

Practice Article

Evaluation of Volunteering Program for International Students in Australia: The AusLEAP Program

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Abstract

International students, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, often encounter challenges when adapting to new environments with different customs and traditions.

Volunteering offers them an opportunity to familiarise themselves with their new community, broaden their understanding of diversity, enhance cross-cultural communication, language skills and

cultural understanding and connect with fellow students. The AusLEAP program is designed to promote the social integration of international students into the Australian community through volunteering. The program helps students build confidence through conversations and develop essential graduate attributes such as communication and leadership skills.

This paper aims to evaluate the program from participants' perspectives. Both quantitative and qualitative program evaluations were conducted in 2022 and 2023. The results show positive outcomes and growth for participants. This type of volunteering engagement represents a mutually beneficial collaboration

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between universities, students, community organisations, facilitating active student learning and promoting inclusion and diversity.

Keywords

International students, Volunteering, Australia, Community organisations, Evaluation

Introduction

Australia is an attractive destination for international education. The number of international students enrolled in tertiary education has been increasing substantially in Australia over the last few decades (Barton & Hartwig, 2017). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector experienced significant growth, contributing \$37 billion to the Australian economy in 2019 (Ministers' media centre, 2019). Although the number of international students decreased during the pandemic, numbers have been recovering since late 2021.

Several studies have revealed that students pursue higher education abroad for various reasons: achieving academic goals, receiving education and training from prestigious institutions, escaping unstable political and economic conditions in their home countries (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009), seeking individual growth (Pope et al., 2014), gaining cultural experience

(Costello, 2015), intending to migrate (Beech, 2017), and attaining a global identity (Page & Chahboun 2019). The increasing popularity of social media has heightened awareness of international education opportunities. Trends in the international education sector show that Western countries, particularly the UK, Australia, the US, Canada, New Zealand, and some European countries, are popular selections for tertiary education, especially for students from countries like China, India, Nepal, Philippines, Vietnam, Colombia, Thailand, Pakistan, Indonesia and Brazil (Department of Education, 2024).

Ensuring the health and wellbeing of international students is crucial for their successful adaptation and overall experience while studying in host countries (where students are temporarily residing to study). Relevant literature (Page & Chahboun, 2019; Smith et al. 2023; Gomes et al. 2021) have highlighted these issues. While studying in universities and colleges, international students can experience several challenges due to language and cultural barriers, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness in foreign countries (Battye & Mak, 2008; Sherry et al., 2010; Akanwa, 2015). These challenges may lead to personal, social, and cultural loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, international students were further isolated by travel restrictions, border closures and lockdowns imposed by local authorities. The situation was exacerbated by the announcement from former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, urging international students to return to their home country if they could not support themselves (Burgess, 2020). While, both domestic and international students faced similar challenges during the pandemic, the situation was particularly challenging for the international students to manage because they were less able to seek help and support (Skromanis et al. 2018).

The volunteering ecosystem experienced new sets of challenges due to the pandemic. Despite the health concerns and ongoing barriers to volunteer participation, the pandemic also brought prosocial motives and exceptional displays of solidarity in volunteering (Trautwein et al. 2020). A 2021 study from Volunteering Australia illustrated the diversity of the volunteering experience emphasizing the wellbeing benefits of volunteering, emerging challenges, and ongoing shifts in volunteer engagement (McDermott, 2021). The importance of volunteering has been well recognised in the extant literature; however, the volunteering





benefits for international students has seldom been the focal point when considering to improve their language skills, understand local culture, and potentially increase their employability (Dostal & Keri, 2020; Finn & Green, 2009; Hart et al., 2007). Barton et al. (2017) recommended that university staff encourage, facilitate, and support international students in gaining volunteering experience in their new cultural environment. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature by evaluating the AusLEAP program that was designed and delivered for international students.

The AusLEAP program helped connect international students in NSW with local, established community, charity, not-for-profit, and social enterprise organisations to undertake training and volunteering opportunities in New South Wales, Australia. The program started as a pilot in 2022, sponsored and supported by Study NSW amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was delivered in a hybrid mode to accommodate participants from regional areas and those affected by the coronavirus. Following the successful delivery and positive outcomes, the program was extended in 2023. AusLEAP provided international students with access to training and tools that encouraged excellence in building leadership,

self-confidence, communication and strengthening existing skills to support acculturation in the new environment.

