

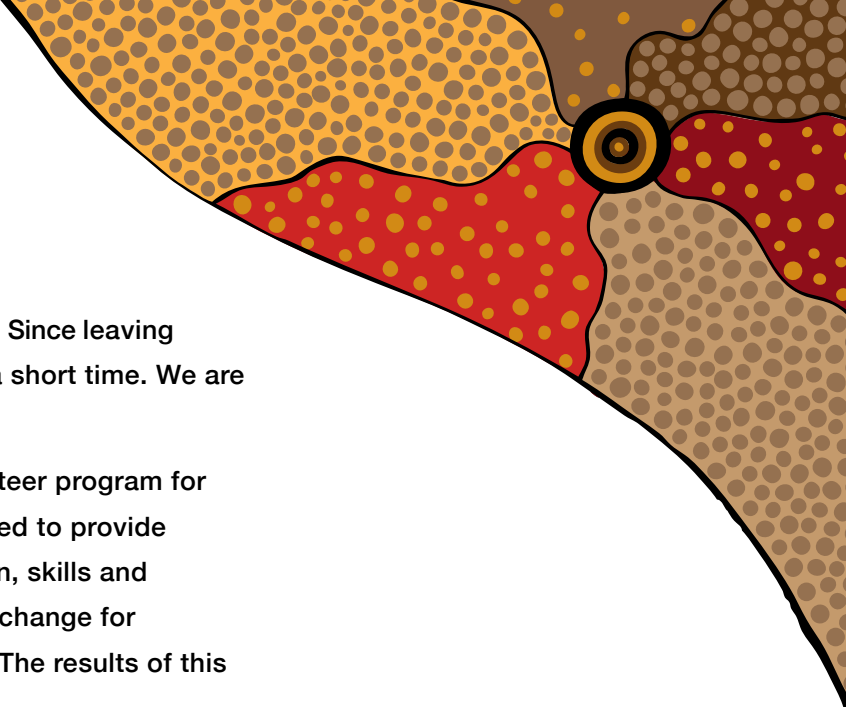


IMPACT OF THE ABORIGINAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

on

**Aboriginal Returned
Volunteers
2018**





'What an inspiring group of young Aboriginal leaders! Since leaving Oodnadatta they have achieved so much in such a short time. We are extremely proud of each of them.'

Ten years ago, the ARG set out to develop a volunteer program for young people in Aboriginal communities. We wanted to provide a volunteering experience that inspired the passion, skills and commitment of young Aboriginal people to create change for themselves and bring benefit to our communities. The results of this research warms our hearts.'

BRUCE HAMMOND, LENORE BAGNARA, HERB MACK AND KEN LIDDLE
ABORIGINAL REFERENCE GROUP MEMBERS

'As a regular supporter of the Aboriginal Volunteer Program, it is particularly pleasing to see the ripple effect that is taking place. This group of young Aboriginal people made a real difference while volunteering in Oodnadatta and they are now out in the world sharing their passion for social and economic justice. As a funder, I could not ask for more. Well done!'

DR DAVID MORAWETZ, AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES FOUNDATION
- THE SOCIAL JUSTICE FUND

'The benefits of volunteering are not always easy to measure in numbers and value in dollars, as this report clearly shows. I am delighted to see that this project clearly captures how individual lives and communities can be changed through volunteering in ways that we may not see or recognise unless we make the effort to look. I trust that this report will contribute to cementing the status of similar projects in the future throughout Australia and beyond.'

DR LISEL O'DWYER, ADJUNCT SENIOR LECTURER,
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND POLICY STUDIES, FLINDERS UNIVERSITY



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The report was edited and designed by Sharyn Kaesehagen, Robyn Haworth and Tahnee Edwards. Tahnee is a Yorta Yorta and Taungurung woman from Melbourne. She runs her own graphic design business. Tahnee also works as a Program and Promotions Coordinator with Djirra (an Aboriginal Community Controlled organisation) that assists victims and survivors of family violence. She is passionate about equity, social justice and volunteering.

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AVP Partners offer a special thank you to the people of Oodnadatta who not only welcomed each of the Aboriginal volunteers into their community but provided opportunities and support to make it a rewarding volunteering experience. Some, like Roseanne Woodforde, continued this support, providing on-going encouragement for the volunteers in their endeavours on their return home.

RETURNED VOLUNTEERS

Kelli Bartlett - AVP Volunteer 2012

Renee Marks - AVP Volunteer 2016

Dale Weegberg - AVP Volunteer 2012

Montana McStay - AVP Volunteer 2016

Alice Krakouer - AVP Volunteer 2013

Lisa Rapley - AVP Volunteer 2016

Khawanha Rose-Powyer - AVP Volunteer 2013

Charles Rolls - AVP Volunteer 2016

Cristal Walters - AVP Volunteer 2013

Jessica Bloomfield - AVP Volunteer 2017

Sophie Bailes - AVP Volunteer 2015

Naomi Fei - AVP Volunteer 2017

Reese Salmon - AVP Volunteer 2015

Kasey Kelly - AVP Volunteer 2017

Bryce Taylor - AVP Volunteer 2015

FOREWORD

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the Aboriginal Volunteer Program on the daily lives of young Aboriginal Returned Volunteers, and to determine whether this impact had transformed into benefits for Aboriginal and wider communities.

