

Time to be bold: An overview of the state of research on volunteering in Australia over the ten years since IYV+10

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Towards a
National Strategy
for Volunteering



About the Volunteering Research Papers Initiative

The Volunteering Research Papers aim to capture evidence on a wide range of topics related to volunteering and outline key insights for policy and practice. The Volunteering Research Papers are peer reviewed, and insights will directly inform the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

The Volunteering Research Papers are an initiative of the National Strategy for Volunteering Research Working Group.

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Time to be bold: An overview of the state of research on volunteering in Australia over the ten years since IYV+10

Dr Megan Paull¹

Key Insights

- There is an ever-growing body of research on volunteers and volunteering in Australia.
- Volunteering research is undertaken by volunteering specialists, discipline based volunteering specialists and visiting discipline experts whose research brings them into volunteering.
- A question arises as to whether we should be proud that quality research emerges despite a paucity in funding, or critical of that paucity of funding, or both.
- Volunteering research is keeping pace with methodological advancements, with mixed methods approaches, and innovative data gathering techniques being seen alongside approaches which are co-designed with the communities being researched.
- Gaps in the literature reflect a need to widen the scope and to broaden understanding of volunteering, and there is a need to focus on volunteer managers (not just management).
- There is evidence of varying understandings of definitions around volunteering, including evidence of the blurring of the lines around what is and is not considered to be volunteering.
- Opportunities exist to bring new voices into the discussion, including about differing perspectives on volunteers and volunteering.
- It is time to be bold in asking difficult questions about volunteering, including whether traditional approaches are still relevant, and about dark legacies of past practices.
- It is time to further explore new forms of volunteering, and new vehicles for volunteering such as social media, and their contribution (or not) to communities.
- Even in more traditional forms of volunteering it is time to explore new ways of thinking.
- Dissemination and accessibility of findings and sharing of outcomes needs attention, with principles associated with open access, data repositories and translation of research for application being important.
- What remains is to ensure continuation of quality volunteering research, to get the best value from what is produced, and to be bold about the questions which are asked.

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Introduction

Research on volunteering in Australia has burgeoned in the period since the last National Strategy for Volunteering published in IYV +10² in 2011. This paper offers a brief overview and short critical review of that research, and proposes that there is a need for further conversations about volunteering research in Australia.

The central thread in this is:

- What volunteering topics and themes are researched in Australia (and how)?

Part of the evaluation of that research is:

- Who undertakes volunteering research in Australia?
- Who funds volunteering research?
- How is volunteering research disseminated?

And the paper concludes with the question:

- How might we ensure quality research continues to be undertaken in the field?

To explore these questions a number of strategies have been employed including systematic and scoping searches of the academic and grey literature, a thematic review of the papers and a critical evaluation to identify scope for new enquiry. Based on work undertaken for a larger research project, this paper identifies some gaps in the field, and points to the need to continue quality research, to be bold in asking questions, and to tackle the need for research to be more widely disseminated.

Identifying Australian Volunteering Research

Volunteering research in Australia is not only promulgated through academic journals, however this is one place where a systematic searching process is possible, and was therefore the starting point for this review. A keyword search using the terms volunteering, volunteer, volunteerism, volunteer management, voluntary work, and voluntary associations³ matched with Australia across six databases [Proquest, Ebscohost, Wiley, Sage, Gale, and Informit] yielded more than 200 journal articles published in scholarly academic journals between 2011 and May 2022. Reverse searching building on those 200 articles (using for example reference lists, author names or project identifiers)

2 Ten years on from the United Nations International Year of Volunteers = known as IYV+10

3 It was also necessary to then exclude voluntary administration, voluntary assisted dying, voluntary redundancy, healthy volunteers participating in medical research not about volunteering and military volunteers but not volunteering associated with veterans.

revealed in excess of 100 more which did not surface via the key word searching process.

Searching also yielded book chapters, books, and theses which would have been subject to editorial or examiner review. Unsurprisingly much of the material in the latter could be considered a duplication, summary or expansion of that published in academic journals as authors are often invited to contribute chapters based on their expertise, and thesis authors seek to publish their outcomes in journals. Book chapters were in two forms – those which were included in volunteering focussed books, such as *Volunteering in Australia*,⁴ and volunteering focussed chapters in books on other topics (e.g. a chapter on voice and volunteering in *Employee Voice at Work*⁵). Book chapters are often part of an international collation⁶ and therefore not always easily identified as including Australian material, even more so when the editors do not include an editor based in Australia.