This evaluation study reports findings from both quantitative and qualitative data collected from participants across two programs (2022 and 2023). The positive relationship of the program for broadening personal and professional networks and building confidence has been highlighted as a significant benefit for international students.

This paper is organised as follows:

- » **Brief overview of the literature on the topic of international students and volunteering;**
- » **Description of the AusLEAP program configuration;**
- » **Study design for 2022 and 2023 AusLEAP Program;**
- » **Findings and discussion sections reports the outcomes and how they are corroborated with the relevant literature;**
- » **Limitations of running the AusLEAP program**
- » **Conclusion.**

Volunteering and international students

Volunteering is important within communities, playing a crucial role

in various aspects of life, including sports events, religious groups, community work, healthcare, or administration work. It helps build stronger, more resilient, and inclusive communities. Globally, literature offers various definitions of volunteering. Volunteering Australia (2015, p.2) defines it as "*time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.*"

Volunteering provides international students with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with their new community, broaden their understanding of diversity, and enhance cross-cultural communication. It also helps students build confidence through conversations with stakeholders and develop essential graduate attributes such as communication and leadership skills. Thus, engaging in community volunteering allows them to strengthen their existing skills and improve their job prospects.

There is a notable lack of literature investigating the impact of volunteering opportunities on international students in host countries. Finn and Green (2009) established a global village with an accredited volunteering program at a UK university to connect international students with local inhabitants. Their program focussed



on developing language skills, cultural awareness, and personal development, demonstrating a positive outcome for international students by linking voluntary placements to their personal and professional development.

Dostal and Keri (2020) examined the economic impact of volunteering in the Visegrad 4 countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) as a part of the Erasmus program. The impact was measured in terms of replacement costs, opportunity costs, and societal benefits, after assigning values to the estimated hours of volunteering by international students. The reasons for volunteering by international students are more or less similar to those of immigrants, focusing on better communication skills, local cultural understanding, improved language proficiency, and increased employability opportunities (Dostal & Keri, 2020).

Research on immigrant volunteering in Canada highlights the enhancement of social and human capital and a step towards social integration in local communities (Handy & Greenspan, 2009). These findings are corroborated by another Canadian study which reported that immigrant participants expected suitable paid jobs after fulfilling their volunteering duties (Wilson-Forsberg & Sethi, 2015).

AusLEAP program configuration

AusLEAP is a program that connects New South Wales (NSW) international students with local established community, charity, not-for-profit, and social enterprise organisations to undertake volunteering opportunities. Sponsored by the Study NSW Partner Project, this government-funded program collaborated with thirty-four (34) partners, including leading educational institutions in NSW (8 universities, 4 colleges and 3 associations, 2 social enterprises, and 1 student agency), as well as business, government, and community groups (16 community organisations). The program was organised in hybrid mode (with an option to join virtually), a small percentage (10% to 20%) of participants joined workshops online via Zoom link, mainly from regional areas.

This project focused on two main aspects:

- » **Connecting to existing programs:** Linking international students with existing volunteering programs to learn about workplace culture in Australia and expand their network by supporting social and environmental advocacies.
- We ran a series of information sessions online to let interested students know about the program. As a part of registration process, we requested two different short documents: a short CV and answer to a question 'Why do you want to volunteer?' from all interested participants. This information helped us to allocate volunteering opportunities to them.
- Four whole day workshops were organised to prepare, empower, monitor progress, and celebrate the volunteering achievement. The first workshop oriented international students on the importance of volunteering in society and opportunities to learn about local culture. Students were matched with community organisations based on their skills and interests for volunteering opportunities. Participants were organised into various groups for volunteering opportunities (in 2022, mostly in virtual environments due to the prevalence of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 pandemic during that time). The second workshop provided training on video blogging to capture
- » **Volunteering training:** Providing volunteering training to international students through workshops and guest speakers, inspiring them to develop an interest in volunteering, building strong connections with locals, learning about local culture, and the discovery of new personal and professional opportunities.

their volunteering learning experiences and reflections on their own journey.

Subsequently, the third workshop covered leadership training and team-building activities, followed by an inspirational panel discussion featuring strong leaders and advocates for volunteering. The final workshop celebrated the students' volunteering experiences, awarding certificates to participants and announcing the winners of the video blogs.

