

Volunteering & New Arrivals: A Social Cohesion Opportunity



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KEY INSIGHTS

- People with migrant and refugee backgrounds newly arrived to Australia are interested and do readily volunteer. Volunteers identified a range of reasons and benefits that directly relate to positive settlement outcomes including improved confidence, English language and cross-communication skills, employment related experience, mental health and social support networks.
- Participant experience of volunteering in country of origin operated largely within the charity and faith sectors with greater scope for informal volunteering. Information and support to better understand a different volunteering 'system' in Australia is needed.
- Education was the main referral pathway into volunteering either through an educator or formal student placement program.
- Participants identified 4 key themes that helped facilitate positive volunteer experiences:
 - Flexibility
 - A welcoming environment that supports and recognises volunteers
 - Opportunities to continue to learn and build on existing skills
 - Making a difference to the community
- To improve the volunteer experience and outcomes participants identified the need for:
 - Information about volunteering opportunities within the early settlement period provided in culturally and linguistically accessible ways.
 - Inclusion and diversity strategies that address participation barriers such as language, transport, financial and caring responsibilities.
 - Meaningful volunteer experiences that build on individual skills, strengths and aspirations.
 - Better volunteer management practices that support whole of organisation to be more inclusive.

"I WANT TO BE A PART OF THE COMMUNITY TO HELP THE NEXT GENERATION"

INTRODUCTION

There are 2.3 million (42.1% of) Victorians over 15 years of age who volunteer in Victoria contributing an estimated \$58.1 billion in 2019 to the state economy and community.¹ Volunteering is referred to as a signifier of strong civil societies, an indicator of social cohesion² and contributor to democracy in Australia.³ Volunteering has been found to directly improve the health and wellbeing of people in overcoming isolation⁴ and, over time, is significantly related to well-being and self-reported health.⁵ There is increasing recognition and evidence to suggest that through volunteering, people gain employment-related and personal skills that enhance employability and/or support further education pathways.⁶

The benefits of volunteering are evident and wide ranging. There is little exploration however, of volunteering amongst people with migrant and refugee backgrounds and its influence on integration outcomes, particularly in the Australian context. In response, this project explored how people with refugee and migrant backgrounds perceived volunteering and its impacts on settlement experiences. It was designed to enable participants' lived experiences to contribute to improved understanding of settlement journeys.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with 20 people with migrant and refugee backgrounds, with experience of volunteering, living in the City of Whittlesea and or connected to Whittlesea Community Connections. Sampling included different genders, ages (over the age of 18 years), countries of origin, types of volunteering, time since arrival and English proficiency.

Project participants volunteered in a range of roles and across a variety of sectors including community, education, health, sports and recreation and ethnic and faith-based organisations. Most participants volunteered within the first two years of settling in Australia often finding a pathway through the education system. Reasons for volunteering included to gain employment related experience in Australia, improve English skills, give back to the community and build social and other support networks.

Project participants identified multiple benefits of volunteering particularly related to employment including improved communication and inter-personal skills, practical experience and the ability to identify one's skills and relevant employment pathways. This had a direct impact on one third of participants who gained employment in the organisation they volunteered with.

Other benefits of volunteering identified by participants included helping the community, reducing isolation and building support networks, a sense of happiness, improved mental health, changing the perception of refugees and people seeking asylum and learning more about the service system in Australia.

"I STARTED HAVING WORK EXPERIENCE WITHOUT PRESSURE, WAS SIMPLY ENJOYING, FEELING MORE CONFIDENT, MORE COMFORTABLE, HELP ME GET MY FIRST CASUAL JOB IN THE SAME SCHOOL. THIS IS WHY VOLUNTEERING IT WORKED FOR ME. INSTEAD OF APPLYING FOR JOBS WITH NO LOCAL EXPERIENCE."

IT IS A JOURNEY ABOUT LEARNING ABOUT YOURSELF, YOU DISCOVER WHAT YOU'RE GOOD AT AND WHAT YOU'RE NOT AND IT'S A LIFE CHANGING JOURNEY, LEARNING FROM OTHER PEOPLE THROUGH TEAMWORK, LEARNING ABOUT THE SERVICES AND CAN HELP OTHER PEOPLE, BE AN AMBASSADOR IN A WAY, KNOW INFORMATION THAT YOU CAN SHARE WITH OTHERS"

"WHEN I CAME HERE IT HELPED ME REALIZE THAT THERE IS SO MANY PEOPLE DIFFERENT PEOPLE COMING FROM EVERYWHERE LIKE AND THEY'RE STILL ABLE TO WORK TOGETHER AND TO GET ON WELL TOGETHER AND IT'S A SAFE PLACE FOR EVERYBODY "

"IT WAS VERY RELIEVING THAT I HAD MY LIFE AGAIN AND I CAN START AGAIN HERE IN AUSTRALIA.... AFTER VOLUNTEERING I STARTED FEELING LIKE I AM RESTORING MY LIFE AGAIN."

