] Jokinen, T. (2010). Development of career capital through international assignments and its transferability to new contexts. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *54*(4), 325-336.

[310] Myers, B. & Thorn, K. (2023). From career to "coreer": SIE and personal transformation in later life. *Journal of Global Mobility*, *11*(2), 159-178.

[311] Sixty-six percent (318/484) of in-country learning episodes occurred in the workplace, primarily 'role performance and management capabilities' which most commonly occurred while participants were performing 'non-routine' work roles, defined as activities that were outside the participants' usual work role associated with their profession.

[312] The main experiential learning approaches were: (i) having to make adjustments to suit local conditions (74/479, or 15% of all learning outcomes), (ii) performing 'stretch' roles that involved unfamiliar responsibilities or activities (55/479, 11%), and (iii) pressure situations involving conflict, urgency or stress (27/479, 6%). The main social learning approaches were collaborating, discussing or consulting others (104/479, 22%) The main vicarious learning approaches (30% in total) were: (i) immersion in the organisational or cultural environment (80/479, 17%), (ii) observing role models, both positive and negative (29/479, 6%), and (iii) observing work practices (29/479, 6%).

[313] This finding is broadly consistent with other studies of learning transferred from international work assignments to subsequent careers: Yakob, R. (2024). Mind the professional void! Career capital development and transfer in international assignments. *Journal of Global Mobility*, *12*(2), 219-240.

[314] Twenty-three percent of all learning (111/484) and 35% of workplace learning (111/318) involved participants performing work that was classified as non-routine; that is, that would not typically be associated with their identified profession.

[315] Forty-four percent (37/84) of the learning episodes reporting improved 'role performance and management capabilities' were reported during non-routine tasks in the workplace, most commonly during activities associated with capacity development such as 'managing and implementing change' (18) or 'supporting others' learning' (5). Thirty-two percent of learning episodes reporting 'domain-specific knowledge and capabilities' outcomes (22/69) occurred during stretch roles or non-routine tasks. Among the types of outcomes were learning a 'new professional field' (7) and improved 'task performance' (6).

[316] Participants #11, #17, #25, #34 and #38.

[317] In 2021 (T3), 29 participants (94% of employed workers and students) reported applying other capabilities identified in their work, most commonly role performance and management capabilities. Source: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022)

[318] Thirteen of the 32 participants working at T5 (41%) use capabilities improved or developed during the assignment that are important features of the work they do and/or how they perform it: participants #02, #03, #05, #06, #09, #19, #23, #28, #37, #40, #46, #53 and #54.

[319] Participants reporting application of domain specific knowledge and capabilities that they developed or improved during their assignment in their subsequent work: #01, #06, #08, #09, #19, #28, #40 and #54.

[320] For information about the process of 'knowledge translation', see Carlile, P.R. (2004). Transferring, translating, and transforming: An integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries. *Organization Science*, *15*(5), 555–568. More recent articles addressing knowledge transfer and knowledge translation from international work include: Oleškevičiūtė, E., Dickmann, M., Andresen, M., & Parry, E. (2022). The international transfer of individual career capital: Exploring and developing a model of the underlying factors. *Journal of Global Mobility, 10*(3), 392-415, and Yakob, R. (2024). Mind the professional void! Career capital development and transfer in international assignments. *Journal of Global Mobility, 12*(2), 219-240.

[321] Succi, C. & Canovi, M. (2020). Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: Comparing students and employers' perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education*, *45*(9), 1834-1847.

[322] Deming, D.J. (2017). The growing importance of social skills in the labor market. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *132*(4), 1593-1640.

[323] Pekaar, K.A., van der Linden, D., Bakker, A.B. & Born, M.P. (2017). Emotional intelligence and job performance: The role of enactment and focus on others' emotions. *Human Performance*, *30*(2-3), 135-153.

[324] While we could find no studies that demonstrate or hypothesise that 'soft skills' enable the transferral of professional skills in new workplaces, a body of research on transferral of knowledge and skills suggest that the work environment has a major impact on the ability to transfer learning between different (workplace) settings (e.g., Baldwin & Ford, 1988). The capabilities may function as enablers by helping volunteers to establish the networks and support that have been shown to facilitate knowledge transfer, and to negotiate and communicate in ways that help them translate their existing professional knowledge and skills (e.g., Blume et al., 2010). It is also likely that their direct experiences adapting and applying their knowledge and skills to an unfamiliar PO context during their assignment was beneficial. References: Blume, B.D., Ford, J.K., Baldwin, T.T. & Huang, J.L. (2010). Transfer of training: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Management, 36*(4), 1065–1105; Baldwin, T.T. & Ford, J.K. (1988). Transfer of training: A review and directions for future research. *Personnel Psychology*, *41*(1), 63-105.