Would the energy, vibrancy and dynamism that had been brought to the volunteer assignment in Oodnadatta continue post assignment? Would passion, engagement, relationships and commitment—key drivers used by the volunteers to achieve change on assignment—flow through to deliver change in their own communities?

This study was based on the premise that volunteers not only contributed to community development while they were volunteering but they had a long term impact through transformative local partnerships and the work they did in communities on their return home.¹

International research conducted by VSO 2017 concluded that international volunteering increases levels of social action post-return.² It identified four sites of impact from the volunteering experience within post assignment outcomes: ‘personal, community, within existing organisations and structures, and through the establishment of new initiatives.’³ Would young Aboriginal people who volunteered within country in a remote Aboriginal community be impacted by their volunteer experience in the same way? Would they also go on to contribute to community development and bring benefit to communities on their return home?

This study also acts to determine if one of the overall goals of the AVP has been met: ‘Volunteers gain the confidence and skills to participate in and contribute to community life.’

SETTING THE SCENE

WHAT IS THE ABORIGINAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM?

The Aboriginal Volunteer Program enabled small groups of carefully-selected, well-trained and supported young Aboriginal volunteers—on ten week assignments—to work collaboratively with the people of the remote South Australian community of Oodnadatta by undertaking locally identified community development projects.


The program was based on an international development approach with proven effectiveness over the long term. Tailored for use in the remote Aboriginal setting, the model represents best practice in culturally sensitive, respectful engagement with Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal volunteers who understand the context work with the community on projects which matter to it.

The AVP delivered five successful programs in Oodnadatta during 2012–17. The Aboriginal volunteers were inspirational. They formed relationships with community members that led children into school, improved student literacy levels, achieved health and well-being outcomes

1 Dr E Chowns & A Rath, [Measurement](#), IVCO 2017 sub theme paper, VSO, UK, August 2017.

2 J Clark & S Lewis, [Impact beyond volunteering](#), VSO, UK, March 2017.

3 D King, [Active citizenship, civic engagement and global citizenship](#), IVCO 2018 resource paper, International Forum for Volunteering in Development, 2018. p2.



across generations, and saw the women of Oodnadatta realising their dream of setting up a social enterprise.

Core elements underpinning the program's success included:


- A partnership with community, with members involved in creating the vision, implementing the program and evaluating the model.
- Aboriginal cultural respect being the key guiding value, informing every area of practice.
- A focus on trusting relationships, central for community engagement.
- A place-based approach, defining complex issues, sharing learning and fostering collaborative relationships.
- Ongoing measurement to achieve positive and consistent progress, as well as to inform tweaks to program design and delivery.
- The building of a backbone of resources for sustaining the program via a range of skills and experience, and diverse funding from donors, business and government.
- Well-selected, well-trained volunteers and a program management team with strong skills and knowledge in community development values and principles.
- The recruitment of young Aboriginal volunteers who are accepted as family and can build respectful relationships quickly.
- Involvement of Aboriginal Reference Group members in every aspect of the program, ensuring Aboriginal ownership and cultural relevance.
- Partner organisations committed to working towards an enabling environment for young Aboriginal people to take up leadership and volunteering opportunities beyond the AVP.

This innovative program was delivered through a multi-stakeholder, collaborative effort between the community of Oodnadatta, the program's South Australian-based Aboriginal Reference Group, AVI, and Volunteering SA&NT. It was supported by a generous group of donors and state and commonwealth governments.

WHO ARE THE ABORIGINAL VOLUNTEERS?

Fifteen young Aboriginal volunteers participated in five volunteer programs 2012–17. They had connections with the Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri, Noongar, Wemba-Wemba, Worimi, Kamilaroi, Quandamooka, Gumbaynggirr and Gunai Kurnai nations, across five Australian states.⁴ They came from varying backgrounds and upbringings, but were all equally motivated to support the community of Oodnadatta. Some had previously contributed to school and community activities but for most, volunteering was a new experience.

⁴ For thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have belonged to over 500 different language, tribal or nation groups across Australia. Refer to: Horton, D, ed, [AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia](#), Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz, 1996, viewed 14 November 2018.



Twelve volunteers were female and three male. They were aged between 18 and 28 years, with eight aged 18 to 20 years at the time of volunteering. Three took leave from full-time employment and three deferred study. Two of the volunteers selected for the program came from the community of Oodnadatta.

When the interviews were conducted, seven volunteers lived in a capital city, seven in regional areas of Australia and one in Oodnadatta. Post assignment the volunteers had been back in their communities for varying lengths of time (seven months to five years), depending on the year of their assignment.