In 2023, the same structure was followed. Additionally, 15 AusLEAP alumni were selected to partake, as mentors, in the program. In the absence of Covid restrictions that year, we did not continue with the hybrid set up but organised shorter version of virtual workshops for few participants who live in regional area (mainly Wollongong, Newcastle, Bathurst and Wagga Wagga).

Study design

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impacts of the AusLEAP program. We employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively assess the program's effectiveness.

2022 AusLEAP Program Evaluation:

A survey was distributed to all participants at the final workshop,

with 43 participants completing it. The survey questions were adapted from Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2007) comprehensive evaluation guide, designed to evaluate students' participation in the program.

The distribution of participants by gender, age group and academic level (undergraduate or postgraduate) is detailed in Table 1 below.

For the qualitative method, participant experiences were analysed to verify the program's quality based on the evaluation criteria: relatedness, learning and impact (Drewery et al., 2016).

Five focus groups were organised towards the end of the program to understand what participants learned. Each group had between 5 and 7 students. These sessions were video recorded with participants' consent, and their responses were transcribed for analysis. All students were given equal opportunity to answer questions. Some of the questions asked during the discussion are outlined below:

- » **What is the main learning you have taken away from the AusLEAP workshops?**
- » **Has the program inspired you to get more involved in the community?**

Table 1 | *Distribution of participants (2022)*

| Description | | Number |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| Total number of participants | | 43 |
| Gender | Male | 20 (47%) |
| | Female | 23 (53%) |
| Age group | Under 25 | 20 (47%) |
| | 25 and over | 23 (53%) |
| Course enrolled | Postgraduate | 19 (44%) |
| | Undergraduate | 20 (47%) |
| | Other (TAFE, VET, ELICOS) | 4 (9%) |



» **Do you feel more confident after attending this program?**

» **What was the best part of the program for you?**

The transcribed answers to these questions were categorised to understand students learning and outcomes from the program.

2023 AusLEAP Program Evaluation:

The approach used for this student cohort was slightly different than the previous program's evaluation. In 2023, students were asked to complete pre-program and post-program surveys.

The pre-program survey included collection of demographic data,

duration in Australia, their skillsets and what they were seeking to achieve through the program. The post-program survey included more questions than the pre-program one, for the evaluation purpose of the program. The distribution of participants by gender, age group and duration in Australia is detailed in Table 2.

Questions asked in both pre- and post-program are shown below:

Table 2 | *Distribution of participants (2023)*

| Description | | Pre-program | Post-program |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Total number of participants | | 94 | 61 |
| Gender | Male | 34 (36%) | 21 (34%) |
| | Female | 60 (64%) | 37 (61%) |
| | Prefer not to say | 0 (0%) | 2 (3%) |
| | Other | 0 (0%) | 1 (2%) |
| Age group | Under 20 | 8 (9%) | 4 (7%) |
| | 20 - 24 | 54 (57%) | 38 (62%) |
| | 25 and over | 32 (34%) | 19 (31%) |
| Duration in Australia | Less than 1 year | 47 (50%) | 30 (49%) |
| | 1 - 2 years | 25 (27%) | 18 (30%) |
| | 2 - 3 years | 7 (7%) | 5 (8%) |
| | More than 3 years | 15 (16%) | 8 (13%) |

» **What are you most interested in learning throughout this program? (Pre-program survey)**

» **I am confident in: (Pre-program and Post-program surveys)**

» **Talking about Australia and its culture**

» **Meeting new people from other countries**

» **Understanding Australian workplace culture**

» **My English language skills**

» **Broadening my professional network**

» **Strengthening and expanding my personal network**

» **My presentation skills**

» **My overall immersion in Australia**

» **Talking with local people**

- » **Joining a workplace in Australia understanding what is required and expected**
- » **How many new friends did you make? (Post-program)**
- » **What is the most important thing you have learned whilst attending the AusLEAP program? What did you enjoy most? (Post-program)**
- » **How will you apply what you have learned here in your life? (Post-program)**

Findings

The AusLEAP program facilitated connections between international students and community organisations that are making a societal impact. The participation in the program encouraged students to observe, review, reflect, and readily apply their previous experiences to their assigned volunteering engagements. Learnings from several theoretical educational frameworks were applied to design, deliver, and maximise the effectiveness of the workshops to set participants up for success prior to and during their volunteering engagement. These trainings were well co-ordinated and supported the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds and cultures, enhancing their communication, leadership, networking, and cultural skills.