[325] Dokko, G. & Jiang, W.Y. (2024). From boundaryless to boundary-crossing: Toward a friction-based model of career transitions and job performance. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *44*, 100205.

[326] 'Translation work' is the interpersonal and cognitive work of creating a shared meaning by making knowledge usable across boundaries. It involves re-expressing, re-framing, and adapting knowledge for people with different assumptions, vocabularies, and interests. It can involve mechanisms like using boundary objects (e.g., models, visuals, shared artefacts) or boundary brokers who connect groups and facilitate understanding. Sources: Carlile, P.R. (2004). Transferring, translating, and transforming: An integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries. *Organization Science*, *15*(5), 555-568; Carlile, P.R. (2002). A pragmatic view of knowledge and boundaries: Boundary objects in new product development. *Organization Science*, *13*(4), 442-455.

[327] Blume, B.D., Ford, J.K., Baldwin, T.T., & Huang, J.L. (2010). Transfer of training: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Management, 36*(4), 1065–1105; Baldwin, T.T. & Ford, J.K. (1988). Transfer of training: A review and directions for future research. *Personnel Psychology*, *41*(1), 63-105.

[328] This is consistent with the findings of Section 6.2 that volunteers who developed and sustained professional networks achieved better career outcomes.

[329] This finding is consistent with the 2024 VIS finding that former volunteers report benefiting in multiple ways from the relationships they formed during their volunteer assignment, but this is less likely to be the case for professional relationships. In other words, the current study supports the 2024 VIS finding that volunteer assignments may not be especially beneficial for volunteers' professional networks.

[330] The 17 participants who reported having accrued some professional benefit from networks that they established at one or more time periods (T3-T5) were: #01, #02, #09, #12, #17, #19, #24, #28, #33, #35, #37, #40, #41, #45, #46, #53 and #54. These comprise 36% of the full sample and 51% of the sample who are currently working (including those on full-time international volunteer assignments).

[331] *Launchers*, *Enhancers*, *Transitioners* and *Imposed Transitioners.*

[332] The four participants reporting substantial professional benefits were: #02, #19, #37 and #53.

[333] The following participants reported professional benefits from the following groups at least once during the T2-T5 period: (i) expatriates (#02, #12, #35, #37, #40, #42, #46, #53 and #54), (ii) HCNs (#01, #17, #19, #24, #28, #36, #37, #40, #41, #53 and #54), (iii) Australians (#02, #19, #37, and #46).

[334] Participants who used professional networks to instigate one or more civic-focused partnerships: #02, #03, #09, #19, #24, #44, #45 and #53.

[335] Participants who benefited from professional networks formed during the assignment providing access to work opportunities via referrals or references: #02, #06, #19, #24, #28, #37, #40, #45, #46 and #53.

[336] Reasons for participants losing contact with professional networks include death of the contact (#08), staff turnover in the PO (#20), changing sector/career (#31), or their decision to disconnect from social media (#43).

[337] The five participants reporting the absence of domestic professional networks as harming their employment prospects following repatriation were: #01, #07, #08, #45 and #52. Two of these had been overseas prior to their volunteer assignment. *Transitioners* were unemployed for an average of 7.5 months following their COVID repatriations, longer than all groups except *Imposed Transitioners* and above the sample mean of 5.8 months.

[338] More details about the nature of the volunteer-study interface are outlined in Section 5.3.3 of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers 2019-2021: Final Report (April 2022) and Section 5.3.2 of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024).

[339] Most commonly post-graduate degrees in health or education. It should also be noted that professional and personal restrictions created by COVID influenced some participants' opportunity to study further, either by constraining alternative work opportunities or by providing time for reflection to consider their next step.

[340] The 15 participants inspired to commence formal study by their assignment came from all seven volunteer types, although were mainly younger *Transitioners*, *Launchers* and *Enhancers*.

[341] The ten participants reporting tangible professional benefits from studies that were inspired by their volunteer assignment were: #02, #03, #06, #08, #20, #28, #33, #43, #46 and #54. Of these, two did not complete their degrees but found the knowledge they gained valuable for a job application (#06) and work role (#46). One completed the program of study but has not yet benefited professionally (#37). Participant #11 discontinued the studies without noticeable benefit.