AIMS AND APPROACH

The aims of the research were formalised following discussion with members of the Aboriginal Reference Group:

- To assess the impact of the Aboriginal Volunteer Program Oodnadatta on the lives of Returned AVP Volunteers.
- To determine if 'returned volunteers' continued in their role as 'active citizens' post Oodnadatta and how this has been done.
- To assess the flow on effect of the AVP experience on positive change for our world.

The research methodology was determined following a discussion between Aboriginal Reference Group members, the returned volunteers and the AVP Program Manager, and a review of international studies that considered the impact of returned volunteers on development.

In selecting a researcher, questions considered included: the independence of the researcher; trust in the researcher; a culturally appropriate approach; and having an understanding about the AVP, its goals and achievements. It was decided that the research would be based around a series of conversations and be conducted by Jo Larkin, the AVP Program Manager and author of this report. Notwithstanding bias, the Program Manager had a trusting relationship with each of the volunteers; was aware of the impacts on the volunteers at the end of the assignment; and, after a life-time of relationships with Aboriginal communities, had cultural respect grounded in personal experience.

Research suggests that this auto-ethnographic approach enhances empathy with interviewees and delivers a more in-depth and intimate response from the participant.

Like the interviewer, those interviewed were also 'insiders', with interactive interviews enabling them to expand on answers and enrich the process with their stories. The volunteers also participated in testing the reliability of the questionnaire and provided comments on the final draft report.

A questionnaire was prepared to form the basis for interviews. Two interviews were conducted with each of the volunteers. A further contact clarified points and added any new information.

Interviews were completed with fourteen of the fifteen volunteers.

FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

As previously stated, this study's aims were threefold:

- To assess the impact of the Aboriginal Volunteer Program Oodnadatta on the lives of Returned AVP Volunteers.
- To determine if 'returned volunteers' continued in their role as 'active citizens' post Oodnadatta and how this has been done.
- To assess the flow on effect of the AVP experience on positive change for our world.

AIM 1: ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

The research identified that the AVP Oodnadatta volunteering experience had a profound and lasting impact on the personal and professional lives of returned volunteers (RVs). They gained a great deal from their volunteering experience and this continued to shape their lives on their return home.

They described impacts in seven key areas of their lives: values and dreams, confidence and self-worth, knowledge and skills, relationships, cultural understanding, professional choices and access to new opportunities. While the degree of impact across the areas varied between RVs, their overall responses were consistent and these are reported on below. The RVs provided a multitude of rich, thoughtful and meaningful comments, too many to be included in this report. Comments were selected to provide a range of insights and reflect the sentiments of the majority of the RVs.

VALUES AND DREAMS


Many of the returned volunteers expressed that life was different now. Oodnadatta had a significant impact on who they were as a person, on their values and dreams.

'My values changed in Oodnadatta. I came to realise the most important things in life. Before I wasted money on things I didn't need, personal things, even food and takeaway. Now I cook, clean and budget and live independently. I never really cooked before.'

AVP Volunteer 2016

'I saw that it was the little things that kids appreciated in Oodnadatta; it was the simple things they liked and this has had a flow on effect how I now communicate with my young foster brothers now.'

AVP Volunteer 2016



Several reported that the Oodnadatta experience had grounded them. It created a personal space for their heads to clear, to set directions and to see their future ahead. They knew what they wanted to do on returning home and had steadfastly pursued it.

‘After volunteering at the Oodnadatta Aboriginal School and seeing the value that a young Aboriginal person can bring to the learning, I decided I wanted to be a teacher. Five years later and I now have my teaching qualifications and am working in a remote Aboriginal School in New South Wales.’

AVP Volunteer 2013

The RVs expressed a need to be part of community. Community development was now part of a RV’s identity.

‘Working with community fits my values and nature. I can be myself.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

‘You get lost when you do not have enough contact with community. Oodnadatta showed me that there are spaces which allow you to work in a way consistent with your values. I am much more now about working with the community with a community development model. When you build relationships it works better.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

Many of the RVs expressed that they were more appreciative of life at home.

I feel privileged with the community services we have at home, like turning on a tap for water. Yet the strong bonds of family life in Oodnadatta is something we do not see here. I am much closer to my family now.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

They reported that they were more caring, non-judgemental and mindful of others in their relationships with family, friends and colleagues.


‘There is a fella at home now on the streets and I talk with him, help out a bit. Before Oodnadatta I would not have noticed him.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

Some expressed frustration with people who complained about first world issues and had no idea that poverty existed in Australia.

‘If the person is not “real” I don’t want to know them. I found that I cut a lot of people out of my life. You just want to shake them, things they say about Aboriginal people and things in life that do not matter.’

AVP Volunteer 2017



Many of the RVs were living a healthy life style, a follow on from their role modelling in Oodnadatta. They talked about exercising, cooking their own meals, growing vegetables and saving money, which before Oodnadatta, was spent on takeaways. Another gave up smoking. For one it was about appearance and self-worth, coming to realise in Oodnadatta that make-up and clothes did not matter.