Quantitative results

A total of 96 students and 16 different community organisations participated in the 2022 program. Representatives from each organisation interacted with students during the volunteering engagement. Due to the pandemic, most of these interactions occurred in a virtual/remote setting. While volunteering and engaging with community organisations, international students had the opportunity to become part of the local community, understand the culture, get exposed to ways of working in Australia, and contribute to social impact through community organisations.

In 2022, only a post-program survey was conducted. The survey consisted of six different questions to understand students' experiences, rated on a five-point Likert scale. The results are shown in Table 3.

For the 2023 post-program survey, the same set of questions from the previous year were used to evaluate the program. The responses are shown in Table 4.

In 2023, in addition to the above, we also conducted pre-program and post-program surveys to evaluate 10 different skillsets of the participants. 94 and 61 participants responded in pre- and post-program surveys respectively. By using a Likert scale (Disagree, Partially disagree, Neutral, Partially agree, Agree),

participants were asked to choose the most appropriate rank. Most responders chose 'Agree' and 'Partially agree', and all responses were aggregated as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 shows how participants rated their skill levels (up 10% to 22%) as a result of participating in the AusLEAP program in 2023.

Qualitative results

AusLEAP 2022

The data collected during the focus group discussions with participants were analysed and categorised into the following two high level outcomes:

Learnings and benefits from the program:

Participants shared their increased sense of community and how they gained professional skills such as time management, multi-tasking, planning, and teamwork.

Impact in the community through volunteering:

Participants reflected on the contributions of the community organisations they volunteered with and impact on their personal and professional development.

Some of the direct quotes from the participants in different focus groups were extracted and grouped together to highlight the learning outcomes and potential impacts as shown on the following pages.



Table 3 | *Evaluation of AusLEAP (2022)*

| Rating of the following questions | Poor | Fair | Good | Very good | Excellent |
|--|------|------|------|-----------|-----------|
| How do you rate the AusLEAP program? (interest, benefit to your personal growth/network, etc.) | 0% | 5% | 33% | 30% | 33% |
| How do you rate your volunteering experience? (skills development, field of work, etc.) | 2% | 26% | 26% | 30% | 16% |
| How do you rate your experience of learning and creating a vlog? | 9% | 26% | 28% | 23% | 14% |
| How do you rate your understanding of the importance that volunteering has? | 0% | 2% | 30% | 35% | 33% |
| How do you rate the impact of the AusLEAP on your professional skill development? | 0% | 12% | 30% | 33% | 26% |
| How do you rate the impact of AusLEAP on your employability? | 0% | 16% | 30% | 40% | 14% |

Table 4 | *Evaluation of AusLEAP (2023)*

| Rating of the following questions | Poor | Fair | Good | Very good | Excellent |
|--|------|------|------|-----------|-----------|
| How do you rate the AusLEAP program? (interest, benefit to your personal growth/network, etc.) | 0% | 2% | 5% | 32% | 61% |
| How do you rate your volunteering experience? (skills development, field of work, etc.) | 0% | 0% | 14% | 38% | 48% |
| How do you rate your experience of learning and creating a vlog? | 0% | 14% | 34% | 29% | 23% |
| How do you rate your understanding of the importance that volunteering has? | 0% | 2% | 9% | 36% | 54% |
| How do you rate the impact of the AusLEAP on your professional skill development? | 0% | 2% | 21% | 16% | 61% |
| How do you rate the impact of AusLEAP on your employability? | 0% | 2% | 18% | 45% | 36% |

Table 5 | *Evaluation of skillsets (AusLEAP 2023)*

| Confident in: | Pre-program | Post-program |
|--|-------------|--------------|
| My English language skills | 73% | 88% |
| Broadening my professional network | 70% | 88% |
| Strengthening and expanding my personal network | 78% | 89% |
| My presentation skills | 57% | 79% |
| My overall immersion in Australia | 63% | 82% |
| Talking about Australia and its culture | 41% | 57% |
| Talking with local people | 74% | 88% |
| Joining a workplace in Australia understanding what is required and expected | 66% | 86% |
| Meeting new people from other countries | 87% | 98% |
| Understanding Australian workplace culture | 62% | 77% |

i. Learnings and benefits from the program

International students who participated in the program generally enjoyed it and mentioned that they learned several professional skills such as 'time management', 'multi-tasking', 'planning', and 'teamwork'. A few participants expressed as shown below to point out these skills (benefits):

"Firstly I learned about leadership and also how to be more confident It taught me how to be more open to people... as an introvert... and be more

vulnerable with new people; ... and to volunteer in the future"

"I've never joined volunteering work ever...I've learned a lot, mainly time management."

