

AVI & UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY RESEARCH STUDY
‘LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS’

SUMMARY REPORT

Executive Summary

This report summarises findings of a research project undertaken in 2006-7, examining whether an international volunteer placement could contribute towards volunteers developing important workplace capabilities, including abilities relevant to creativity. The study tracked a sample of international volunteers during the first year of their placement, measuring changes that they experienced and exploring the ‘learning incidents’ that they encountered whilst working as international volunteers.

The findings suggest that international volunteer placements provide learning experiences that are unique in terms of context, process and outcomes. As a group, the volunteers became significantly better divergent thinkers, more cognitively complex, and more confident in their creative capabilities, and reported a range of learning outcomes that were often transformational in nature. Contributing to these outcomes are opportunities for volunteers to interact with host-culture nationals and others from a range of professions and backgrounds, to take on new and challenging roles and responsibilities, including the critical role of capacity building, and to reflect on the many ‘upending’ experiences that they encounter.

A number of initiatives are suggested that would support volunteer learning further. These include measures to facilitate more peer-to-peer interaction between volunteers and host-culture nationals, both at work and outside work, systematic interventions that enable volunteers to remain engaged with their profession during their volunteer placement, and targeted training and support to help volunteers recognise and leverage the many informal learning opportunities that they experience.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises key findings of the research project, *Learning Opportunities of International Volunteers*, a collaborative study between AVI and researchers from the Faculty of Economics and Business at The University of Sydney, which took place between February 2006 and October 2007. The study sought to identify whether, and how, an international volunteer placement (IVP) could contribute towards volunteers developing capabilities that are valued in the contemporary workplace.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Recent research has highlighted an unresolved contradiction about international volunteering. On the one hand, international volunteers report developing an array of skills and capabilities during their placements, including advanced communication skills and improved creative problem-solving abilities, that are highly valued in contemporary workplaces. However, the role that IVPs play in helping to develop these skills is not recognised or appreciated within the wider community, notably employers and businesses leaders, who generally view international volunteering as admirable but not particularly valuable from a career development perspective. One apparent reason for this is that little is known about the nature of IVPs, and how they might contribute toward volunteers developing important workplace capabilities. The current study aimed to address these oversights by demystifying the learning experiences of international volunteers. The study had both descriptive and explanatory aims:

1. To identify and describe changes in the capabilities of volunteers during an IVP, particularly those valued in the contemporary workplace. One focus of the study was to examine whether volunteers develop cognitive abilities relevant to creativity;
2. To explain these changes by exploring the specific learning experiences of volunteers, and through this develop a cogent framework which identifies the main features of IVPs that contribute toward volunteer learning.

2. DATA COLLECTION

The project involved a longitudinal panel study that ‘tracked’ a group of international volunteers over the first 12 months of their IVP. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. To measure changes that occurred over the study period, participants completed psychometric tests and questionnaires prior to commencing their IVP (at pre-departure briefings), and again 12 months later. These tests measured specific cognitive abilities that contribute to individual creativity. Participants also provided information about critical ‘learning incidents’ and personal changes that occurred throughout their IVP, as well as more general details relating to their work and non-work experiences. These were collected via bimonthly written surveys, as well as interviews with some participants at the end of the study. A number of volunteers used reflective journals to record their learning experiences.

The information provided by international volunteers was compared with a small ‘control’ group of domestic non-volunteer workers. The use of a control group enabled a direct comparison between the experiences and changes of international volunteers and other workers, and hence provided a strong empirical basis for identifying those features unique to international volunteering that might contribute toward learning.

3. PARTICIPANTS

Eighty-six Australian and New Zealand volunteers who commenced their IVPs in 2006 chose to participate in the study. Ninety-nine percent came from professional and para-professional careers (as classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics) prior to volunteering, with ages at pre-departure ranging from 20 to 68 years old (average = 41.5). The volunteers expressed complex and often multifaceted reasons for volunteering, with 50% articulating a learning and/or career benefit as a factor influencing their decision. Less than one third had firm plans for their career following their IVP (as stated at pre-departure). The volunteers undertook assignments from eight to 24 months in duration, in 18 different countries in three regions:

- Pacific (Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu), n = 34 (40%)
- Asia (China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor Leste, Viet Nam), n = 39 (45%)
- Other (Lebanon, Malawi, Maldives, South Africa, Swaziland), n = 13 (15%)

The control group comprised 20 non-volunteers who were working in a domestic (i.e. Australian or New Zealand) context and who had completed similar pre-departure training to the volunteers. The group consisted of attendees at pre-departure briefings who, for personal or other reasons, did not accept their IVP, as well as current and former staff of AVI. Table 1 on the following page outlines the key characteristics of both groups who participated in the study.