‘I learned that people accepted you for who you are. Now I dress like Oodnadatta and I still do not wear makeup unless it is an event. I even feel funny wearing it now and I am not into social media on my phone anymore either.’

AVP Volunteer 2017

CONFIDENCE AND SELF WORTH

All of the RVs identified growth in confidence and self-worth as the catalyst for many of the activities undertaken on return home: applying for international volunteering, going overseas, applying for scholarships, starting up a business, asking for a more challenging role at work and going interstate to work. They were not only sure of themselves, in making decisions and explaining why they do things, but were viewed by others as mature and confident.

‘I get told constantly that I come across as extremely confident and comfortable in myself. After Oodnadatta it became part of who I am.’

AVP Volunteer 2017

They saw a flow-on effect in the effective relationships they were building, skills they were confidently using and management responsibilities they were taking up.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS


The RVs described how the comprehensive list of personal, professional and cultural skills that they were called on to use during the assignment was now central in how they lived their lives. Some had transformed the way they were working, confident in using community development techniques. Others were taking on leadership roles and had management responsibilities, with managers now recognising and valuing their skills. Several mentioned coping skills such as flexibility, courage, patience and resilience which were assisting them to problem-solve and get through more challenging times. Four RVs spoke of adjusting their communication styles to hear what people have to say: to walk alongside rather telling people what to do.

‘Oodnadatta gave me the people skills, the team skills and belief in my ability to have a go. After this I wanted to be a team leader for the AVP. It also gave me the confidence to start my own business.’

AVP Volunteer 2012

RELATIONSHIPS

All of the RVs recognised that success in Oodnadatta was tied closely to the trusting relationships they had formed. To build these relationships they had developed strategies and skills to engage with a range of different people across the generations.



‘It changed me as a person. In Oodnadatta, I had to learn to talk to people to get the job done. I am now better at making friends and even relate better to managers and supervisors.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

RVs reported that they now put more effort into getting to know people’s stories and they consciously put relationships first when working with community.

‘In Oodnadatta I had to go out and build the relationships and saw the results of this approach when everyone turned up. I experienced it first-hand. I did well at it and it is influencing how I work with people now. I am trying to build these kind of relationships with the communities in my new job.’

AVP Volunteer 2017

‘Being part of an Aboriginal community is all about relationships. If you have poor relationships you won’t get anywhere. We learned so much about this in Oodnadatta. On arriving for my teaching job, the first thing I did was to go out and connect with the community. I could never have done this without Oodnadatta.’

AVP Volunteer 2013

CULTURE

The cultural experience in Oodnadatta was profoundly important for each of the volunteers, but was reflected differently in how it impacted on their lives going forward. For some it was about identity.

‘I am more secure in my identity since I came back from Oodnadatta. I went with the expectation from living in Victoria that I wasn’t dark enough. I learned that it is more about knowing where you come from, your family history, what they achieved, can you follow in their footsteps and make them proud and keep the traditions and lessons they taught alive. I am now sharing my culture to help others.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

For others it was about a sense of belonging and that they are now closer to their families. Four talked about a sense of loss and were taking steps to re-invigorate their cultural heritage at home and in the workplace. Others were ‘blown away’ by the sharing of knowledge in Oodnadatta and have built ‘sharing’ into their way of working, using concepts like ‘train the trainer’ and ‘mentoring’. One volunteer reflected on cultural respect, and from her experience in Oodnadatta, now ‘welcomes people to country’ from the heart.

PROFESSIONAL LIVES

The RVs reported that their volunteering experience had a real effect on their professional lives.

Four stated that they had the confidence and skills to set up their own business, based on community development principles that fitted with their values. Eleven took up jobs where they could contribute to communities, gaining positions in the community services, health, employment, housing, education, justice and aged care sectors. All of the RVs were involved with study, including short courses and tertiary studies (TAFE seven, University four), recognising that desired career outcomes would be facilitated by on-going learning.

One reported that she won a state wide internship which required demonstrated experience in team skills and living and working independently, all achieved in Oodnadatta. Another reported that the work in the school in Oodnadatta was accepted in lieu of a bridging course, a requirement to get into a teaching degree at the university.

Some talked of 'preparedness': the cultural knowledge and skills gained in Oodnadatta gave them the confidence to apply for Aboriginal positions; going through the AVP recruitment process gave them confidence in interviews; and their project management, community development and leadership experiences gave them the confidence to push the boundaries and seek out the right position for them.

Nine took on leadership roles, including managing a section at work, organising and chairing network meetings, like the Aboriginal Health Partnership Network Group and the Australian Public Service Indigenous Network (ACT) or being a team leader on international volunteering placements. Others reported stepping up in existing roles and taking the lead to ensure outcomes were achieved, a flow on from a way of working in Oodnadatta.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The RVs believed that many of the opportunities that had come their way had links back to their volunteer experience. When applying for jobs, internships, scholarships or volunteering opportunities, it opened doors. It demonstrated that they were passionate people, committed to helping others: people who could stay for the duration and get the outcomes sought. Employers liked talking about the volunteering experience.