"Definitely I'm becoming more confident. The reason is when I joined this program, I have a chance to meet... a lot of speakers and friends who are very friendly."

Since the program was delivered in early 2022 after the COVID-19

lockdowns, some participants valued the face-to-face communication with other participants and realised that making friends and socialising are important in a new environment while studying abroad to build new social and professional networks. They said:

"After COVID, I haven't spoken to many people or new friends. So I would say it's...a new skill to make friends, through this program."

"I have completed my entire degree in lockdown. I couldn't socialise. So this program gave me the opportunity to socialise with people."

"Mostly enjoyed the connection... strangers become my friends...it helps me to create my network, expand my network."

Some participants appreciated the Australian workplace readiness training they received during the workshop and the volunteering experience, which gave them some exposure to it. As a participant specifically mentioned:

"Coming in here and working with these organisations gave us an experience [about the] Australian workforce. That was quite important for us."

Exposure to multi-culturalism was also another benefit participants appreciated during the program and reiterated in the focus groups as highlighted below:



"When I meet my team...I really liked hearing their story, their background... and get to know them so I can work and collaborate with them better"

"You get a chance to meet new people; different nationalities, different backgrounds and they have different stories to share"

"I learned about different cultures. Because in my country there is only one culture. I was in a group of diversified culture so I also got to learn a lot from them."

"We all come from different education and cultural backgrounds. There's always something new to learn."

ii. Impact in the community through volunteering

Through this program, we also aimed for international students to understand the contributions of community organisations where they volunteered. While discussing this topic during focus groups, some participants put forward their experiences and expressed:

"My organisation is making a lot of impact on people...especially on school kids because they are giving a lot of... valuable courses... Understanding of different aspects that you need...if you want to be a leader in the future."

"We can get a chance to interact with these local people and can mix up with

the culture. We can know about the culture, their customs and many other things surrounding the new country. So it's really impacting the community as well as impact our professional and personal career and qualities."

"I worked with [organisation] about researching for a school to teach the children about bushfires."

Through this volunteering engagement, the students were empowered to form new connections, networks, strengthen their confidence, enhance their understanding of workforce cultures, and ultimately enable better integration into the local community while creating social impact.

AusLEAP 2023

In 2023, post-program survey also included questions to evaluate the program from different perspectives. For example, most of the participants pointed out that they made a lot more new friends (ranging from a few to 100 plus) during the program. The majority of them mentioned that they made 10 or more new friends.

To the specific question (What is the most important thing you have learned whilst attending the AusLEAP program? What did you enjoy most?) regarding their learning from the program, they expressed highly positive experience. Some of their quotes are shown below:

"I came to Ausleap to just get my volunteering certificate and get out. That was the initial plan but these 4 weeks have taught me that sometimes its ok to not only think about ourselves. You can also sometimes make other people special as well and that's the most important thing I learned in this experience is to value other people and it will brighten your day as well."

"I learned that good leaderships create new leadership, and I practiced what I learned at AusLeap to my personal studying and it worked very well..."

"Helping people doesn't need skills, it needs courage."

"I learned it's important to speak up and share my experiences and sometime others value them."

"Before I joined the program I tend to hesitate to talk to others as I was just not confident about my English skill but my perception has changed over the program."

"Ausleap gives me so many new learning experiences especially how to embrace yourself throughout volunteering and improving your confidence. It makes me realise how incredibly important of confidence is and it actually help me to step up from my comfort zone and it is the most part that I enjoy so much."

"The team work, and friendship. I really enjoyed the volunteering, it made me realize how volunteering can help others and also good for our mental health."

"I wanted to be more proactive this year after spending a year acclimating to Australia and this program gave me a fresh start to do this."