Final data was collected from 54 volunteers and 15 non-volunteers. This represents an overall attrition rate of 35%, although many of those who withdrew provided up to five waves of usable data. Half of withdrawing volunteers were forced to evacuate from the host-country due to political or military upheaval. For others who withdrew, the main explanations given were premature return (i.e. placement ‘failure’ or illness), poor access to communication in the host country, or too busy to continue participating.

Table 1: Characteristics of Study Participants

| | International Volunteers: n (%) | Control Group: n (%) |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Professional Category* | | |
| Education | 21 (24%) | 1 (5%) |
| Legal, Social & Welfare | 17 (20%) | 2 (10%) |
| Business, Human Resource & Marketing | 11 (13%) | 6 (30%) |
| Management | 9 (10%) | 3 (15%) |
| Health | 7 (8%) | 0 (0%) |
| Design, Engineering, Science & Transport | 4 (5%) | 3 (15%) |
| ICT | 3 (3%) | 1 (5%) |
| Arts & Media | 3 (3%) | 0 (0%) |
| Other | 11 (13%) | 4 (20%) |
| 2. Gender | | |
| Female | 53 (62%) | 11 (55%) |
| Male | 33 (38%) | 9 (45%) |
| 3. Highest Relevant Education Level | | |
| Postgraduate Degree (Masters or PhD) | 13 (15%) | 4 (20%) |
| Undergraduate Degree | 48 (56%) | 8 (40%) |
| Other Formal Qualification | 20 (23%) | 4 (20%) |
| No formal qualification | 5 (6%) | 4 (20%) |
| 4. Age at Pre-Departure | | |
| 20-29 years | 24 (28%) | 6 (30%) |
| 30-39 years | 20 (23%) | 7 (35%) |
| 40-49 years | 18 (21%) | 4 (20%) |
| Over 49 years | 24 (28%) | 3 (15%) |

* Australian Bureau of Statistics: Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO).

4. LEARNING OUTCOMES OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS

The volunteers reported that, in general, their IVP was a positive learning experience. An overwhelming majority felt that they developed skills over the study period that would be beneficial to their professional careers. Volunteers perceived the study period as being significantly more positive in terms of learning outcomes than the control group.¹ Less

¹ One-way analysis of variance, $F(1,67) = 15.90$, $p = .000$, $r = .44$.

experienced volunteers and those with less knowledge of the host-culture prior to departure felt their IVP was a stronger learning experience.

a. Measuring Change: Do Volunteers Develop Creative Abilities?

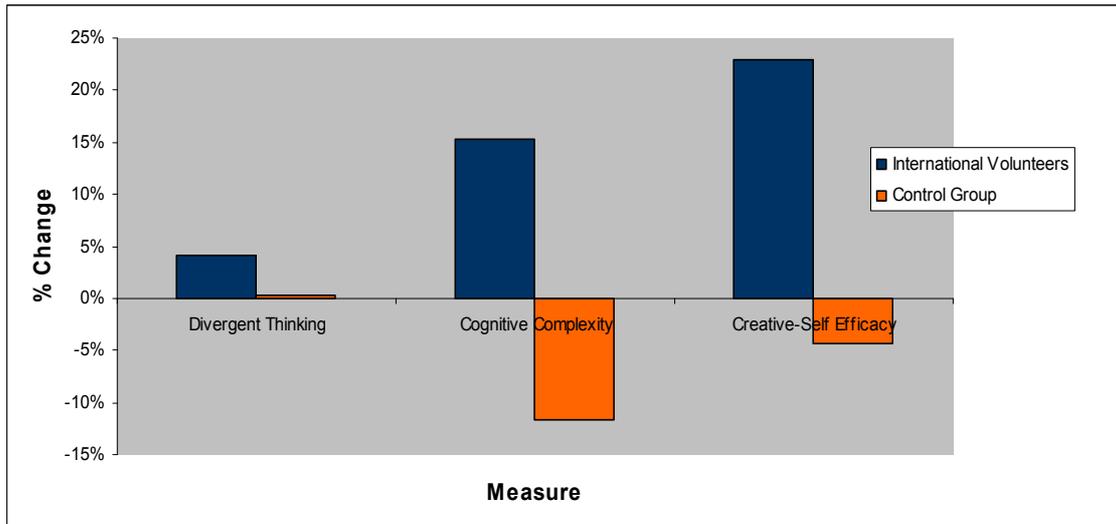
Changes in participants' creative ability over the study period were measured using three separate indicators:

- *Divergent thinking* is the ability to produce a number of original and relevant ideas. It is the foundation of creative action and assists in, among other functions, problem-solving and decision-making;
- *Cognitive complexity* refers to the ability to see a complex and nuanced world and to make connections between apparently disparate pieces of information. It helps people to organise, interpret, evaluate, understand and predict complex situations, and is critical to viewing situations from different perspectives; and
- *Creative self-efficacy* was conceptualized as the participants' perceptions of and confidence in their overall creative abilities.