[342] Participants whose study plans reflected a distinctive feature of the local culture: #08 and #43; participants whose studies involved the cross-cultural application of their professional training or backgrounds: #08 and #33.

[343] Career crafting is an ongoing process that involves both reflecting on and actively constructing a career (e.g., by acting on the competencies needed to advance a career) with the goal of ensuring 'person-career fit' throughout a career. Sources: Akkermans, J. & Tims, M. (2017). Crafting your career: How career competencies relate to career success via job crafting. *Applied Psychology*, *66*(1), 168-195; Suárez-Bilbao, B., Andresen, M., Crowley-Henry, M. & O'Connor, E.P. (2023). The influence of complexity, chance and change on the career crafting strategies of SIEs. *Career Development International*, *28*(4), 359-376.

[344] The experiences of participants are generally consistent with research showing that international work produces mixed career effects but is generally positive on multiple measures, although these can differ by assignment and the type of expatriate. For instance, the type of assignment can influence the extent and type of career benefit that expatriates experience. Those who are assigned abroad by an employer and return to the same organisation may benefit from internal job hire opportunities, probably related to social capital benefits (Dickmann & Cerdin, 2018). Female expats may derive fewer benefits (Mello et al., 2023). Sources: Dickmann, M. & Cerdin, J.L. (2018). Exploring the development and transfer of career capital in an international governmental organization. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *29*(15), 2253-2283; Mello, R., Suutari, V. & Dickmann, M. (2023). Taking stock of expatriates' career success after international assignments: A review and future research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, *33*(1), 100913.

[345] The term 'transfer narrative' draws on the narrative approach to career development (Savickas, 2012) and refers to the story a volunteer constructs to explain how skills developed during their assignment - which may be tacit or difficult for them to articulate - can be applied in a prospective role or sector. A 'micronarrative' similarly draws on Savickas's (2012) concept of the small but "important incidents, recurrent episodes, significant figures, self-defining moments, and life-changing experiences" (p. 16), that together constitute a professional identity story. Source: Savickas, M.L. (2012). Life design: A paradigm for career intervention in the 21st century. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *90*(1), 13–19.

[346] For volunteers at later career stages (*Career Breakers*, *Veterans*, and *Non-working Partners*) the assignment was valuable in different ways, but these were more often personal and affirming than professionally transformative.

[347] Lazarova, M. & Taylor, S. (2009). Boundaryless careers, social capital, and knowledge management: Implications for organizational performance. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 30*(1), 119–139; Seibert, S.E., Kraimer, M.L. & Liden, R.C. (2001). A social capital theory of career success. *Academy of Management Journal*, *44*(2), 219–237.

[348] In each case, the goal of these activities is to support volunteers to continue their own career construction, rather than be passive recipients of a reintegration process.

[349] Akkermans, J., Seibert, S.E. & Mol, S.T. (2018). Tales of the unexpected: Integrating career shocks in the contemporary careers literature. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, *44*(1), 1-10; Akkermans, J., Richardson, J. & Kraimer, M.L. (2020). The COVID-19 crisis as a career shock: Implications for careers and vocational behavior. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *119*, 103434.

[350] Kierner, A. & Suutari, V. (2018). Repatriation of international dual-career couples. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *60*(6), 885-895; Kimber, J.A. (2019). Repatriation: A qualitative study of repatriates after returning from China assignments. *Journal of Global Mobility*, *7*(4), 381-394; Szkudlarek, B. (2010). Reentry - A review of the literature. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *34*(1), 1-21.

[351] Kierner, A. & Suutari, V. (2018). Repatriation of international dual-career couples. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *60*(6), 885-895.

[352] Participants marrying since the assignment ended: #12, #21, #39, #43 and #53; participants becoming parents: #12, #21, #41 and #53; participants becoming grandparents: #32, #36 and #38.

[353] Participants who relocated to a new city for personal or professional reasons were: #02, #03, #06, #08, #09, #20, #24, #26, #28, #32, #36, #37, #45, #46, #52 and #54.

[354] Participants reporting major medical issues during their assignments at T2: #01, #06, #07, #10, #13, #14, #22, #23, #25, #26, #27, #28, #29, #32, #33, #36, #38, #40, #41, #42, #43, #45, #47 and #49. Participants who reported using *Response Psychological* during their assignment (T2): #08, #14, #29, #42 and #47. For details, see: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase Two Final Report (December 2020).