Research reports and documents not subject to peer review (referred to as grey literature) were also located via key word searching, although these are not as easily found as there is no longer a tendency to seek ISBN numbers or lodge a copy with the Australian National Library (despite this being a requirement),⁷ and many organisations simply hold a copy of the report of their research on their website, sometimes not publicly accessible.

What resulted was a comprehensive list of publications for review to gain an overall picture of the state of volunteering research in Australia. This short piece cannot hope to do justice to the volume of research available. The refereed journal list alone shows an increase from around 20 articles in 2011 to over 40 in 2021, although this too is difficult to calculate as often in recent times the published date based on the volume and issue number, is much later than the availability date due to journals publishing material online ahead of time.⁸

Authors had published in 185 different academic journals, with the greatest number of articles published in *Third Sector Review* (33) followed by *Voluntas* (14), and most journals only involved once or twice. The fields in which the journals publish range from those specific to the voluntary sector through to the variety of specific disciplines such as emergency management, rural studies, dentistry, nursing, tourism and human resource management.

4 Oppenheimer & Warburton, 2014

5 Teicher & Liang, 2019

6 e.g. Holmes et al., 2022.

7 See: National Library of Australia

8 2022 dated material is included in the list - much of it was available in 2021 online ahead of print but is not included in this 2021 count.

The quality of the research is varied, but in the main adds value to the field. The volume of research is great news for those interested in evidence-based understanding of volunteering in the Australian context. That is, of course, if you can access this work behind the paywalls of many academic journals, or, even better, if researchers seek to disseminate their findings in publicly accessible and useable forms – now strongly encouraged across the university sector⁹ and in fact required by some grantmakers.¹⁰

Who undertakes Volunteering Research in and about Australia?

Early analysis identified three categories of researchers and authors mostly in academia, mostly in Australian universities or affiliated research centres, and spread across a range of academic disciplines. These broad categories have been loosely classified as those who are “volunteering specialists”, and whose volunteering research spans a range of projects over a number of years, and some of whose names are familiar to many who have researched in the field for a while; “discipline volunteering specialists”, whose work focusses on a particular aspect of volunteering – e.g. sport, health, corporate, and then “visiting specialists” whose work is largely focussed in their base discipline area, where volunteering has emerged as one aspect of that work (for example Viduka,¹¹ in the field of archaeology has identified a form of citizen science as volunteering). There are also consultants who have contracted to undertake work in organisations (some of whom are also academics) and with researchers (e.g Walker, Accadia and Costa¹² - Accadia is affiliated with Barrett Consulting). Of course, simple categorisation is not possible as researchers are often working in teams where their work crosses over into each of these types, and into other projects or spheres which do not involve volunteering at all. In all over 670 individuals were identified as authors on published research, and around a dozen teams were identified as appearing on numerous occasions, with some changes in team membership being apparent.

All but two of the forty-three universities in Australia are represented in the affiliations shown by authors, and there are authors from collaborating universities all over the world. Australian authors also come from specialist research centres and facilities, some associated with universities and some not. Some collaborators come from industry, mostly in the health arena, and in emergency services and natural resource management, with industry collaborations identified in the research not necessarily resulting in co-authorship on published journal articles.

9 Williams & Lewis, 2021

10 e.g. NHMRC, 2022; ARC, 2021.

11 Viduka & Edney, 2021

12 Walker et al., 2016

Broader searching beyond the academic literature identified reports on volunteering and related topics important to the community. Some of these added detail to the work published in academic journals, but other work had not yet appeared in academic journals, and some potentially would not. Good examples of the last is a report by Robinson¹³ consulting to Volunteering WA, which offered valuable insights into formal volunteering in CALD communities in Western Australia, and Gilham, Kellner and van Kooy¹⁴ from AMES in Victoria. Other areas where there are reports and documents which form part of the volunteering literature include work by the Lowy Institute on Chinese community organisations in Australia,¹⁵ and the Refugee Council of Australia on volunteers visiting immigration detention centres.¹⁶ Reports connected to universities include work out of the Business School at the University of Technology, Sydney on international volunteering through the Australian Volunteers Program.¹⁷

Who funds volunteering research?