Three of the RVs, independent of each other, were selected from 400 applicants by the Foundation for Young Australians to be part of the 2017 Young Social Pioneers Program, an incubator which provided support for young people leading initiatives that responded to society's most pressing challenges. The RVs attended workshops, gained a mentor, won an award and received start-up funding for their businesses. One of the RVs was then invited to join the FYA Board, with an opportunity to become involved in policy development.

Two RVs won internships with Amnesty International and Harness Racing Victoria, with one winning the Ted Demmler Award for hard work and commitment to their industry. Another RV became the first Aboriginal student to be selected by the University of Newcastle for an Indigenous Exchange with the University of Victoria in British Columbia. She spent eight months working at the SATLIP Aboriginal Education School, a tribal school in Canada. Another won a 2017 Power Shift scholarship and spent three days in Melbourne with other young people, learning about taking action on the climate crisis.

SUMMARY: ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

The results clearly demonstrate that the Oodnadatta volunteering experience had a significant and lasting impact on the RVs, enriching and engendering changes in their personal and professional lives and setting them on a journey to create a better world. As three of the RVs stated:

‘Oodnadatta was a massive learning curve.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

‘It was a life changing experience for me.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

‘It changed me as a person.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

AIM 2: DETERMINATION OF ‘ACTIVE CITIZEN’ ROLE

The study identified that the energy, passion and dynamism that drove change in Oodnadatta remained strong. RVs were actively seeking to contribute to their communities on their return home. They talked about ‘wanting to make a difference’, ‘having a fire in their belly’, ‘feeling privileged and wanting to give back’, ‘taking up every opportunity to do this’, ‘it is like a flame was lit in me’. Some expressed that ‘community’ is ‘who I am’ and for others ‘who I have come to be’.

‘This is a new way of thinking for me now. I am different now. I can see it is not good enough what is happening with our kids.’

AVP Volunteer 2017

This strong drive to bring about positive change was reflected in the many and varied activities undertaken by the RVs since their return home.

PROMOTING AWARENESS ABOUT DEVELOPMENT AND VOLUNTEERING

The RVs reported that they used every opportunity to share with family, friends, colleagues and others the stories of their Oodnadatta experience. They took seriously the opportunity they had to influence change.

‘I see my role as educating fellow citizens about the facts.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

For some it was about promoting the benefits of volunteering and for others, encouraging people to learn more about development and the issues facing Aboriginal people, particularly in remote communities. They did presentations for Year 12, TAFE and university students, AIME mentors, employers and colleagues at work, and for funders and potential donors. They shared information at conferences, including presenting on the success of the AVP model at the 23rd International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) World Conference 2013, on youth and inclusion at the International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations’ Conference (IVCO) 2018 and being a panel

member at the Nexus Australia 2018 Summit, considering the topic 'Indigenous history and culture in the world today'. They talked about their Oodnadatta experience when volunteering overseas.

They were active on social media, had spoken on radio and TV, had articles in newsletters and had their stories and a video included on websites. This passion to influence change was reflected in comments made by one of the RVs who was fundraising for her next volunteer experience in a remote Aboriginal community.

'I just wanted to let you know I've been posting a lot about my story as to why I wanted to get into volunteer work. A bunch of people shared it and a few Aboriginal pages posted about it. I got hundreds of requests in a couple of days. The paper from my home town and the town I live in now have done an article on my fundraising and so many people have messaged me and come up to me around town. People have even been knocking on my door to talk more about it! If you could see how many people are starting to get behind remote communities and want to learn more you'd be as moved as me. I've literally cried everyday just from the pure kindness of people wanting to help. I just thought I'd let you know. Hope it makes you as happy as it made me.'

AVP Volunteer 2017

Several of the RVs were talking to others about effective practice, a way of working with Aboriginal communities to achieve results. Some returned home quite disturbed that the government bureaucracies, both inside and outside of the communities, were not receptive to local needs and responded in a 'white' context.

'They just don't understand and do everything the wrong way. They go out for one day to understand a big issue. They just don't get it.'

AVP Volunteer 2017

On assignment, the RVs had participated in a community development model and saw it achieve results. They were now promoting this model as an effective mechanism to bring about change.