Discussion

The AusLEAP program addressed the diverse needs of international students by providing structured learning outcomes through workshops which focussed on developing diverse skills such as social and professional networking, communication, video blogging, leadership, team-building and volunteering. Deliverables included in-session group presentations, creation and, or improvement of LinkedIn profiles, and creation of a video blog highlighting their volunteering experience. Volunteering experiences were facilitated by up to 15 organisations, which varied from helping in gardens to the development of water, sanitation and hygiene learning curriculums. The program's design and delivery have enabled students to build confidence, develop essential skills, and form meaningful connections with their peers and community organisations. The outcome from this program is similar to previous studies conducted for

international students by Finn and Green (2009) in England and Dostal and Keri (2020) in Europe as part of the Erasmus program. This mutually beneficial collaboration has not only enhanced the students' employability prospects but also contributed to tackling social and environmental challenges affecting local communities. The outcomes from the program are categorised and discussed as shown below:

Building confidence and capabilities

The program demonstrated substantial success in building confidence and capabilities among international students. Through a series of carefully designed workshops, students were equipped with essential skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork. These workshops included video blogging, which not only allowed students to document their experiences but also helped them acquire valuable digital skills, which are aligned with desirable graduate attributes in today's competitive market. Leadership training and team-building activities further reinforced these learnings, providing students with opportunities to reflect and grow.

Participants reported increased confidence and a better understanding of the Australian workplace culture. The exposure to real-world scenarios and

professional environments offered by the volunteering engagements inspired newfound confidence and skills that are essential to improving employability prospects and performance in the workforce.

Forming connections with like-minded peers

One of the most important outcomes of the program was the opportunity for international students to connect with like-minded individuals, both local and international peers. The program facilitated interactions and networking opportunities that helped students build new social and professional networks. This was particularly valuable in the post-COVID-19 context, where many students had experienced prolonged social isolation.

Participants appreciated the chance to meet people from different nationalities and backgrounds, which enriched their cultural understanding and collaboration skills. These connections not only enhanced their social experience but also provided a support system that is crucial for their well-being and integration into Australia.

Mutual benefit to students and community organisations

The program represents a mutually beneficial collaboration between international students and community





organisations. By setting up bespoke volunteering engagements for participating international students, the program promoted social integration with community organisations benefiting from the fresh perspectives and diverse skills that international students brought to their projects, while students gained invaluable professional experience and a sense of belonging.

The program's structure provided a strong foundation for both students and partnering community organisations. The mutual benefits were evident in the focus group discussions, where participants highlighted the impact of their contributions to community projects and their personal and professional growth.

Limitations of the AusLEAP program

The AusLEAP program faced several significant challenges that impacted its execution and outcomes. These limitations are primarily attributed to the pandemic, resourcing issues with community organisations, and fluctuating student commitments.

Pandemic-related challenges

The spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 posed a substantial challenge. Concerns about health and safety made it difficult to conduct

in-person workshops, which were a crucial component of the program. This situation led to delays in allocating participants to community organisations, as many activities had to be shifted to virtual formats in 2022. The virtual arrangement was not the preferred mode for the majority of students, as they did not feel well connected with the people from the organisations, affecting both student retention and the engagement of community organisations throughout the project duration.

Resourcing issues with community organisations

Another significant challenge was the withdrawal of some community organisations from their commitments after the initial allocation of participants in 2022. Some of those organisations felt that they were not ready for having students at that time. This necessitated reallocating students and finding alternative arrangements, which disrupted the program's flow. The project team's ability to quickly pivot and respond to this unforeseen challenge was commendable, but it highlighted the need for clear project scope and firm commitments from community organisations to ensure the program's success from the onset. During 2023 program, this issue was not there any more as most of

the placements were in-person and students enjoyed the volunteering opportunities as a group.

Student commitment

As the program progressed, student commitment to attending workshops and participating in volunteering activities wavered. Conflicting personal schedules over the program period contributed to this issue. Some students had to continue their volunteering activities past the last workshop, which extended the program's timeline and added to the logistical complexities. To avoid this challenge, we ran the program for a shorter duration in 2023. Even then, some students lost their interests, mainly those who were committed to take part virtually.

Recommendations

To mitigate these challenges in future iterations of the AusLEAP program, several recommendations have been identified and considered:

- i. Clear project scope and commitments: Ensuring all partnering community organisations have a clear understanding of their commitments and the project scope is paramount. This will help in maintaining consistency and reliability throughout the program.



- ii. Flexible student allocation: Allowing flexibility in student allocation to community organisations can help accommodate changes and unforeseen withdrawals. This flexibility can also enable students to switch organisations if needed, ensuring a better fit and more meaningful engagement. Real-world project settings can be simulated by the project team as a contingency measure.
- iii. Preferred modes of engagement: While virtual arrangements were necessary due to the pandemic, future programs should consider the preferred modes of engagement for students. In-person interactions, where safe and feasible, should be prioritised to enhance retention and engagement.