Funding is more easily identified in recently published work where academic journals have begun to require funding declarations on submission, and funders have required statements appear on published work. Government funding (ARC, NHMRC, DSS, and other federal departments, as well as State and Local Government e.g. Healthway in WA) appears to be varied and somewhat disconnected, with funding for similar projects in different locations being undertaken by different researchers without any seeming connection, even to the point of apparent duplication. Often papers about volunteers and volunteering emerge from larger funded projects where the funding is not for volunteering research per se, but for the overarching research project.

Private philanthropic funding of volunteering research still appears to be limited – although this is still being investigated as not all funding is disclosed. Sources such as The Jack Brockhoff Foundation have been identified by authors as funding a project in Victoria. Corporate funding appears to be limited but increasing, either via universities or via grants with centres such as the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre at Curtin University in Western Australia.

Some nonprofit organisations fund research projects associated with their work, and many make in-kind contributions to projects funded by others, even if only by recruiting their volunteers or paid staff as participants. Projects are also funded by deidentified

13 Robinson, 2012

14 Gilham et al., 2020

15 Hsu et al., 2021

16 Refugee Council of Australia, 2017

17 Fee et al., 2022

partner organisations.¹⁸ Self-funded research, where the researcher is undertaking the research as part of their employment at a university is also prevalent, and potentially makes up a significant proportion of the research time invested in funded research as well given the contributions often made by researchers beyond funded hours. Important research is often undertaken on a shoestring budget with limited funds, and yet despite this quality outcomes emerge. This is an area in need of further consideration – should we be proud that quality research emerges despite a paucity in funding, or critical of that paucity of funding, or both? Should we be critical of the overlapping funding where similar work is undertaken in various locations, seeking to join up these similar projects, or seeking to divert funding for work which appears repetitive to other projects?

Methodological approaches

As would be expected where quality research is being undertaken by committed experts, the full range of research methodologies are being employed. Single case studies, evaluations, interventions, program reviews, explorations, population analysis, statistical research, historical accounts, broad profiles and preparatory literature reviews in specified fields were identified. Qualitative methods such as semi and unstructured interviews, focus groups, group workshops, observations, documentary analysis and new methods such as card-sorting, and online gaming across a range of paradigms have yielded rich data on the experiences of volunteers, organisations, managers, clients and paid staff. Similarly quantitative methods including surveys, psychological experiments, statistical analysis, panel data analysis and structured interviewing. Mixed methods approaches are more evident in recent times, with the value of convergent analysis beginning to be recognised – concurrent with the emergence of mixed methods research (MMR) as a recognised third way in research. All of this is evidence that volunteering research is keeping pace with current thinking in methodological approaches. Further evidence of this is co-design beginning to be apparent, with the participants being consulted about design, methods, and content, a shift towards research “with” participants rather than about them.¹⁹ This is a shift which can only serve to make research more relevant and accessible, but which does not come without its challenges.

Type and focus of volunteering research

Researchers increasingly investigate newer types of volunteering including corporate and employee volunteering, online and virtual volunteering, episodic, micro, and digital volunteering, as well as focussed types such as event, sport, tourism, development,

18 Cinelli & Peralta, 2015

19 Naqshbandi et al., 2019

crisis intervention, aged care, palliative care, dementia care, emergency services, and natural resource management volunteering. Studies also looked at First Nations, faith-based and faith focussed,²⁰ ethno-specific, CALD community, refugee and asylum seeker volunteering. Researchers have focussed on Muslim communities,²¹ the experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities in volunteering,²² and on people with a disability,²³ rural volunteering,²⁴ and international volunteering.²⁵ In recent times there has been a little bit of attention paid to what is termed informal (or unaffiliated) volunteering. While it could be argued that community participation and community development research has been focusing on this topic for decades, it is now coming to the fore in volunteering research partly as a result of community responses to emergencies²⁶ and to COVID-19.²⁷ The importance of the blurring of the lines at the edge of what is considered volunteering is ripe for discussion.