¹ Victoria State Government., Institute of Project Management., & Volunteering Victoria (2020). State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020.

² Markus, A. (2008). Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys Summary Report. Monash University, Melbourne. cited in, Leong, R. (2008). Volunteering: pathway to inclusion. Australian Journal on Volunteering, 13(2), 67-73.

³ Cox, E. (2002). Australia: Making the Lucky Country. In Putnam, R. D. Ed. Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society. Oxford Scholarship Online.

⁴ Leong, R. (2008). Volunteering: pathway to inclusion. Australian Journal on Volunteering, 13(2), 67-73.

⁵ Allyn Piliavin, J., & Siegl, E. (2007). Health Benefits of Volunteering in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. Journal of Health and Social Behaviour, 48(4), 450-464.

⁶ Rochester, C., Ellis Paine, A., Howlett, S., & Zimmeck, M. (2010). Measuring the Impact of Volunteering In Rochester, C. et. al., Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century. (pp. 161-175).

POLICY & PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Flexibility, a welcoming environment that supports and recognises volunteers, opportunities to continue learning and building on existing skills and knowing that you are making a difference to the community were identified as facilitators of positive volunteer experiences.

To improve access to, and outcomes of, volunteering participants identified a number of strategies. Following are recommendations to help strengthen these outcomes and ensure people with migrant and refugee backgrounds newly arrived in Australia are able to participate in volunteering during the settlement period in meaningful ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Systems and Services

- Build and strengthen links between the volunteering and intersecting sectors including settlement, employment and mental health to facilitate and enhance outcomes for people with migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Build and strengthen pathways from education to volunteering. This includes pathways from the Adult Migrant English Program and other education settings that support English language and skill acquisition for people with migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Work to address the systemic barriers experienced by people with migrant and refugee backgrounds to participate in volunteering. This includes for women with caring responsibilities, people experiencing financial difficulty, transport disadvantage or visa-related restrictions to service access and participation opportunities.

Information

- Promote volunteering to people with migrant and refugee backgrounds within the settlement period using culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies. Engage diverse communities, genders and age groups using the lived experience of volunteers with migrant and refugee backgrounds. Promotion strategies should speak to the mutual and individual benefits of volunteering directly related to the settlement experience.
- Provide information about volunteering in Australia's cultural and legal context that easily explains the 'system' and provides opportunities to explore diverse volunteer opportunities. Information about volunteering should also include volunteer and employer rights and responsibilities.

Volunteer Management

- Deliver cultural orientation for volunteers with migrant and refugee backgrounds to understand the workplace in the Australian context.
- Recognise that people with migrant and refugee backgrounds volunteer for different reasons and under different circumstances. Tailor volunteer roles and experiences in response and to achieve desired outcomes as identified by the volunteer and in recognition of individual circumstances that create barriers to participation.
- Develop youth specific strategies that support young people with migrant and refugee backgrounds. These could include working with peers, in teams and in less formal ways to encourage the beginning of the volunteer journey, building confidence and a sense of enjoyment.
- Where people have identified gaining employment as the reason for volunteering, develop opportunities for volunteers to explore and identify their skills and preferred pathway and enable volunteer roles to evolve helping people to continue to build skills and experience.
- Facilitate the development of social support networks that are critical for people with migrant and refugee backgrounds who have left behind family and friends.
- Enhance volunteer management practices that support inclusive practices across the volunteer-hosting organisation.

Recognition & celebration

- Recognise and celebrate the contribution of people with migrant and refugee backgrounds volunteering in the community

CONCLUSION

People with migrant and refugee backgrounds newly arrived in Australia want to be active participants in community and volunteering is instrumental in supporting this outcome.

Volunteering helped participants develop confidence, social support networks, English language and employment related skills and helped to improve mental health and build people's sense of belonging. There are clear pathways between education, placement and volunteering and by strengthening these pathways and building better connections between settlement, volunteering and other sectors, greater access to participation opportunities can be provided to people with migrant and refugee backgrounds.