All three measures of creativity showed significant increases for the volunteer group, but not the control group, over the study period. Figure 1 shows the percentage change in the results of the volunteer and control groups for each measure. The difference in changes between the scores of the two groups was statistically significant on each of the three measures.² In other words, the international volunteers did develop significantly greater creativity abilities and self-efficacy than non-volunteers over the study period.

² Results based on 2 x 2 split plot analysis of variance (SPANOVA) using a single within-subject factor of time (pre/post) and a single between subject factor, IVP (volunteer/control). (1) Divergent Thinking: $F(1,67) = 3.93$, $p = .05$, $r = .24$, (2) Cognitive complexity: $F(1,67) = 6.61$, $p = .009$, $r = .30$. (3) Creative Self-efficacy: $F(1,67) = 12.98$, $p = .001$, $r = .40$.

Figure 1: Percentage Change in Results (Volunteer and Control Group)



Volunteers who showed the greatest increase in creative abilities were those who:

1. **Interacted most frequently with host culture nationals (HCN)**, both at work and outside work. As well as the *extent* of contact with HCN, the *nature* of the contact was critical. Volunteers showing the most creative development tended to work with HCN on a ‘peer-to-peer’ level, rather than as a superior or subordinate; for instance, they worked collaboratively on specific projects, capacity building or problem-solving activities. Interaction with HCN outside work that was particularly conducive to creative development included socialising, participating in cultural events and networking: volunteers who socialised most frequently with HCN in this way tended to be first-time volunteers (rather than those who had previously undertaken an IVP), and those who were not accompanied by a spouse or partner.³
2. **Had opportunities to contribute to the host organisation through creative output.** Volunteers who put forward or suggested creative ideas more frequently, even if these ideas were not implemented, showed the greatest creative development. These volunteers tended to be more proactive in their capacity building efforts which provided the focus of many of their creative efforts.

³ Volunteers who interacted more frequently with HCN also reported better cultural adjustment.

Among the factors that did *not* contribute significantly toward the changes in creative abilities were the volunteers' age, profession, education level, country of placement, cultural novelty (the perceived degree of difference between the home and host culture), and previous international experience.

The findings give support for the notion that the cognitive building blocks of creativity can be developed both socially and experientially. In brief, it is the actions and initiative shown by volunteers during their IVPs – both at work and outside work – that have the strongest influence on their creative development. The frequent interaction that volunteers had with people from other cultures provided a strong impetus for them to reflect on, understand, adapt to, and in many cases incorporate, new and unfamiliar ideas, perspectives, values and behaviours. These cultural differences are more likely to be viewed as opportunities to learn as opposed to challenges to be overcome when the interaction is perceived as being on an 'equal status' level (i.e. interacting as peers, either at work and outside of work). Similarly, the experience that volunteers gained through being able to contribute creatively in a new cultural context – particularly through their role as capacity builders - also appears to have enhanced their capabilities and self-efficacy as creative workers. For many volunteers in the study being creative was an important, and in many cases the most rewarding, part of their placement. Most volunteers had frequent opportunities to put forward and implement new ideas, ranging from small 'micro-innovations' that addressed an immediate problem for themselves or colleagues, to substantial initiatives with long-term implications for the host organisation, external stakeholders, and the local community. The following page summarises key features of the creative work of international volunteers.

The Nature of the Creative Work of International Volunteers

The overall creative output of volunteers (as measured by the number of original ideas put forward) was, on average, higher than that of the control group's and higher than the volunteers' previous work role prior to their IVP. Most (although not all) volunteers felt their ideas were welcomed by colleagues and management, and as a result they were proactive in suggesting and implementing ideas:

I am often consulted for my ideas and feedback ... and feel that my opinions and ideas are more valued than they were in my workplace in Australia ... and that this work environment is more encouraging and conducive to creative responses to work requirements. I have been able to learn so much through opportunities and lack of fixed organisation structure in this more resource-poor work environment. – Program officer, Asia.