Motivation to volunteer, and its relationship to recruitment and to retention of volunteers is still one of the most researched topics, with increasing recognition of the limited universality of motivation.²⁸ There is recognition that motivation to volunteer is an evolving topic with different generations of volunteers having different reasons for taking up and or continuing to volunteer,²⁹ and different volunteer activity attracting different volunteers.³⁰ Other researchers have investigated the relationship between faith and volunteering.³¹ Investigation of non-volunteers with a view to finding out if they might be attracted to volunteering,³² has been accompanied by examination of the motives of volunteers at very specific events and activities.³³ Marketers have talked about segments of the market being a useful way to consider recruitment of volunteers,³⁴ and postulated about whether volunteer recruitment is a human resource management (HRM) issue or a consumer behaviour issue.³⁵

20 Faith based volunteering is used here to refer to activities arising out of the practice of faith such as helping out to deliver human services in an organisation run by a faith organisation such as feeding the homeless, while faith focussed refers to activities aimed at assisting our community to practice their faith such as reading scripture to/with them.

21 Peucker, 2020a

22 Lyons et al., 2021

23 Kappelides & Spoor, 2019

24 O'Halloran & Davies, 2020

25 Schech et al., 2015

26 Whittaker et al.. 2015

27 Chapman et al. n.d

28 Dunn et al., 2016; Kritz et al., 2021:

29 Miranti & Evans, 2019; Brayley et al., 2014

30 Alam & Campbell, 2017

31 Petrovic et al., 2021

32 Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018

33 Lamb & Ogle, 2018

34 Randle & Dolnicar, 2017

35 Randle & Dolnicar, 2012

Sport,³⁶ event,³⁷ leisure,³⁸ and heritage³⁹ volunteering feature strongly in the Australian volunteering research genre. Recruiting, training, retaining and marshalling volunteers for organisational sustainability is the focus of work in many of these fields. One cross-national study which included Australia examined the formalisation of community sporting clubs,⁴⁰ whereas other work looked at specific activities.

Rural communities have also been a strong focus of research, in part because there are many services offered in rural areas which are run by volunteers and would not be offered otherwise. These include essential and non-essential services, and range from health services,⁴¹ emergency services⁴² and community wellbeing,⁴³ and community development⁴⁴ through to natural resource management,⁴⁵ tourism.⁴⁶ The research on rural communities, especially when viewed over the ten-year period, paints a picture of the importance of volunteering in these communities and highlights the ageing population, the need for focus on youth.⁴⁷ It also shows changes in rural communities such as the settlement of refugees in rural communities.⁴⁸

Researchers have also focussed on capturing the rich history of volunteering, particularly in larger organisations, with CWA,⁴⁹ Red Cross,⁵⁰ and Meals on Wheels⁵¹ being notable examples. The evolution of volunteering highlights some of the enduring concepts including that 'traditional organisations' need to find new ways of operating, in response to government policy, changing community expectations, client demands and generational differences.

Specifically targeted research includes examination of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) pilot programs which included both paid staff and volunteers in providing decision making support for people with cognitive disability,⁵² and examination of

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- 36 Cuskelly, & O'Brien, 2013
 - 37 Kim et al., 2018
 - 38 Cantillon & Baker, 2020a
 - 39 Baker & Cantillon, 2020
 - 40 Nichols et al., 2015
 - 41 O'Meara et al., 2012; Blair et al., 2018
 - 42 O'Halloran & Davies, 2020
 - 43 Warburton & Winterton, 2017
 - 44 Alonso & Nyanjom, 2016
 - 45 Tennent & Lockie, 2013
 - 46 Alonso, & Liu, 2013
 - 47 Nursey-Bray et al., 2022
 - 48 Wood et al., 2019
 - 49 Jones, 2017
 - 50 Oppenheimer, 2014
 - 51 Oppenheimer et al., 2015
 - 52 Bigby et al., 2017

post military service activities, including volunteering.⁵³ Exploration of social capital in surf lifesaving, which is at the intersection of sport, leisure and emergency services yields evidence of the importance of club level interactions, as well as the larger cross organisational infrastructure.⁵⁴

Volunteers in conservation and environment activities both within and through organisations, or as collective behaviour outside organisations has received attention in the volunteering research. Sometimes crossing over to citizen science,⁵⁵ and including awareness-raising, education and restoration activities environmental volunteering behaviours have been identified as being both at the participation and leadership levels.⁵⁶ Similar to other fields, support, recognition and opportunities for training are identified as important. Wildlife volunteering too has received attention, with both the importance and contribution of the volunteers and the need for recognition and strategic thinking about these volunteer activities being highlighted.⁵⁷

The changing face of volunteering is also illustrated in research on the evolution of organisations such as Koori Radio where volunteer involvement has been vital to the success of the organisation, but where controversies have emerged.⁵⁸ Other research on volunteering in, with and by Aboriginal communities includes dental volunteering in the Kimberley,⁵⁹ and particular attention to the involvement of Aboriginal Men in Men's Sheds.⁶⁰ Perhaps more importantly some consideration is being given to concepts around volunteering in Aboriginal communities,⁶¹ as well as to co-design as mentioned above.