Returned Volunteer presents on the topic 'Volunteering from the same perspective', at the Human Library Session, IVCO, Montreal, 2018



Returned Volunteer increases the participation of Aboriginal girls in netball - Khaamburra Netball Tournament Trophies, Canberra, 2018

ENHANCING COMMUNITY WELL-BEING THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

Despite the demands of study and making a living on return home, the RVs remained passionate about volunteering. Three went on to volunteer with the Classic Wallabies Exchange in South Africa. One was invited on a second program as the team leader and another as a team leader with Youth Challenge Australia in Vanuatu. A fourth RV volunteered in St Lucia, Mozambique, with Volunteer Eco Students Abroad. A fifth RV was selected to join the NASCA volunteering program and early this year volunteered in two remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

The RVs were also volunteering in their local communities. This was often episodic volunteering as they fitted it in between work and study. Volunteering included organising events, like NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week activities, ATSI Celebration days, the ATSI element of the National Multicultural Festival in Canberra, the Easter Koori Art and Craft Fair, Insight Days for Aboriginal secondary students to learn about university life, and school holiday activities. They were also mentoring with AIME, helping at the local school, fund raising and participating in the Cancer Council's 'Shave for a Cure' and 'Relay for Life', organising an Indigenous student network on campus and participating on various consultative groups like the Executive of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.

One of the RVs was driven to increase the number of Aboriginal girls playing netball. This included participation at the grass root level for those who had never had the opportunity to play and bridging the gap at the elite level to get players into top rep teams. This significant commitment to volunteering involved participating in committee membership, organising tournaments and training camps, facilitating indigenous participation in coaching, taking teams to national indigenous netball championships and linking in with Netball Australia and Netball ACT to create pathways and access support.

The RVs continued to provide direct support for the Aboriginal Volunteer Program. This volunteer effort included promoting volunteering opportunities, participating in Pre-Entry Volunteer Briefings and Re-Entry workshops, mentoring new volunteers, providing feedback to donors, talking to potential funders and contributing material for reports. They also maintained contact with the Oodnadatta community, offering support when needed.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH WORK

Twelve of the RVs reported that they had chosen career pathways to ‘make a difference’: teaching, law, justice, health, employment, aged care, journalism and community services.

‘I see myself becoming a successful lawyer and ultimately helping Indigenous youth to get the most beneficial outcome in the courts that they can get.’

AVP Volunteer 2017

‘I am far more passionate about Indigenous issues since being in Oodnadatta. I changed to journalism as I want to write stories to inform and make a difference.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

Three RVs created businesses based on a community development model to empower people to improve well-being. Two of these recently came together and have been supported to deliver mental health and resilience workshops in schools in Queensland.

‘I am passionate about being a role model and sharing information that can improve well-being. Young people have to have the knowledge and understand ‘why’ before change will occur.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

One of the RVs, working outside of the community sector, reported that her job still fitted with her ‘community values’ as she was actively involved in corporate volunteering, supporting the homeless and aged care sectors. Her role also encompassed regularly sharing her story with young Aboriginal students, who came into the workplace to learn about career opportunities.

The RVs reported that their aim was to bring into the workplace new methods and approaches based on community development principles and cultural frameworks, in order to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people. Some were already doing this: the teacher who saw it as a priority to get to know the community before teaching their children in school; the community engagement officer who now saw ‘engaging’ as putting in time and effort to build relationships with the community rather than a visit ‘in and out’; and the public servant who had taken on the role of walking alongside, empowering young Aboriginal people to build their capacity and strengthen possibilities for them in the workplace.

One of the RVs talked about the importance of collaboration and a holistic approach after having experienced in Oodnadatta bureaucracies working in silos while the community was operating as a dynamic entity. Others reported that they influenced change through network meetings and developing Reconciliation Action Plans and Inclusion Strategies for the work place.

ACTIVISM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Whilst all of the RVs reported that they were involved with communities to make a difference, several were particularly passionate about social justice and human rights. They saw change coming through social movements and regularly posted on social media, including FEED and change.org. Some took a different path obtaining knowledge about activism through a FEED workshop, participating in rallies, joining with Amnesty to contribute to knowledge about

Aboriginal youth in the justice system or involved in a protest to stop construction companies digging on Aboriginal land. One took a pathway regularly donating to Oxfam to support both Aboriginal and international causes.

SUMMARY: 'ACTIVE CITIZEN' ROLE

Overall, the findings show that the passion that drove the volunteers to achieve change in Oodnadatta remained strong. These young Aboriginal RVs were enthusiastically embracing the role of 'active citizen' on return home. They grasped every opportunity to integrate community development into their busy lives of work and study and were actively out there trying to create a better world.



Returned Volunteer supports student literacy activities – NASCA Volunteer Program, NT, 2018

AIM 3:

ASSESSMENT OF POSITIVE FLOW-ON EFFECT

There is ample evidence to suggest that the development work of the RVs was making a difference.

Whilst this study was not designed to rigorously measure the broader meaningful impacts of the contribution made by RVs (a topic for further research), the findings signal that the contributions of the RVs had brought benefits to communities.

For a start, it is recognised that volunteering in itself has a significant impact on the community, building economic, social and cultural capital.⁵ Whilst there is no specific data on the number of hours that the RVs contributed to volunteering since their return home, the impact of all the activities undertaken is clearly considerable.

Similarly, there is no specific data on how many people RVs reached, through the various mediums, to raise awareness about development, issues impacting on Aboriginal people and the benefits of volunteering. However, the report on the depth and breadth of their awareness raising activities suggests a substantial number. The RV who put up information about her volunteering experience on social media said she had hundreds of responses from one post. The RVs have clearly been crucial catalysts for positive change.