In most cases, volunteers' creative efforts were focused on capacity building. More than 50% addressed internal organisational activities like improving systems, processes or schedules, while a small number focused on organisational offerings (i.e. products and services offered by the organisation). Having to overcome limited or insufficient resources was a major impetus for volunteers' creative output.

Two characteristics of the volunteers' creative work provided particularly rich learning potential. Firstly, volunteers had to be very conscious of the way in which they introduced new ideas. This stemmed from their lack of formal authority within the host organisation and the unfamiliar work and cultural context that they perceived. Frequently, learning incidents stemmed from volunteers having to adjust the way they framed and presented their ideas in order to ensure they were understood and fully considered. In many instances this involved considerable research and preparation from volunteers:

You must link new ideas with what's currently happening, because if I give (my counterparts) this ideal picture but they don't see how it can be woven into what they are doing, then it is just a whole lot of nice ideas. So I really go to a lot of effort ... working out how to introduce new ideas into a closed situation. That's been a challenge. It's not just one thing, it's quite complex ... (so) I do spend a lot of time trying to figure out how best to bring the change in. – Teacher trainer, Middle East.

In addition, when compared to the control group, volunteers tended to be more collaborative and consultative at all stages of the creative process, from diagnosing problems to scoping and implementing solutions. This was frequently attributed to the need to understand the local context, or as a means of involving HCN in the initiative (thereby building capacity). This collaborative process contributed to a range of learning outcomes including enhanced communication and mentoring skills, cultural understanding, decision-making abilities (especially incorporating different viewpoints into decisions), and self-awareness:

It was an incremental process that required discussions, meetings, chatting and of course approval at every step and with every level of the organisation ... (T)his meant that things took much longer (than I expected) but the result was worthwhile, and for me the whole process was a real eye-opener. – Development manager, Pacific.

b. Learning and Development Outcomes

Volunteers reported a total of 431 learning outcomes stemming from learning incidents that occurred during their IVPs. In addition each interviewee reported an average of 12 learning outcomes, new skills or changes that they attributed to their IVP. These are summarised in Table 2, broken into nine generic categories based on a taxonomy of informal learning in the workplace.⁴

Table 2: Volunteer Learning Outcomes: Definitions of Categories and Frequencies

| | LEARNING INCIDENTS | | INTERVIEWS | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| | Count | Percentage | Count | Percentage |
| Personal Development (e.g. greater adaptability or resilience, improved self confidence, willingness to try/do new things, changed perspective or attitude). | 121 | 28% | 95 | 25% |
| Decision Making & Problem Solving (e.g. incorporating different viewpoints into decisions, managing uncertainty, generating, formulating & evaluating options). | 62 | 14% | 59 | 15% |
| Advanced Communication Skills (e.g. persuading, negotiating, questioning, consulting, greater communicative flexibility). | 56 | 13% | 50 | 13% |
| Cultural Skills & Understanding (e.g. recognising cultural patterns, enhanced cross-cultural or language skills). | 58 | 13% | 18 | 5% |
| Self Awareness (e.g. awareness of own dispositions, schemas strengths & weaknesses). | 40 | 9% | 27 | 7% |
| Role Performance (e.g. supporting other people's learning through coaching or mentoring, managing and implementing change, managing information). | 33 | 8% | 63 | 16% |
| Situational Awareness & Understanding (e.g. understanding other people, contexts and situations). | 32 | 7% | 3 | 1% |
| Strategic Understanding (e.g. seeing one's work in wider context, long-term view of changes in organisation & work patterns). | 19 | 4% | 29 | 8% |
| Task Performance (e.g. expanded domain-specific knowledge, generic technical skills related to domain, building valuable networks within domain). | 10 | 2% | 40 | 10% |
| TOTAL | 431 | 100% | 384 | 100% |

Because volunteers only reported one or two critical learning incidents every two months, these incidents represent a *sample* of learning outcomes, rather than a count of all learning that took place. Taken collectively, the outcomes are generally supportive of earlier studies looking at volunteer learning which show that volunteers can and do develop valuable

⁴ Eraut, M. 2004. Informal Learning in the Workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2): 247-73.

abilities. Learning incidents were generally informal and incidental, falling outside the bounds of structured ‘professional development’ initiatives and occurring as a by-product of other work or non-work activities. Only three percent of volunteers’ learning incidents occurred as part of structured formal learning⁵; indeed, volunteers were much more likely to learn from their own capacity building efforts than by being recipients of structured training.

