



Subject Guide

INVOLVING VOLUNTEERS FROM CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS – TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

For organisations, managers and trainers who would like to learn more about getting people from diverse cultural backgrounds involved in volunteering.



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Front cover image courtesy of the School Volunteer Program. 2005 NAB Award State Winner: Education and Youth Development (WA).

Involving Volunteers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds – Take a Closer Look can be used in conjunction with the online Subject Guide – *Involving Volunteers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds* on Volunteering Australia's website. The Subject Guide lists free resources that can be accessed on the internet and is divided into four sections:

1. *Fast facts*, to give you an understanding of issues related to involving volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
2. *Training materials*, more in-depth resources to help you build your skills and knowledge, and help you to train others in your organisation.
3. *Research findings*, reports and journal articles, to extend your understanding of this subject.
4. *Involving Volunteers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds – Take a Closer Look*, is also available in PDF format as the final section of the online Subject Guide.

The online Subject Guide is accessible at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org> > Publications.

'Volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others'

One of the 11 principles of volunteering

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds can and do make valuable contributions to their communities through volunteering. Volunteering is known and valued by Australians as an activity that benefits the community and brings people together to achieve positive change. These benefits are increased when we embrace diversity and create more inclusive volunteer programs built on multiple perspectives, respect for difference, mutuality and trust. Culturally diverse volunteer programs can be powerful examples of how people from different backgrounds can work together effectively, and how this work can be enriched by appreciating difference and supporting people's cultural identities. This has particular relevance in today's global climate. With many people from CALD backgrounds engaged in volunteering, it is not surprising that this is a topic attracting more research interest.

Understanding and supporting other people's identities is critical if we want to form productive, respectful and ongoing relationships with people from diverse backgrounds. We all have our own particular social identity which shapes our sense of self and sense of belonging. Social identities are based on how we categorise ourselves and others, our memberships of various demographic groups (our nationality, ethnicity, age or gender for example) and the roles we play in society. Our national and ethnic identities can be particularly strong shapers of our behaviour. They influence the way we communicate and interact with other people and how we interpret other people's actions and behaviour.

With one in four Australians born overseas and 25% of these Australians engaged in voluntary work, it is in the best interests of volunteer-involving organisations to be proactive about understanding and engaging with people from CALD backgrounds. It is essential to bear in mind that people are individuals and will be shaped by their own unique experiences, influences and circumstances, no matter what cultural aspects they may share with other members of their national or ethnic group. Understanding other cultures at a level far deeper than the stereotypical will help organisations build inclusive, diverse volunteer programs. The information below is offered with this in mind.



Courtesy of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.
2005 NAB Award National and State Winner:
Community Service and Development (VIC).

Did you know...
25% of people born overseas are engaged in voluntary work

A perfect match: Volunteers of CALD background have much to offer volunteering, and volunteering has much to offer them

Did you know...

One in four Australians was born overseas ¹

15.6% of the Australian population speak a language other than English at home ²

25% of people born overseas are engaged in voluntary work ³

Australia is a multicultural country consisting of more than 200 different ethnic groups. Irrespective of an individual's cultural background, level of education, age or gender, volunteering is a key way in which people contribute to their communities. However, the concept of volunteering can be interpreted and understood in many different ways. If organisations wish to engage volunteers from CALD background, it will be important to describe (in plain language) what it means to be a volunteer, in ways of that are meaningful to other cultures. For example, use phrases such as 'help the community'. Ensure your promotional materials reflect this. Similar issues of translation may arise when communicating volunteers' rights, and the expectations an organisation has of its volunteers.

'Volunteering' will have different meanings to different cultures; some of these meanings may actually be negative.

Enlist the help of your local Migrant Resource Centre to gain their feedback from a non-English-speaking point of view, and seek feedback from community leaders on how volunteering is understood and perceived in their culture.

Contrary to popular belief, research on diversity within volunteering shows us that volunteers of CALD background working in mainstream volunteer-involving organisations are often seeking ways to connect with the wider community. Volunteers of CALD background are not solely interested in working for their own communities and are seeking opportunities to make a broader contribution.