There is a volume of research on wellbeing, some of which is not specifically about volunteering, but which includes volunteers in important findings about migrant wellbeing,⁶² and health benefits of volunteering,⁶³ including in rural neighbourhood houses⁶⁴ and of members in organisations run by volunteers.⁶⁵ Some questions have begun to be asked about whether it is volunteering which comes first, or social connectedness and community participation.⁶⁶

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- 53 Carra et al., 2021
 - 54 Darcy et al., 2014
 - 55 Gollan et al., 2012
 - 56 Gulliver et al., 2022
 - 57 Hearing et al., 2020; Hearing et al., 2021
 - 58 Montalvo Chaves, 2022
 - 59 Patel et al.
 - 60 Cavanagh et al., 2018
 - 61 Spencer & Christie, 2017
 - 62 Liu et al., 2021
 - 63 Brown et al., 2012
 - 64 Binder et al., 2021
 - 65 Ang et al., 2017
 - 66 Douglas et al., 2016

Volunteers are also the subject of a large volume of research in health and health related fields including in aged care and older communities, with some of the work seemingly overlapping. Examples include research comparing care work in Australian and Danish hospice settings,⁶⁷ work in hospitals⁶⁸ and aged care settings including in the COVID-19 era.⁶⁹

The impact of COVID-19 on volunteering more generally in Australia has received recent attention with researchers seeking to extract the impact of the pandemic from other patterns already apparent in the Australian community. Examples include the work emanating from the Centre for Social Research and Methods at the Australian National University,⁷⁰ and from Volunteering Australia,⁷¹ and some state volunteering peaks,⁷² and commentary offered on the challenges of volunteering during the pandemic.⁷³

Student volunteering and service-learning activities, by students across the school,⁷⁴ and university sectors,⁷⁵ as well as parents and other community members,⁷⁶ for education and for other purposes (e.g breakfast clubs⁷⁷ volunteering in schools form another body of work). One study looked at policy around playgroups, examining inclusion acknowledging a difference between funded playgroups and community playgroups which rely on volunteers⁷⁸ The debate or discussion about whether activities embedded in curriculum⁷⁹ are Work-Integrated-Learning or volunteering is complex and has become more so since student volunteering can be included on transcripts.⁸⁰

Research on volunteering associated with different life stages includes youth volunteering, in development volunteering,⁸¹ and political engagement.⁸² Volunteering by older people has been examined from a range of perspectives including as it relates

67 Overgaard, 2015

68 Ayton et al., 2020

69 Fearn et al., 2021

70 Biddle & Gray, 2020; 2021, 2022. (Volunteering focussed reports in the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring series)

71 McDermott, 2021

72 Ellis et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2021a; 2021b

73 Luskyte et al., 2021

74 Henryks, 2011

75 Holmes et al., 2021

76 Fitzgerald et al., 2018

77 Jose et al., 2020

78 Townley, 2021

79 Anderson et al., 2018

80 Paull et al., 2022

81 Georgeou & Haas, 2019

82 Homana, 2018

to retirement⁸³ in older migrant communities⁸⁴ and in rural communities.⁸⁵ In both of these spheres, the “untapped potential’ is considered, and the links to personal⁸⁶ and community wellbeing examined.⁸⁷ Those who are neither young nor old tend to only be specifically mentioned when a whole of life approach is being taken to examine patterns in volunteering,⁸⁸ or when they are integral to a particular type of volunteering such as in school canteens⁸⁹ or gardens,⁹⁰ or in sport.⁹¹

Corporate and employee volunteering, the involvement of businesses and their employees in volunteer activity either during paid work time or as extra-curricular activity, is the focus of work examining its relationship with employee satisfaction⁹² as well as how it relates to corporate image.⁹³ As with other Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives the need for authenticity is an important consideration in corporate and employee volunteering, for the engagement of employees, the image and brand of the organisation , and, arguably, for the image and reputation of volunteering. There is some discussion in the literature about the less than voluntary nature of corporate and employee volunteering, especially where there is implied coercion. A related area of skilled and professional volunteering, where the volunteer is contributing knowledge and expertise for which they would ordinarily receive payment, did not emerge in as many publications, although accountants⁹⁴ were the subject of some exploration revealing that recognition of the skills they are contributing is an important factor. Searches for research on pro bono legal work, volunteering, only highlighted pro bono clinics in law schools. The recognition of pro bono work extended across to health professionals and other experts, perhaps giving it a status and identifying the contribution of professional skills.