When compared to the control group, three features characterised the volunteers’ learning outcomes. Firstly, significantly more learning outcomes involved transformational or ‘double-loop’ learning: that is, not just accumulating new knowledge or understanding, but questioning existing perspectives or practices and developing new frames of reference. This was a major feature of several categories of learning outcomes, including decision-making and problem solving, self-awareness, and personal development. Secondly, learning *about* the host culture often served as a platform for more significant personal development and growth, especially when combined with reflective and collaborative learning strategies. More than 90% of incidents reporting ‘cultural’ learnings also reported additional outcomes stemming from this awareness; the majority of these related to the volunteers’ own cognitive frameworks, including increased awareness of one’s own schemas (and stereotypes), developing new frames of reference, and seeing and incorporating different perspectives into decisions. Finally, the proportion of domain-specific (task relevant) learning outcomes reported by volunteers was lower than that of the control group. While capacity building often provided opportunities for volunteers to extend or enrich their task relevant knowledge and skills, several interviewees, especially those in more remote locations, described feeling isolated from other members of their profession as well as ‘out of the loop’ on the latest developments in their field - factors that hindered both their learning and performance during their IVP.

⁵ Most formal learning incidents reported by volunteers occurred during in-country volunteer meetings, frequently triggered by the stories and experiences of other volunteers attending the meetings.

Table 3 outlines the primary ways in which the volunteers' learning experiences differed to those of non-volunteers in relation to: (a) the background context in which the learning incident occurred (learning context), (b) the situation, event or occurrence that prompted the learning (trigger event), and (c) the strategy or process of learning employed by the volunteers' (learning strategy).⁶

Table 3: Key Features of Volunteers' Learning Incidents

| VOLUNTEER LEARNING INCIDENTS | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| LEARNING CONTEXT | <p>Volunteers experienced frequent informal learning opportunities both at work and outside work. When compared to the control group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning was more likely to be informal and incidental, occurring as a by-product of other work and non-work activities rather than through structured learning initiatives. • Workplace learning occurred more frequently during 'non-routine' activities that were outside the volunteers' usual day-to-day role in their profession. Of these, most occurred while volunteers undertook capacity building, especially 'unstructured' capacity building (e.g. collaborating informally with a host-culture counterpart rather than conducting formal training or workshops). • A slightly larger proportion of learning incidents occurred outside work as volunteers moved around the host community or interacted with members of the HCN. |
| LEARNING TRIGGER | <p>Volunteers encountered active and salient learning triggers. When compared to the control group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More learning incidents were 'experiential', triggered by particularly salient personal experiences including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making errors and/or misinterpreting situations; 2. Taking on new and challenging responsibilities or activities (i.e. 'stretch roles'); 3. Proposing and implementing suggestions or new ideas (and the subsequent response of HCN to these); and 4. Coping with insufficient or inadequate resources. • Vicarious learning more frequently involved observing situations that challenged the volunteers' expectations or assumptions (i.e. disconfirmed expectancy). Volunteers described such situations in a way that reflected surprise; for instance, "What a shock!", "I was stunned. I felt that I had been struck somewhere in my chest," or "... (it) was not at all what I had expected ... (it) left me completely perplexed." |
| LEARNING STRATEGY | <p>Volunteers tended to employ highly collaborative approaches to learning. When compared to the control group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning strategies were more likely to be collaborative. Such approaches included discussing experiences or problems with others (HCN and expatriates, often from outside the host organisation) and consulting informal 'mentors' even though few volunteers had a designated HCN mentor. • Volunteers were more inclined to use 'trial & error' experimentation (e.g. new/untried methods or work practices) as a means of learning. • The opportunity, willingness, and ability to reflect on learning experiences was critical, especially in relation to transformational ('double-loop') learning outcomes. Most volunteers who used reflective journals felt that this contributed to the richness of their learning experience. |

⁶ Marsick, V. J. & K. E. Watkins. 2001. Informal and Incidental Learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89: 25 - 34.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS

A number of characteristics of IVPs contributed strongly towards the volunteers' learning experiences. These can be delineated at three levels: the work role that volunteers perform, the organisational context in which they work, and the macro environment, or the wider social and physical context, in the host country. These components, and their impact on volunteer learning, are briefly discussed below and outlined in Figure 2 at the end of this report.⁷

a. The Work Role of International Volunteers: Two features of the volunteers' work role were particularly supportive of learning. Firstly, because volunteers often lacked formal power within the host organisation, their success at building capacity and facilitating change tended to depend on their ability to harness the support of relevant stakeholders. Consequently volunteers devoted considerable time and effort to garnering support from the myriad stakeholders, both internal and external, with whom they dealt, and as a result became more reflective, and effective, communicators. High level communication skills accounted for 13% of learning outcomes, and increased awareness of 'recipient-centered communication' several more. The responses suggest that volunteers communicated strategically, often as a way to facilitate change. They planned, tested and used different approaches for different contexts and recipients; for example, adjusting emphases, using multiple channels, delaying requests and suggestions, and even exploiting differences by feigning cultural naïvety. Some were explicit about using social situations strategically, both at work and outside of work, to achieve organisational outcomes.