[355] Participants reporting major health issues at T3 as a result of either their assignment or the post-assignment adjustment during COVID: #07, #12, #14, #20, #21, #28, #29, #41, #42, #45, #46 and #52. For details, see Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022), Section 6.3.2.

[356] The two classic texts that describe liminality and the liminal state are: Arnold van Gennep, A. (1908/1960). *The Rites of Passage – A Classical Study of Cultural Celebrations*, The University of Chicago Press; Turner, V. (1969/1995). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine de Gruyter.

[357] Examples of participants descriptions of this 'protracted liminality' following their assignment are outlined in Section 6.3.2 of the report Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022). They include: "*I was kind of like, oh my god what am I doing? Feeling quite aimless or weird … how do I figure out life now?*" (#46); "*… time stood still really … I was very unsettled*" (#05); "*We were holding up some really big decision points … previously we had all these plans, they're all successive, and now it's like, okay … we're just going to roll with it"* (#21); "*I felt like I was perching for the first six months. You didn't know whether you were going back or not or what was happening … we had to get a job … and then the rent goes up so I move in with a friend and now I'm waiting for my contract so I can have a bit more stability"* (#24); "*It was very much that limbo space which is a funny psychological space to be in, and it is not always the easiest … it's not normal everyday life … ups & downs"* (#29); "*… basically every month after we came back we thought we'd be two months away from leaving. So I wasn't really looking to engage in anything that would require me to be here for more than two or three months. I didn't play any sport … I held back from making new friends and things like that … I thought I'd be leaving in one- or two-months' time"* (#51); "*From last year, everything seemed to be put on hold, it was just a non-year really. When it dragged on and dragged on, you say okay I've got to reset"* (#55).

[358] Participants reporting being affected by the death of one or more PO colleagues, volunteers, or HCN friends: 16/47 (34%).

[359] Participants contrasting their volunteer assignment with prior negative workplace or life experiences: participants #07, #36, #40 and #42.

[360] Examples of participants who believe that their volunteer experiences helped them cope with life events are: (i) moving to a new city: participant #09, #32, #35, #37 and #46, (ii) coping with hardship: participant #08, #09, #23, #28, #42 and #48, (iii) coping during COVID pandemic: participant #05, #07, #09, #10, #23, #26, #27, #40 and #47.

[361] Participants #05, #10, #15, #16, #18, #25, #33, #36 and #48.

[362] Twelve participants (26%) identified personal development as the biggest impact of their volunteer assignment at T5: #10, #11, #12, #18, #23, #26, #30, #39, #43, #44, #46 and #50. At T4, the number was 20, with four others identifying personal development along with other changes: #04, #06, #10, #11, #15, #16, #18, #22, #27, #30, #31, #33, #35, #36, #41, #42, #43, #44, #45, #46, #48, #50, #52 and #53.

[363] Great variation existed in the perceived magnitude of personal change reported by participants, ranging from accounts that were "*potentially transformative"* (#06, T5) – most common among younger participants ("*I feel it changed everything*", #02, T5) – to relatively negligible among older volunteers ("*I don't think it's changed me much*", #36, T5).

[364] Of the 522 learning episodes coded at T2 interviews, approximately 39% (203/522) could be classified as primarily personal. These include categories such as 'personal development', 'self-awareness', 'situational and contextual awareness' and 'interest and hobbies', as well as sub-categories such as 'interpersonal skills', 'managing uncertainty and ambiguity', 'decision making', 'problem solving', and 'life priorities'.

[365] See Table 4, Section 6.1.1 of the report: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022) for examples.

[366] Although reported by just a few participants, this finding gives some support for two results of the 2024 VIS, which showed that: (i) volunteers' tendency to attribute positive wellbeing outcomes to their volunteer assignment increased with time (i.e., volunteers whose most recent assignment was longer ago generally report stronger impacts on their sense of wellbeing), and (ii) volunteers are more likely to believe that their assignment was a turning point in their life the longer time has passed since their assignment (i.e., volunteers whose most recent assignment was longer ago are more likely to report their assignment as a turning point in their life).

[367] Participants reporting no noticeable personal changes from their time on the program at T5 were: participants #03, #36, #38, #39, #42 and #50. Participants #16 and #52 reported generally negative personal consequences. Participants weighing negative consequences with some positive changes at T5 were: #14, #15, #29 and #41.