It is also important for organisations to recognise that while people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds have different social identities, values and belief systems, research has shown that they share the same diverse motivations for volunteering as anyone else. For example, they volunteer to do something worthwhile, learn new skills, meet new people, contribute to their community, and build self-confidence.

Whether a volunteer has recently arrived in Australia or has been here a long time does not seem to impact on whether that person will or won't volunteer. Just as someone who has recently moved from Mildura to Melbourne or Longreach to Brisbane might volunteer to meet new people and start to integrate into the community, so it might be with a volunteer who has recently arrived from Eritrea, Poland or India.

¹ ABS *Migration, Australia 2004-05* (cat. No. 3412.0)

² ABS 2001 *Census of population and housing*

³ ABS 2001 *Voluntary Work Survey* p. 4

Volunteering may be of particular interest to newly arrived people from CALD backgrounds as it is a known pathway to developing skills and gaining employment. It provides opportunities for people to gain experience in an Australian work environment, enhance English language skills and obtain a reference. In line with best practice in volunteer involvement, you should endeavour to find out what all of your volunteers want to get out of their volunteering experience so that you can find the right role for the volunteer and your organisation.

One implication that managers of volunteers need to be aware of is that the motivation to volunteer may change over time. To retain volunteers, whatever their background, it is important to recognise that motivations change and need to be sustained.

People's English language level is not an indicator of their talents, skills and abilities.

Also, bear in mind that people (whether from CALD backgrounds or not) will have varying experience in working alongside people from different cultural backgrounds, as will the amount of support they need to be effective volunteers. Remember that individuals have unique talents and strengths that cannot be identified on the basis of their level of English language skills.



Courtesy of the Long Reef Surf Life Saving Club.
2005 NAB Award State Winner: Emergency and
Safety (NSW).

Communicating across cultures is more about the right responses than the right words.

Understanding how culture influences behaviour and communication

Involving volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may present challenges and barriers, especially to organisations that have had little or no involvement in working with a range of diverse cultures.

Effective cross-cultural communication is a two-way process that often has more to do with providing the right type of response (often these are non-verbal) for a particular situation and observing the particularities of a culture, rather than delivering the right verbal message or finding the right words.

To appreciate other cultures, we need to be conscious of our own cultural norms, including our values and how they affect our lifestyle and work patterns, and how these might differ from those of other cultures.

- Recognise that the way we see the world and interpret people's behaviour is only one way of doing so, and that other people will have different interpretations. If we remember this, we will have a solid platform on which we can build effective cross-cultural communication skills.

- Remember that culture influences the way people behave, and these differences will often transcend language. For example, culture affects:
 - the way people view and manage time and whether they are comfortable making appointments and sticking to or creating schedules;

 - how much information is usually communicated in any given situation, and how formally or informally this is communicated;

 - how people go about gathering information. For some cultures, attending a formal information session may be the least attractive or inspiring introduction to your organisation. Hearing about your volunteer program from a relative or social contact may be far more persuasive;

 - how people view personal space, and how much personal distance is appropriate;

 - how people treat and relate to different genders;

 - the meaning attached to the repetition of messages;

 - whether or not it is appropriate to ask questions. In some cultures, people are hesitant to ask too many questions in case they are seen as being impolite.

- Australia is, by and large, a Western culture, which means that in general we are future-oriented, like to plan and make appointments, place a high value on punctuality, take time commitments seriously, are extremely respectful of private property and so are less inclined to lend or borrow things than other cultures, are accustomed to short-term relationships, use quite informal language even when speaking to managers and older people, generally don't like interruptions, often deal with people one at a time and like to make decisions quickly.



Courtesy of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.
2005 NAB Award National and State Winner:
Community Service and Development (VIC).

This Western approach is vastly different to that of many other cultures. When working and volunteering with people from other cultures, try not to view things only through your own cultural filters. Bear in mind that people from different cultures have different ways of being and communicating that work perfectly well in many contexts. For example, compartmentalising time and activities, or providing separate work spaces like enclosed offices may be the respectful way to work in Western cultures, but it can be anathema to more collectivist cultures, and cultures that thrive on networking.