Networking is crucial. Whereas in Australia, I focused more on attaining a superior quality of work, socialising is ... considered something to make time for at/because of work. Being able to chat with someone about a work issue or project is what gets results - in Australia, that is a modality often reserved for executives on entrepreneurs. – Research project manager, Pacific.

⁷ A more detailed discussion of the components can be found in the attached academic paper, *Climb High, Sleep Low: The Unique Learning Environments of International Volunteer Placements*.

I quickly learned that work developed by e-mail is impossible. You really have to go out and meet people, so you're constantly going to meetings. And it may only be one hour of talking about something generally and then two hours of morning tea. That actually works in your favour. – Government adviser, Pacific.

A second feature of the volunteers' work role was the central role of capacity building. Twenty-four percent of learning incidents occurred while volunteers were undertaking capacity building. Almost all volunteers led some form of structured training or skills transfer (e.g. workshops, presentations, written manuals), a task that first required them to reinforce or extend their own (often tacit) knowledge. However, more significant in terms of learning was the informal or unstructured capacity building that the volunteers undertook through mentoring, coaching, supporting and empowering HCN colleagues. This was usually embedded into day-to-day work activities and required volunteers to make significant changes to how they performed their work. Nine percent of reported learning incidents and 40% of change incidents stemmed directly from volunteers needing to adjust their work through, for example, delegating more frequently than usual, explicitly 'role modelling' best practice, involving colleagues in problem-solving initiatives (rather than doing this alone), and engaging colleagues in discussions about work processes or philosophies.

I spent a lot of time working with (host-country staff) to build their confidence. That was a big challenge, I had to use a variety of methods. Usually in a work environment you're trying to prove your own worth, whereas in this environment I was trying to prove to them that they were the ones with the expertise, not me. – Organisational psychologist, Asia.

I suppose it is about letting go of your own ego. It's not about you and what you have achieved; it's about them and how you can work with them, so that they can achieve it. It's about giving them the power to take it over and do it. – Health worker, Asia.

Capacity building also provided important opportunities for volunteers to better understand and absorb new ideas and approaches from their counterparts, and subsequently question previously unexamined aspects of their work or profession. Almost 15% of learning incidents involved respondents incorporating host-culture approaches into their work:

I'm learning a lot from my colleagues ... most of it has been learning about religion and the value of faith-based responses to HIV. Previously all the approaches I had had been secular and very mainstream, and this has been great in looking at an alternative approach to the same problem. – HIV/AIDS program officer, Asia.

b. The Organisational Context: Most volunteers worked in organisations that operated with limited financial, physical, administrative and human resources. Dealing with these constraints infused much of the volunteers' work and led to a number of learning outcomes, including greater resilience/persistence, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and flexibility. Volunteers regularly relied on creative problem-solving to overcome resource constraints. They reported a total of 54 incidents where they had to innovate solutions to cope with insufficient resources, staffing or funds, and this contributed to over 10% of learning incidents. One resource that volunteers frequently lacked was information - relating to their role, the organisation, and the culture. The reasons for this were varied and included differences in language and communication patterns, including limited opportunities for performance feedback, as well as poor administration and record-keeping, and vague or inaccurate job descriptions. Consequently, volunteers found the organisational context highly uncertain, especially in the early stages of their placement. This ambiguity proved to be a double-edged sword for volunteers; while it created stress that indirectly impeded performance and constrained learning, it also contributed directly toward almost 10% of learning incidents. For instance, a number of volunteers implemented processes to manage information at the organisational level, while almost all employed some strategy to proactively source information for themselves in relation to their job. This commonly

involved tapping into diverse informal learning communities outside work that contributed to the volunteers' professional networks and exposed them to a variety of perspectives and ideas.

There's not much record keeping done here or in other parts of the Pacific, so what it really comes down to (is) you've got to talk to as many people as possible to try and get an idea of what resources exist. Most of the people we socialise with are also out here working with the large organisations or the umbrella organisations in the Pacific. So the more people we talk to the better. – Project manager, Pacific.