[368] Other personal changes that multiple participants attributed to their assignment at two or more time periods (T2-T5) that are not part of these six categories were: increased curiosity, patience, easy going (more relaxed), and developing new hobbies or interests.

[369] Some personal changes reported by participants have been more perishable than those identified here. Among the most prominent of these was volunteers reporting a stronger sense of 'acceptance' in the early stages after their assignment (easy going, being more relaxed, willing to go with the flow, accepting imperfections, contentment and calmness, stressing less over minor issues outside one's control, accepting when things do not go to plan).

[370] Examples of participants who reported each of the personal changes at two or more interviews (T2-T5), who were able to link these to assignment experiences, and who reported specific benefits of these changes were: (i) confidence: #06, #11*, #19, #30*, #37, #39*, #53 and #54, (ii) self-awareness: #06, #07, #12*, #29, #30 and #46, (iii) personal fulfilment: #10, #14*, #17, #18, #29, #36, #38, #39 and #44, (iv) adaptive resilience: #09, #11, #14, #23*, #30 and #44*, (v) reflective appreciation: #10*, #20, #25, #28 and #33, and #43*, (vi) relational orientation: #08, #09, #12, #14, #20, #37, #41, #46* and #52. Participants marked with an asterisk reported this outcome as the main impact of the volunteer assignment.

[371] More details about the foundations for this framework can be found in: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022), Section 6.2 and Figure 16, and Fee, A. & Lizier, A. (2024). Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024), Section 6.3 and Figure 10.

[372] Although the 2024 VIS showed that women and volunteers with a disability were more likely to report that their experiences from their volunteer assignment helped them cope with a challenging personal situation, no clear pattern was evident to support this in the current study.

[373] 'Personal fulfilment', as described by participants, bridges agentic and relational/moral elements. It reflects an inward sense of meaning, accomplishment, and satisfaction, but also draws on outward-facing experiences of contribution, connection, and value to others.

[374] The definition of 'meaning' is adapted from: Pratt, M.G. & Ashforth, B.E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. In K.S. Cameron, J.E. Dutton, & R.E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline* (pp. 309-327). Berrett-Koehler. The four conditions identified here were initially coded from descriptions of participants in-country learning episodes (T2) and refined in subsequent interviews. For details, see Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022), Section 6.2 and Figure 16. The two conditions that participants referred to most regularly across interviews T3-T5 when describing the causes of their personal changes were 'challenge' (reported by 12 participants at two or more separate interviews - #06, #07, #09, #11, #14, #23, #28, #29, #30, #31, #39 and #40), and 'novelty' (also reported by 12 participants at two or more separate interviews - #03, #05, #07, #09, #16, #20, #22, #23, #32, #43, #49 and #54).

[375] Of the 203 learning episodes reported during the assignment (T2), 112 (55%) occurred during work contexts. The data for this is contained in the report: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022).

[376] Participants reporting a combination of these emotions at multiple interviews (T3-T5) were: #12, #18, #21, #24 and #42.

[377] By 'spillover', we refer to potential secondary social effects of volunteers' personal development towards other people and other parts of the volunteers' lives. In other words, the benefits of the assignment may diffuse into later community engagement, family life, and social relationships.

[378] It is worth noting that external events like those addressed here are often overlooked in research examining work, career and changes occurring in professional settings. See, for example: Andresen, M., Lazarova, M., Apospori, E., Cotton, R., Bosak, J., Dickmann, M., Kaše, R., & Smale, A. (2022). Does international work experience pay off? The relationship between international work experience, employability and career success: A 30-country, multi-industry study. *Human Resource Management Journal*, *32*(3), 698-721.

[379] By way of example, in the aftermath of their repatriation, one participant drew attention to his "*privileged existence (where) I get to go back my wealthy homeland while the people that I'm trying to help have to face this global health threat on their own*" (#52, T2). Another described noticing in the early post-repatriate days in Australia: *"… stark disparities around COVID playing out and the emotions attached to that. It's very safe [in Australia] and 'emotionally neutral' basically, whereas people back in [the host country] have clearly had a much more up and down experience"* (#29, T2).

[380] Freire, P. (2020). Pedagogy of the oppressed. In *Toward a sociology of education* (pp. 374-386). Routledge.

[381] Participants #04, #07, #20 and #40.

[382] The 13 participants who commented at least once that they had benefited from their participation in this study were: #01, #07, #12, #15, #17, #18, #20, #21, #23, #30, #40, #43 and #53.