There is a small body of research on international and development volunteering by Australians, but the classification of such volunteering as somehow different or separate is evident. Focus has been on changing understandings of development and international volunteering, particularly in light of changing approaches to aid from Australia.⁹⁵ There seem to be two groups in this research – some focussing on development volunteering

83 Zhu, 2021

84 Liu et al., 2021 op cit

85 Lear, 2013

86 Jongenelis et al., 2022

87 Wilson, 2017

88 Haski Leventhal et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2012

89 Drummond & Sheppard, 2011

90 Henryks, 2011

91 Ringuet Riot et al., 2014

92 Haski-Leventha et al., 2019

93 Plewa et al., 2015

94 Cordery et al., 2019

95 Schech, 2017

(dubbed volunteering for development or V4D and the subset YV4D)⁹⁶ and others looking at aspects of the relationship between tourism and international volunteering.⁹⁷ Recent work has examined changing thinking about international and tourism volunteering, with decolonisation being a focus.⁹⁸

Defining and measuring volunteering has received attention both within other investigations, and also in research specifically focussed on parameters and approaches. Definitions came up repeatedly, not only in terms of the potential for rethinking how volunteering is framed⁹⁹ but also in how we use terminology and how it is evolving.¹⁰⁰ There have been attempts to measure and count volunteering based on ABS data,¹⁰¹ and with varied and evolving methodologies developed and employed by consulting companies,^{102,103} but there is no accepted measure of volunteering which is considered to be all encompassing, making it difficult to compare over time.¹⁰⁴ The ABS called for submissions to inform needs for this type of data and continues to consider such data important.¹⁰⁵ The United Nations continues to declare that “what is not reported is invisible”,¹⁰⁶ and to seek to ensure that the unpaid work of volunteers is recognised across the world, with the notion that volunteers are essential to the successful operation of communities, and the “backbone” in times of crisis.¹⁰⁷

Disseminating our research

Attempts to find a way to gather and disseminate research on volunteers and volunteering in Australia in coherent and accessible forms have taken many forms over the years. In the 1990s a representative from the Centre for Volunteering in NSW collated a record of all the resources available across all the state peaks, while Volunteering SA successfully launched the *Australian Journal on Volunteering* which evolved into a peer reviewed asset of Volunteering Australia before its demise in 2009. Volunteering Australia also sought to maintain a website publicising volunteering research and to make available evidence based resources for volunteer involving organisations and researchers alike. Fundamental structural changes brought about by a range of factors led to the demise of

96 Georgeou & Engel, 2011

97 Frazer & Waite, 2016

98 Everingham & Motta, 2022

99 Overgaard, 2019

100 Whittaker et al., 2015

101 ABS, 2021

102 Volunteering Tasmania, 2020; Ellis et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2021a; 2021b

103 Volunteering Australia & PWC, 2016

104 Baker et al., 2019

105 ABS, 2017

106 UNV, 2021

107 McDermott, 2022

both the journal and the website, and researchers seeking to maintain a network found themselves without a supporting infrastructure other than their own informal networks.

Volunteering Australia renewed the National Volunteering Research Network in 2021, and researchers have sought to continue involvement in other networks such as the Australia and New Zealand Association for Third Sector Research (ANZTSR).¹⁰⁸ Reliance on government support such as the researcher network through the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (discontinued at a change of Commissioners) or changed funding for Volunteering Australia activities places such networks at risk and therefore members need to find ways to ensure sustainability and longevity which are not reliant on government policy or funding. Even the changes to funding for research in universities has had an impact, including on attendance at conferences.