Despite these challenges, the 2022 and 2023 AusLEAP program successfully provided a valuable volunteering experience for participants, contributing positively to their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

A substantial number of international students enrol in various education programs in Australia. These students usually come from diverse multicultural

backgrounds and may encounter challenges when they find themselves in a new environment. Language and cultural barriers, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness are all leading causes of personal, social, and cultural loneliness for international students.

By contributing their time and skills in volunteering, international students also get a chance to learn new skills, improve English language, be part of a professional work environment and enhance employability opportunities. AusLEAP was unique experience where students across many universities and institutions could address personal growth, network with like-minded individuals, and utilise their skills.

The AusLEAP program has inspired togetherness between international students and Australian groups to tackle social and environmental challenges through the power of volunteering. It has helped connect international students from diverse multicultural backgrounds (including students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities) with local culture and communities.

This enables them to make valuable contributions to their education and the communities they live in, which is important for their lifelong learning.

From community organisations' perspectives, this program demonstrates the availability of international students for volunteering and diverse experiences they bring to enhance the impact of their work in the community. Programs like AusLEAP provide an impetus to engage and integrate multicultural volunteers in mainstream volunteering. Increased awareness and availability of volunteering programs for international students will enable greater contribution to the wider Australian community. Additionally, it also contributes to form agency for a more diverse and inclusive future in volunteering.

Sojen Pradhan

Sojen is a senior lecturer at School of Professional Practice and Leadership with an extensive experience of over 25 years in teaching. He holds PhD in Computer Science and MBA from University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

His research focuses on the intersection of social innovation, digital platform and community development. He has worked on projects that address a range of social and cultural issues, including outsourcing to disadvantaged communities, volunteering opportunities for international students, innovative solutions in rural tourism and education in developing countries. He also has

research interest in evaluating different innovative work integrated learning models in higher education.

Sojen is a passionate advocate for volunteering in community organisations. He created and led the AusLEAP volunteering program to provide experiential learning for international students across NSW. He managed relationships with several partner organisations including higher education institutions, charities, not-for-profits and social enterprises.

Tiffany Yee

Tiffany is the International Relations Manager at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) leading a team of professionals who manage the university's international student recruitment agents, and high-level engagements and programs that showcase the university's excellence in teaching, research and innovation for current and prospective international partners and students.

Prior to UTS, Tiffany was a Senior Event Manager managing conferences and exhibitions in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and India.

Tiffany is passionate about integrating international experiences. She encourages all people to take advantage of opportunities to gain firsthand

experience of different cultures and academic environments. By promoting and facilitating short programs for international delegations, Tiffany aims to help participants develop a more nuanced perspective and a greater appreciation for global diversity.

Tiffany is also an alumna of UTS, holding a Bachelor of Business degree.

Thomas Da Jose

Thomas Da Jose is a problem solver with a passion for innovation and technology, making engineering his career choice. He is dedicated to transforming lives through social infrastructure and education initiatives in Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Thomas is an Infrastructure Advisor at E3 Advisory, Founder/CEO of WASH Education Pty Ltd. (WASH-Ed), and Managing Director of Masy Consultants, an award-winning social enterprise. He has consulted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and was a Senior Project Manager at AECOM. Recognised for his excellence and social justice efforts, Thomas received the UTS Alumni Award, was a Westpac Future Leader Scholar, and was a finalist for the Asian-Australian Leadership Award. In 2017, he was appointed as an inaugural New Colombo Plan Alumni Ambassador by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Thomas holds a Bachelor of Civil Engineering from UTS and a Master of Commerce from USYD.

Elina Amatya

Elina is a pharmacist and health informatician, with South Asian heritage. She is passionate about patient safety and improving health outcomes, and works as a Strategy Manager at eHealth NSW, driving digital transformation for NSW Health. She has over 16 years of career experience across wide range of sectors such as children's services, public health, industry and community pharmacy.

Beyond her professional achievements, Elina brings a rich cultural perspective and is committed to working with the community. With her altruistic interests, she actively took part in various volunteering activities as a student and continues to do so, including mentoring young people, and volunteering her skills.

Since completing her Master's degree from the University of Sydney, Elina has made contributions to a number of scholarly works, reflecting her blend of expertise, interests and community dedication to inspire positive change.



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