At home you mix with who you grew up with. They're of a similar age ... a similar career path. But here it's all over the shop. On the phone we talk about work and everyone's doing similar things ... but everyone's taking chances and learning new things, and so if I know that someone recently had to make a database and never had to do to before, then it's okay to call them up and ask them. Everyone has time to do that. – Research project manager, Pacific.

The lack of resources also appeared to motivate volunteers to take on new challenges beyond their designated work role. Many undertook entrepreneurial roles in order to secure funding and resources for the organisation, often by leveraging relationships they fostered outside the organisation, which expanded their repertoire of experiences and contacts. At least 22 volunteers (26%) oversaw major projects in addition to their job functions and in their own time, ranging from initiating and managing construction projects to establishing partnerships with businesses and service providers in Australia.

In addition, volunteers generally experienced work environments that they perceived as friendly, supportive and encouraging. Volunteers felt safe experimenting with new work approaches (including those picked up from HCN during capacity building) or accepting new and challenging work functions, often due to the shortage of skilled and experienced host-culture staff. This presented opportunities for volunteers to take on tasks and responsibilities that would be unavailable to them in their home country. Twenty three percent of all learning

incidents resulted from volunteers taking on more senior or demanding (often managerial) roles. These were especially prevalent among highly-skilled, early-career workers.

My position was significantly more senior than in Australia. I was effectively the most senior person in my department, certainly the best qualified. As such, I had exposure to all workings of the office design/consultation/project management/client interaction/accounts and project finance. I previously had been supervised by several layers of mid/senior management but in this job I was senior designer, project manager, construction manager. No technical supervisor whatsoever. I reported to the Department Director. – Civil engineer, Pacific.

I was required to manage and train three lawyers and two para-legals with the assistance of two interpreters and one receptionist (who I was also expected to manage). I was required to manage the budget of the office, all complaints, leave arrangements, work distribution etc. I was also required to run a case load of over 100 files with no supervision, limited research resources and in legal areas ranging from criminal to family, constitutional, human rights, land law, immigration, medical negligence etc. (i.e. highly specialised areas in which I had no or limited previous experience). The challenge was immense. The learning curve vertical. For the first time, I was 'the boss' - of myself and of my colleagues, who I trained and supervised daily (i.e. very high level of interaction). – Lawyer, Pacific.

c. The Macro Environment: Whereas the work role and organisational context provide rich experiential and social learning opportunities, the macro environment of IVPs contributes to volunteers' learning primarily through its impact on their cognitive frameworks, and the reflection and understanding that a new cultural environment can stimulate. Volunteers face extreme culture change through both the degree of cultural novelty they experience,⁸ and their immersion in the host community. This provides both the motivation and opportunity for

⁸ Volunteers reported a number of cultural differences that influenced their work performance. Many of these were common across countries and regions. These included: (a) different attitudes toward time, planning and accountability, (b) the hierarchical nature of society and the workplace, (c) the importance of relationships in the workplace including family and 'connections', and (d) more frequent use of indirect communication.

volunteers to learn. They experienced many incidents that forced them to develop new approaches to their work, or to adjust their perspectives: 13% of learning incidents were triggered by volunteers making mistakes or incorrect assumptions, while an additional 19% of learnings were triggered by volunteers observing events, situations or behaviours that presented a stark contrast with their existing cognitive frameworks (i.e. ‘disconfirmed expectancy’).

The volunteers’ deep cultural immersion enabled them to construct rich and highly nuanced understandings of the local culture, language and practices (14% of learning incidents). Perhaps more significantly, over 90% of incidents reporting ‘cultural’ learnings also reported additional outcomes stemming from this awareness. The majority of these related to the volunteers’ own cognitive frameworks, including increased awareness of one’s own schemas (and stereotypes), which comprised 5% of all learning outcomes, developing new frames of reference (13%), seeing and incorporating different perspectives into decisions (5%), and recognizing patterns (4%). In effect, their deep immersion in the host culture provided a counter-point that broadened their perspective on their own culture, their work, and themselves.

The biggest change is now not being so certain of things. After a time I actually thought I knew anything about the culture, for example, or the way people might think and behave ... I can’t feel confident about that anymore. It’s always been hard for me to stop and think about how people are thinking and feeling because I’m more inclined to focus on the doing instead of the process. So I think that I am more aware of that and will spend more time on the process in the future. – Manager, Asia.