One consistent feature is the ongoing involvement of researchers in national conferences hosted by Volunteering Australia and state peaks, and to researchers who persisted along the path of volunteering research. Researchers also continued to present their research via disciplinary conferences, and via organisations such as ANZTSR's conferences and journal *Third Sector Review*.

Discussion

The 2011 Volunteering Strategy, launched by the then Minister for Social Inclusion and Minister for Human Services, Tanya Plibersek, identified the importance of research on volunteering. The report stated in part "Research focusing on volunteering plays a vital role in improving the effectiveness of volunteer policy and programs".¹⁰⁹ Much of the research undertaken in the intervening period is in keeping with this approach and is positive in nature with recruiting more volunteers, better managing volunteers, increasing the capacity of volunteers to make a contribution and marshalling volunteer energy into productive outcomes being a strong focus.

There are some voices asking more complex questions about the trajectory of volunteering,¹¹⁰ and the less palatable aspects of volunteering,¹¹¹ as well as examining interpretations of volunteering in different contexts,¹¹² including in the media¹¹³ and examining the intersection between active citizenship and other parts of people's

108 established 1992 <https://www.anztsr.org.au/>

109 DPMC, 2011

110 Brueckner et al., 2017

111 Paull & Redmond, 2011; Paull & Omari, 2015

112 Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019

113 Hewege & Mitchell, 2013

lives.¹¹⁴ Peucker, for example, argues that “Volunteering within a minority community context, however, does not receive the same appreciation and support as volunteering in ‘mainstream’ civil society groups”.¹¹⁵

Online and digital volunteering is an emerging, or perhaps returning, area of research with projects such as Digivol being examined,¹¹⁶ alongside the use of social media during emergencies¹¹⁷ although this tended to be more prevalent in grey literature or project reports¹¹⁸ rather than the focus of research in Australia which was discovered using the search strategies employed in databases.

Gaps are also evident in terms of some communities where search terms including volunteering and Australia did not surface research, including ethno-specific forms of volunteering, and activities which might be volunteering in the official definition, but which were not classified as such by the authors – nor potentially by the communities being researched.¹¹⁹ Conversely, there were also reports on activities considered volunteering by communities and authors, but which are explicitly set aside by the Volunteering Australia definition and FAQs as being different. Examples here include work for the dole activities where individuals are treated the same as volunteers within an organisation, and are not separately identifiable in research, and student volunteering where credit is awarded, considered in some research to be one form of student volunteering.¹²⁰

Service clubs and grassroots organisations have not received a great deal of attention, under ‘volunteering’, although work has been done in relation to the role they play in developing community resilience,¹²¹ and in relation to finding volunteer leaders.¹²² Gaps are also evident in terms of family volunteering and other activities highlighted as possibilities by our peak bodies. That informal volunteering and unstructured community participation are now part of the purview of those interested in volunteering in locations outside Australia is likely to translate into inquiry in Australia as well, but to date there is a paucity of Australian research on these activities under the banner of volunteering.

Boards of directors in the nonprofit sphere rarely come up as volunteers in searches for research on volunteering but are recognised as volunteers within articles identified in focussed searches on boards. Examples include examination of the impact of contracting

114 Peucker, 2020b

115 Ibid p. 2367

116 Alony, 2020

117 Abedin, 2018

118 McLennan, 2022

119 Dekker, 2018

120 Lovegrove & Fairley, 2018

121 Roberts et al., 2021

122 Mex, 2018

on board skills and recruitment,¹²³ and on structure and performance.¹²⁴ Volunteer managers too, appear to be a neglected group. Much of the research, particularly on motivation, and retention, has recommendations aimed at this group, and the research contains lots of advice as to what managers “should do”, but there is limited recognition of the importance of their role. Exceptions include work comparing volunteer managers’ responses to a wide-ranging survey across the US, Canada and Australia, conducted over 4 years.¹²⁵

There are several published literature reviews, but the propensity towards systematic reviews has led to some of these being, at times, narrow in focus and for example not including research published in Australian sources. That *Third Sector Review* is not indexed as widely, and that many of these searches are limited to peer reviewed articles combine at times to mean that some landmark work is omitted, unless reviewers employ databases such as INFORMIT, and include grey literature in their searches. Some work not included for indexing, however, is still missed. Quite often the narrow focus of such literature reviews is carried into the primary research which follows. More positively, however, these reviews include research from outside Australia, and therefore bring new thinking to Australian research and potentially to practice.