Some of their achievements are indeed profound but will need more rigorous measures to define. For example, what value do you put on a young Aboriginal teacher who puts her hand up to go to a remote Aboriginal school, where it is often difficult to attract and retain teachers; who brings with her training and development from her work experience volunteering in a school in a remote Aboriginal community; and who has the confidence to immediately build connections with the local people?

With national Aboriginal literacy levels still below par⁶, what value do you put on RVs who now read regularly with young family members at home after seeing the value of reading one-on-one with children in Oodnadatta?

'I saw the value of reading to kids out there. I saw the progression of kids learning and how it builds confidence. It helped with my confidence too, reading aloud. I missed out a lot at school and this got me into reading again. I felt better reading things at work. I now read books all the time to my young daughter.'

AVP Volunteer 2012

The RVs referred to some of the specific outcomes they had achieved through their development work including: increase in community participation, preservation of culture, increase in cultural understanding, increase in knowledge and skills and collaboration across sectors. The following table provides an example of these achievements.

5 Volunteering Australia, [Volunteer support services: building strong and resilient communities](#), media release, 2017–18 Federal pre-budget submission, Canberra, January 24 2017.

6 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, [Closing the gap](#), Prime Minister's report 2018, Commonwealth of Australia, 2018.

<p>PROMOTING AWARENESS ABOUT DEVELOPMENT AND VOLUNTEERING</p>	<p>'I recently met a cousin whose views are different from mine and she introduced me as the person who goes out to volunteer and help people. She actually knew and valued what I did. It was a wow moment for me.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2013</i></p> <p>'I spent a week with a girl at a University workshop and talked non-stop about Oodnadatta. The next year she applied and became an AVP volunteer.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2015</i></p>
<p>VOLUNTEERING</p>	<p>'With the recent netball tournament we greatly increased participation, from 10 teams last year to 20 teams this year and the kids had a great time. Two of the girls I mentored are now doing a Level 1 Coaching course.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2017</i></p> <p>'The work we did in South Africa did make a difference. All the children learnt new skills as they participated in mixing cement, laying bricks or planting vegetables. It also helped to preserve our culture as we shared our cultural stories with the people.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2015</i></p>
<p>WORK</p>	<p>'I recently won an award for my tutoring at TAFE. My students, aged 14-65 years, reported that I had made learning easy for them. They said that I understood where they were coming from, had created a safe, comfortable environment, had good communication skills and used a team approach, everything that I learned in Oodnadatta.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2016</i></p> <p>'I have just sold forty soaps made by the ladies in Oodnadatta. I am proud that I can help out their new social enterprise, knowing that they now have something to work for and are supplementing their low incomes.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2015</i></p>
<p>BUSINESS RUN BY RETURNED VOLUNTEERS</p>	<p>'It is hard to know what impact the drug awareness program has. I do know that analysis of before and after feedback from five High Schools in Mackay showed that only 7% of students knew that drugs were neurotoxic to the brain and after they had been through the training it was 96%. This is huge.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2016</i></p>
<p>SOCIAL ACTIVISM</p>	<p>'I did get an email from Amnesty to say that the information we had put together on the high incarceration rate of Aboriginal youth had contributed to a campaign to inform politicians about this social justice issue.'</p> <p><i>AVP Volunteer 2015</i></p>

SUMMARY: ASSESSMENT OF POSITIVE FLOW-ON EFFECT

The findings demonstrate a positive flow on effect from the Oodnadatta volunteering experience. RVs have gone on to bring considerable benefit to Aboriginal and wider communities. Whilst further research is needed to define the extent and type of this benefit, it is anticipated that it will reveal impacts that are both significant and profound.

DISCUSSION


The study focused on a group of young Aboriginal people who were passionate about creating a better world and actively contributing to benefit their communities. Did this drive to make a difference emanate solely from the Oodnadatta volunteering experience or was it inherent in the makeup of the volunteers? Although not tested, it is likely that both have played a part.

For the majority of RVs, the Oodnadatta experience definitely put the 'fire in the belly'. Whilst everyone was aware that poverty could exist in some remote Aboriginal communities, only four RVs went to Oodnadatta expressing a passion for social justice. The Oodnadatta experience created a level of consciousness about development. The RVs experienced what it was like to live without essential services, to see the contribution their volunteering made in improving student literacy levels and to understand the impact they had as role models on the young children in the community. This 'experiential' or lived experience led to a transformation, with volunteers returning home more aware and more passionate about addressing issues affecting their communities.

As Aboriginal people, the RVs brought to the volunteering experience an understanding of the importance of community. However, it was only after working in the realities of community and seeing the results of their community development work that they came to the realisation that community is 'who I am' and for others 'who I have come to be'.

Their commitment for using community development techniques as a way of working in their businesses, the work place and volunteering was closely tied to their Oodnadatta experience.