[383] The potential for interviews to act as an 'intervention' was an expected consequence of the interpretivist approach central to the study's initial design, in which participants were actively encouraged to consider implications of their experiences and co-construct meaning by guiding the discussion towards personally important outcomes. The research design planned for this. Steps taken to reduce these biases during interviews included: the use of reflexive analytical practices, open questions encouraging participants to identify experiences and outcomes pertinent to them, and follow-up probes to seek tangible and verifiable examples of changes that were identified. See Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Inception Report (April 2019), the LSAV research proposal (January 2019), and the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee application HREC-ETH 19-3663. The processes being activated during interpretivist interviews are consistent with theories of informal learning that focus on the role of reflection transforming experiences into learning. See, for example: Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Prentice-Hall; Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. For studies on the potential impacts of LQIs on participants, see: Meyers, O. & Davidson, R. (2025). Time after time: longitudinal qualitative interviewing and the interplay between structure and agency in communication research. *Journal of Communication*, *75*(4), 273-284; Nardon, L., Hari, A. & Aarma, K. (2021). Reflective interviewing - Increasing social impact through research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20,* 16094069211065233.

[384] Data in this section draw on participants' own interpretation of questions relating to their lifestyle (and changes to it), how any changes manifest, and the ways that their involvement in the program may have contributed to these. We therefore rely on their (typically quite broad) interpretations of 'lifestyle.' In discussing this topic, most participants who identified changed lifestyles focused on new routines, practices, or general re-orientations that they had made to a part of their day-to-day life and which they believed resulted from their assignments. Most participants were clear about the attitudes that informed these changes and the bases for these from experiences reported in earlier and/or multiple interviews. While some participants describe these changes in slightly different ways, all five categories of change are linked to accounts provided by multiple participants at T2 (during or immediately after their volunteer assignment).

[385] Participants reporting enacting change/s to their lifestyle upon return that they linked to their assignment – T3: n = 29/54 (54%), T4: n = 27/50 (54%), T5: n = 22 (47%).

[386] The number of participants reporting different forms of lifestyle changes at T3, T4 and T5: (i) Anti-consumption: Reduce consumption, share/donate resources, simplify lifestyle. - Participants reporting: T3: n = 8, T4: n = 8, T5: n = 6. (ii) Environment and sustainability: Live more sustainably, recycling, connect with nature - Participants reporting: T3: n = 6, T4: n = 3, T5: n = 3. (iii) Priority to relationships: Importance of personal, family and community relationships. Participants reporting: T3: n = 6, T4: n = 5, T5: n = 7. (iv) Health conscious: Attention to physical and mental health, eating patterns. Participants reporting: T3: n = 6, T4: n = 9, T5: n = 2. (v) Host country culinary or hygiene practices – T3: n = 3, T4: n = 3, T5: n = 5. (vi) Work-life balance: Easy going, happiness, less stress over unimportant issues - Participants reporting: T3: n = 6, T4: n = 2, T5: n = 1.

[387] Besides those in Figure 18, other reported lifestyle changes excluded from this section are changed values or beliefs about political and social issues, or intentions to raise children aligned with these values, that were not (yet) evident in some participants' lives. Moreover, some participants reported temporary changes to their work-life balance (e.g., more inclined to prioritise happiness over work, less stress over inconsequential issues) in earlier waves, although these

changes have now been largely discontinued ("*I wish that was still the case. I don't think I could say it is, in all honesty*", #02, T5).

[388] The extent to which COVID disruptions (e.g., lockdowns, work from home, separation from or 'forced' habitation with others) influenced participants' propensity to adjust their lifestyle is relevant. On the one hand, COVID introduced additional life change which have the potential to interrupt routines and prompt more mindful sensemaking. This, in turn, can trigger 'periods of de- and re-routinisation' (Spaargaren & van Vliet 2000, p. 64-65) that re-set habitual patterns of behaviour (Weick et al., 2004). On the other hand, reverting to familiar habits can be a mechanism to preserve precious cognitive resources at times of uncertainty, complexity or change (Kahneman 2013). These competing dynamics make it difficult to know whether COVID may have amplified or dampened any lifestyle changes that were inspired by the assignments. COVID lockdowns may also have hindered participants' conscious or subconscious efforts to access resources, networks, and social reinforcement that would assist with any proposed changes to their lifestyle. Of particular interest here is contact with and feedback from other volunteers – many of whom were valued for possessing shared beliefs and values and/or particular HCNs, who may have been the indirect inspiration for some changes. Sources: Kahneman, D. (2013). Thinking, Fast and Slow, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Spaargaren, G. & van Vliet, B. (2000). Lifestyles, consumption and the environment: The ecological modernisation of domestic consumption, *Environmental Politics 9*(1), 50–76; Weick K.E., Sutcliffe, K.M. & Obstfeld, D. (2004). Organizing and the process of sensemaking, *Organization Science*, *16*(4), 409–421.