In the wider volunteering literature, there has been recent interest in ensuring that volunteering not be treated as a “homogenous and stable entity” and that inequalities are recognised and incorporated into future research agendas.¹²⁶ Assumptions include that volunteering is always positive – in part due to the nature of the accepted definitions before and after the review in 2015 – “for the common good”, need to be questioned and the voices asking for a freeing up of some of the constraints imposed by thinking of volunteering in an “ecosystem” may need to be considered. Neighbourhood volunteering which “others” some members of the community in an effort to maintain current amenities can lead to exclusion. Familial, cultural and community helping behaviours which are not connected to the ecosystem, but nevertheless contribute to community, despite not clearly being considered to be volunteering.

123 Considine et al., 2014

124 Ingram & O’Boyle, 2018

125 Kappelides & Johnson, 2020

126 Hustinx et al., 2022

Final statement: Time to be bold

This piece is distilled from ongoing work on volunteering research in Australia since IYV+10 2011. Locating research on volunteering in Australia was not straightforward and highlighted that our research efforts while widespread and diverse, are not coalescing into a body of work for researchers and more importantly organisations and volunteers to access or benefit from.

It is time to be bold – in the questions that we ask, in the voices that are included, and in the ways we ensure volunteering research has real impact on policy and practice. We need to ensure that we question our assumptions and are open to new thinking, including from outside sources.

There is a responsibility to ensure that research in the field grows, asks important questions, ensures the voices of all involved both in the ecosystem *and outside* are heard, questions assumptions and takes risks, and yet at the same time adds to the growing body of knowledge in ways which assist in the evolution of the field. This should include ways for new researchers to join the conversation, and for work-in-progress to be visible so that researchers are able to share their work as it evolves.

Disruption of taken for granted understandings and revisiting of assumptions and approaches will only serve to benefit volunteering in its many forms. Canvassing of overseas research to add to our thinking should continue, and Australian researchers should seek to investigate challenges identified in other locations to examine whether Australian approaches experience similar challenges, have addressed such challenges or have yet to recognise them. Examples include research undertaken in New Zealand urging caution about young people's responses to traditional forms of recognition for volunteering,¹²⁷ examining "folk logic" about differences associated with reporting on rural and urban volunteering in the US¹²⁸ research from Austria on social inequality and power in civil society organisations,¹²⁹ warnings about the safety of volunteers involved in archival activism,¹³⁰ and examinations of the need to balance community led responses to, for example COVID-19, with international support which does not devalue local action.¹³¹

Australian researchers also need to ask questions which are particular to our nation including those which are uncomfortable. Examples here include the role volunteers have

127 Nissen & Carlton, 2022

128 Paarlberg, 2022

129 Meyer & Rameder, 2022

130 Tong, 2022

131 Carstensen, 2021

played in organisations whose history has been entangled with the Stolen Generations, child migrant schemes, forced adoptions and child sex abuse. In 2022 organisations and researchers need to be willing to examine racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism and to continue the work which has commenced on bullying, incivility, exclusion and disrespect. At the same time we need to be continuing research which allows for better understanding of ethno-centric, ethno-religious, faith focussed and faith-based volunteering. We need to be willing to critically examine our behaviours to help inform a better future.

Funding for research needs to be widely available and encourage widespread collaboration rather than divisive competition with other researchers - both volunteering specialists and those from outside. Collaboration also needs to be encouraged with stakeholders across many forms of volunteering, both within organisations and without. Fostering collaboration, however, falls not only to funders, but also to researchers, whose responsibility it is to stimulate, inform and support exploration and debate.

Opportunities for wider dissemination, as well as a central repository of knowledge – and for debate and discussion, are important goals for the volunteering research community – both those in the field long term and those whose work brings them in temporarily. We need to find ways to ensure the continuation of the Volunteering Research Papers initiative¹³² set up by Volunteering Australia as part of the development of the new National Strategy for Volunteering as well as the Research Digest collated by Volunteering WA.¹³³

It is time to start new conversations and revive old ones, and to add new voices as well as listen to those already involved. It is time to be bold, ask difficult questions, explore old and new topics, speak up, ask for resources, demand collaboration and provide support, to ensure we continue to enable quality volunteering research to be undertaken and seek to get the best value possible from what is produced.

132 <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/research/>

133 <https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/news/research-digest>

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