Several reported that they gained their understanding about community development from watching how the AVP was rolled out. Whilst community development principles were at the forefront of the program, emphasised in pre-departure and re-entry briefings and weekly meetings, it was unexpected that the volunteers should learn so much about community development from watching how the AVP management did their business with its focus on community ownership, relationships, cultural respect, partnership, collaboration, risk management, outcome measurement, impact reporting and accountability. The importance of this role modelling is a lesson for the future.

This study demonstrated that the length of time that the volunteers had been home did not matter. Whether this was seven months or five years the RVs remained committed to improving the well-being of communities. If this is now part of a lifelong journey, the value of the Oodnadatta experience grows in importance.

The RVs were asked about the role of the AVP in offering on-going support in this journey. Many thought it was now their responsibility to take this forward although they welcomed the idea of an AVP Alumni, found the post assignment workshop valuable and appreciated the on-going updates about new opportunities. They also recommended bringing all of the AVP volunteers together to share their learning journeys and inspire new outcomes.

Providing spaces for self-reflection has been critical in the transformation of the volunteers. Even this interview process challenged the volunteers to gain a deeper understanding of the changes that had occurred in their personal lives and how the contributions they were making in communities fitted into a larger framework of addressing poverty and injustice. Providing further opportunities for the RVs to come together to self-reflect is likely to benefit their learning journeys and the communities they are supporting.

Two of the volunteers came from the community of Oodnadatta. Whilst you cannot draw conclusions from a small sample, it is likely that the volunteering experience had a greater impact on the volunteers who came from outside of the community as they faced the challenges of forming new relationships, living independently and adjusting to a remote environment. One of the volunteers from Oodnadatta expressed that her confidence would have grown more if she had volunteered somewhere else. Even so, the research findings suggested that the volunteering experience impacted on the local volunteers in ways similar to the external volunteers.

‘The main thing I got was about how you can help other people and I am now I am helping people at the Clinic. It brought it out in me. It’s hard to explain.’

AVP Volunteer 2015

‘I would like to go somewhere else to volunteer.’

AVP Volunteer 2016

It is important that the volunteer sending organisation recognises that RVs who live in a remote community post assignment may need more support to continue on a ‘community development’ journey, with opportunities to participate in development being limited and more difficult to access.

Whilst this study has not sought to compare results with the findings of the VSO 2017 research or similar international studies, it appears that the overall impacts resulting from volunteering in a remote Aboriginal community within Australia are consistent with those for international volunteering. As a topic for further research, with a larger sample of volunteers, it would be interesting to explore these comparisons, particularly looking at the drivers in the act of volunteering that lead to the change in volunteers on their return home. These drivers could include elements of the AVP model

as well as categories such as age, gender and length and location of placement outlined in the VSO 2017 research.⁷

It has been a goal of international volunteering organisations in Australia to address inequity in the makeup of their volunteer cohorts, including increasing the number of Aboriginal people volunteering overseas.⁸ The Oodnadatta volunteering experience proved to be an important stepping stone, giving people the skills and confidence to go on to volunteer internationally. Again the RVs are making an important contribution, not only contributing to development in another country and increasing the numbers of Aboriginal people taking up international volunteering, but successfully role modelling to other young Aboriginal people that it is a worthwhile experience to volunteer overseas.

One of the most significant impacts of the AVP has been the development of a group of young Aboriginal leaders. With young people making up a large proportion of the Aboriginal population, it is likely that they will be called on to play their part in realising community visions and building community capacity. The RVs have already demonstrated that they have the capability to reach marginalised communities and deliver development outcomes and it is anticipated that they will play an important role in the survival and growth of Aboriginal communities in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings clearly demonstrate that the AVP volunteering experience in Oodnadatta had a meaningful, ongoing and lasting impact on the personal and professional lives of fourteen young Aboriginal people. It transformed the way they lived, influenced their career choices and styles of working, and set them on a journey to improve community well-being.

The study shows that the RVs were actively engaged in numerous community development activities, bringing benefits to Aboriginal and wider Australian and international communities. The dynamism and passion that led them to achieve positive changes in Oodnadatta was still evident, driving them to create a better place for all.

This research confirms that the value of a volunteer program does not simply rest on the development outcomes achieved during the volunteer assignment. It is also about the benefits that the volunteers bring to their communities when they return home.

It is clear that an overall goal of the AVP has been met: 'Volunteers gain the confidence and skills to participate in and contribute to community life'.

Credit must be given to this group of young Aboriginal leaders who achieved so much in such a short time. If this is a snapshot of the contribution they will make to community development over a life time, then the impact of their volunteering experience is truly remarkable.

As one of the RVs said in her interview:

'Oodnadatta kick started it all for me.'

AVP Volunteer 2013

⁷ J Clark & S Lewis, [Impact beyond volunteering](#), research summary, VSO, UK, March 2017 p3

⁸ S Johe, [Indigenous Australian participation in international volunteering: report on exploratory research](#), Australian Volunteers International, Melbourne, 2008.

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