I learnt a lot about myself through (regular interaction with the local community). When you’re out of your own comfort zone, who you are is quite clearly reflected back to you through the people that you’re with. There’s nothing to hide behind. There’s no trappings of a nice house or a good job or the sports that you do or the people that you mix with so you do get to see yourself quite clearly ... I’m there bare

bones, and I'm struggling to some extent so I think the good and the bad comes out more so because you are finding your way and there's nothing to hide behind. – Teacher, Asia.

In many cases these changes were quite transformational in nature; 17 volunteers (20%) reported significant changes to their values or belief systems during the study, while six more strengthened existing values. Volunteers from a variety of professions also reported developing heightened or more clearly defined ethical principles resulting from the need to demonstrate and/or explain culturally-different approaches to HCN, or through a perceived absence of appropriate structures or regulations in the host culture.

In Australia there's a code of ethics that can be enforced by law at certain points. If you step beyond those boundaries...there are a number of different agency guidelines that could constrain your work. In thinking about the lack of constraints in (the host country) ... just knowing that there are no boundaries and that there are different approaches to work, it was almost like I had to be more aware of it for myself and also protecting what other people were doing as well. – Social worker, Asia.

Not all learning incidents were unambiguously positive. Illness, crime, and personality conflicts with supervisors or colleagues also influenced the volunteers' learning experiences, and while these cannot be directly attributed to the IVP, the volunteers tended to associate these experiences with the 'crucible' of volunteering. They were also clear about the reflective powers of such events, with several attributing positive personal change to these experiences, notably self-awareness, self-sufficiency and adaptability.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The learning outcomes reported here, including the creative capabilities measured in this study, are highly valued within the corporate sector. While giving support to earlier studies identifying the learning outcomes of international volunteering, the current study provides a

unique perspective on the phenomenon. Longitudinal panel studies provide the most direct measure of individual learning and change yet are rare in international research. This study represents the first empirical research, as far as we are aware, to demonstrate changes in cognitive capabilities that occur during IVPs. Moreover, the use of qualitative data that focuses on specific ‘learning incidents’ which are grounded in actual events overcomes several validity threats common to the self-report data used in earlier studies. The study therefore presents a robust case for the learning potential of IVPs.

For agencies overseeing volunteer placements, the findings have implications for each stage of the volunteer lifecycle. In particular, the framework outlined in Figure 2 provides a starting point for assessing or enhancing the learning potential of specific positions, and for improving the ‘match’ between a position, host organisation, and an applicant’s motivations and objectives. Related to this is the important role volunteer agencies can play in facilitating learning during the IVP to ensure volunteers (and host communities and organisations) maximize the learning potential of their IVP. In this regard, volunteer agencies could consider a number of initiatives that, on balance, would enhance volunteer learning further. Suggested measures include:

1. Supporting opportunities for more peer-to-peer interaction between volunteers and host-culture nationals, both at work and outside work;
2. Instilling mechanisms to ensure volunteers receive performance feedback from relevant members of the host organisation/culture, especially in the early stages of IVPs when they are less comfortable managing the uncertainty that this creates;
3. Structural interventions to facilitate ongoing engagement between volunteers and their profession, both in the host country and at ‘home’, in order to ensure volunteers continue developing domain-specific knowledge and skills; and
4. Targeted pre-departure training and in-country support to assist volunteers to develop capabilities in recognising and leveraging the many informal learning opportunities they encounter during IVPs.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study was exploratory in nature and the sample sizes were small. Consequently, while the framework presented here may provide a useful platform for future studies of international volunteering, replication of the study in different contexts and cultures would help to refine the framework.

Recommendations for future studies include a more focused examination of the components of the framework which contribute most strongly to learning, notably the volunteers' capacity building function and the creative nature of this work, in order to document 'good practice' approaches which can benefit both volunteers and host organisations. Such a study would incorporate the perspective of the host organisation and HCN, voices missing from the current study. Related to this, while the current study explores learning experiences from the perspectives of volunteers, further research into how the presence of (foreign) volunteers in the host organisation influences the learning, performance and attitudes of HCN is likely to unearth factors that contribute to skill exchange in both directions. Finally, while the current study identifies important cognitive and other changes occurring during the first 12 months of the volunteers' IVP, time and resource constraints have prevented a longer study that would track volunteers beyond this period. Consequently, the question remains as to how permanent the learning outcomes are, particularly following a volunteer's repatriation and reintegration into a subsequent work role, and what role these capabilities play in the volunteers' ongoing careers.

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Figure 2: The Learning Environment of International Volunteer Placements (IVPs)