[389] These conscious lifestyle 'projects' have some parallels with behaviours that Giddens (1991) associated with late modernity, whereby people construct and continuously reconstruct their identities through lifestyle choices and other actions as a form of 'reflexive project of the self'. This reflects a more autonomous form of identity construction that differs from traditional notions of identity being ascribed through social position and group membership. Source: Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press.

[390] Examples of lifestyle changes instigated during the volunteer assignment that participants have endeavoured to 'recreate' are: reading (#04), socialising (#37), surfing (#08) or exercising (#25, #36).

[391] Some participants who reported changes expressed views and values at T1 that already suggested an inclination towards a particular lifestyle. In the analysis here, we include only participants who articulated a clear impetus or inspiration for a change that stemmed from their assignment. For instance, participant #25 was "*passionate about nature*" at T1 and became a more fervent recycler at T3 ("*when I'm with the grandchildren we recycle, we reuse stuff, exactly as I did in [the host country], we reuse stuff*") after being exposed during the assignment to "*a whole page of things that were pissing me off, the garbage was one*" (T2).

[392] At T5, 22 participants reporting lifestyle changes identified culture-general capabilities associated with 'global mindset' as an ongoing impact of their volunteer assignment. Fourteen of these (64%) identified 'international' outcomes as the major impact of the assignment. At T4, 19/28 (68%) participants who developed capabilities that were classified as "global mindset" reported lifestyle changes.

[393] In general, the results support the finding in the 2024 VIS that volunteers across ages and types reported that the relationships they formed during their assignments have a positive impact on their quality of life. Conversely, the data did not support another finding of the VIS – that women and volunteers with a disability were more likely to report positive benefits from the relationships they formed during their volunteer assignment, primarily to their learning and their personal development.

[394] For more on the social capital formed by development volunteers, see: Onuki, M. & Okabe, Y. (2025). Role of social capital in international volunteering: Evidence from Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *55*(2), 475–502.

[395] For example, the number of participants who had had direct contact with a volunteer in the past month declined from 18 (36%) at T4 to 12 (25%) at T5, and several participants noted that their contact with other volunteers had declined ("*It's a thing where we just, on occasion, message each other, how we're going, what we're doing with life, but it's a bit hard, we live on opposite sides of the country so it's a bit hard. But it's just a nice thing that we check in*", #11, T5).

[396] The five participants reporting no ongoing contact with other volunteers comprised three *Veterans* (#10, #17 and #25), and participants #41 and #43, both of whom experienced major life disruptions (personal health, grief): "*Sadly I lost touch with a lot of them, which is a shame because we made some good friends and I really liked a lot of the other volunteers, I thought they were really great. I suppose they all just live in different places and when I got back to Australia, it was COVID and I was unwell and stuff*", #41, T5.

[397] 14 participants (30%) identified other volunteers as the stakeholder group that has had the strongest lasting impact on them at T5: #03, #04, #06, #07, #11, #14, #16, #20, #21, #23, #30, #36, #52 and #54. Participants identifying their new relationships with other volunteers as the main lasting impact of their assignment at T5: #12, #46 and #52.

[398] Participants identifying other volunteers as among their strongest friendships at two or more interviews (T3-T5): #07, #12, #23, #37, #42, #46, #53 and #54.

[399] Participants #10, #12, #15, #16, #17, #18, #21, #22, #25, #32, #36, #38, #39, #49, #50 and #53.

[400] Participants reporting that the volunteer assignment strengthened their relationships with their partners: #15, #16, #12, #21, #31, #36, #39 and #53.

[401] Almost half the sample reported at T2 that their partners provided important counsel, back up, encouragement, and a sense of a shared in-country endeavour. This involved activities such as helping with day-to-day living, organising repairs, or accompanying volunteers on work trips, all of which made indirect contributions to the volunteer's ability to focus on their core role. See Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-21): Final Report (April 2022).

[402] Participants #48 continued using and sharing diary entries on two subsequent in-country volunteer assignments during the study period, although he did not do the same for remote assignments he completed.

[403] This includes four adult children of volunteers: #22, #33, #42 and #48.

[404] Participants #17, #18, #19, #33, #36, #46 and #48.

[405] Also see: Fee, A. 2023, 'International development volunteers: A potential source of global experience, knowledge and enterprise', Volunteering Australia, Volunteering Research Papers Initiative.

[406] The identification of these workplace conditions is one feature distinguishing this study from others that have examined the personal impacts of volunteering, which tend to focus on the (undifferentiated) 'volunteer experience' as a catalyst for growth.

[407] Research on experiential and transformational learning supports this finding, suggesting that personal development is most likely when learners encounter genuine stretch experiences that are socially embedded and perceived as meaningful. Sources: Kolb, D.A. (2014). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. FT Press; Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[408] Research on expatriates underlines the importance of proactive organisational support during repatriation. Sources: Szkudlarek, B. (2010). Reentry - A review of the literature. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *34*(1), 1-21; Furukawa, T. (1997). Sojourner readjustment: Mental health of international students after one year's foreign sojourn and its psychosocial correlates. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, *185*(4), 263-268.

[409] It should be noted that volunteers' pre-assignment experiences were also punctuated with periods of uncertainty and stress, a finding highlighted in the report: Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers: Phase One Final Report (October 2019).

[410] Ryff, C.D., & Keyes, C.L.M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(4), 719; Ryff, C.D. (2013). Psychological well-being revisited: Advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, *83*(1), 10-28.

[411] While financial vulnerability was a concern for a minority, psychological vulnerability was more widespread.

[412] Research from narrative sensemaking and reflective practice draws attention to the benefits of structured opportunities to verbalise and reappraise experience, which can be catalysts for learning and growth. These types of experiences can be especially valuable following complex or emotionally demanding experiences. Sources: Boud, D., Keogh, R. & Walker, D. (Eds.). (1985). *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. Kogan Page, London; Schön, D.A. (1995). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Arena.

[413] Although different definitions of 'reflective practice' exist, in general it involves the critical examination of one's experiences, actions, and thought processes, leading to deeper understanding and continuous improvement (Schön, 1995). Reference: Schön, D.A. (1995). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Arena.

[414] Supporting this is the growing recognition that reflective practice is critical to adult learning, particularly in the workplace (Faller et al., 2020). Two different forms could benefit volunteers (Schön, 1995). 'Reflection-on-action' occurs after a learning experience, when individuals deliberately contemplate what occurred, analyse their actions or performance, and identify areas for growth. This retrospective reflection encourages learners to extract meaningful insights and strategies to apply in future situations (Boud et al., 2013). 'Reflection-in-action', in contrast, involves adjusting and making decisions in the midst of an unfolding experience. This real-time reflection is crucial in dynamic work environments and in situations where people experience multiple transitions – such as those encountered by many program volunteers - enabling people to adapt their approach as circumstances evolve and make sense of unfamiliar contexts and setting. Both forms of reflection can help to transform experiences into enduring knowledge and improved skills in ways that are professionally and personally valuable. References: Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (2013). *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. Routledge; Faller, P., Lundgren, H., & Marsick, V. J. (2020). Overview: Why and how does reflection matter in workplace learning, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *22*(3), 248-263; Schön, D.A. (1995). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Arena.

[415] Extended time abroad, particularly in contexts of cultural immersion and personal challenge, can produce meaningful shifts in values, worldview, and self-concept, like those reported in this study (Sussman, 2002). Research on repatriates suggests that, if underestimated, such changes can make it difficult for returnees to reconcile their transformed selves with the expectations of those closest to them (Rogers & Ward, 1993). Yet the more prevalent experience in this study, of strengthened relationships that proved resilient under the pressure of distance, aligns with research suggesting that growth following significant life challenges is frequently expressed through closer, more appreciative relationships with others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). References: Rogers, J. & Ward, C. (1993). Expectation-experience discrepancies and psychological adjustment during cross-cultural reentry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 17*(2), 185–196; Sussman, N.M. (2002). Testing the cultural identity model of the cultural transition cycle: Sojourners return home. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 26*(4), 391–408; Tedeschi, R.G., & Calhoun, L.G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry, 15*(1), 1–18.

[416] Meneghini, A.M. (2016). A meaningful break in a flat life: The motivations behind overseas volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *45*(6), 1214–1233.