Knowing these things might help you to shape role profiles for your volunteers and create a work environment that works for both the organisation and your volunteers. Ask how your volunteers prefer to work and how a similar role would be carried out in their culture (if indeed there is a similar role). It may not be possible to accommodate all preferences and both parties may need to compromise. However, understanding these differences is the first step to understanding and interpreting other people's reactions to the way we work in Australia, and finding out how you can make your volunteer program more inclusive.

When considering your training options, remember that cultures vary enormously, especially in relation to gender issues. Understanding more about the specific communities in your particular local area may be more useful than generalised cross-cultural training. Also, cross-cultural awareness is a two-way thing; as well as considering whether you need to offer training about other cultures to your existing volunteers and staff, offering training about Australian culture, especially to volunteers who have recently arrived in Australia, may also be beneficial. Your local Migrant Resource Centre may have some leads on training materials and specific information about understanding and communicating with CALD communities in your area.

Understanding Australian culture and how it might be viewed by people from different cultural backgrounds is the first step to finding out how you can make your volunteer program more inclusive.

Organisations that get to know CALD communities in their local area are successful at involving volunteers of CALD background.

Laying the foundation for a culturally diverse volunteer program

Organisations that effectively involve volunteers from CALD communities are often successful because they get to know the CALD communities within their local area, they recognise and respect difference and educate themselves about different cultures, and they create an environment that is inclusive of diversity and supported by organisational policies and procedures.

Getting to know your local community

There are several things that you can do to understand your local CALD community groups, make links with these groups and incorporate what you learn in your volunteer program:

- Research your local demographics. Know who your local CALD community groups are and build your relationships with them. Make contact with relevant community leaders.
- Recruit a CALD volunteer or a team of volunteers from different cultural groups to assist you in developing a CALD volunteering strategy for your organisation.
- Devote time to expanding and strengthening your networks. Build relationships with other mainstream community groups such as your local council, Volunteer Resource Centre, Centrelink multicultural staff, and work together to promote volunteering in CALD communities. You may find that many of them have already developed internal organisational policies and strategies to assist them in their support and management of volunteers of CALD background. These organisations may be willing to share these resources, and allow you to use them as a guide for your own policies and processes.
- Bring together mainstream organisations, ethno-specific organisations and leaders in CALD communities. This kind of networking is one of the most effective ways to promote volunteering within CALD communities. Remember that well-established communities will differ from new and emerging communities in the issues they face, their level of English proficiency and their experiences with the wider Australian community.
- Consider working in partnership with local CALD organisations to provide information sessions to members of their community, and involve volunteers of CALD background in this process.

Building knowledge

It's important for the leadership team in your organisation to have a solid understanding of what culture is and how it influences behaviour, and an awareness of the particular cultures of your local CALD communities, their beliefs, values, symbols, customs and religion/s.

Because managers are in a position of leadership, be mindful that the way people react towards strangers is usually based on assumptions about their nationality, ethnicity, and religion. By recognising that stereotypes exist and that they have limitations we can start to challenge these.

Stereotypes can be positive or negative, generally true or completely false, and are applied to groups of people. As a manager of volunteers, it is your responsibility to exercise leadership in managing diversity. Spend time building up your own knowledge base, challenge stereotypes, be willing to explore how things might be done differently and remember that there is no one right way to do things.

Training can take many forms – it is possible to build your volunteers' and paid workers' knowledge without great expense. An interactive session exploring differences and similarities between cultures and their various approaches and attitudes to work, family and social life is a simple, inexpensive and effective way of building more in-depth understanding of other cultures. There are also many free resources you can access on Volunteering Australia's website, made available through the National Volunteer Skills Centre project.

Creating an inclusive organisational environment

The commitment and support of management is essential to creating an inclusive organisational environment.

True inclusiveness can only be reached through the adoption of a whole-of-organisation approach that incorporates the principles of diversity in the organisation's policies. It also requires the creation of an organisational culture that is inclusive of diversity.

When looking at policies and procedures organisations should ensure that:

- policies respect and comply with the principles of equal opportunity;
- all volunteers are covered by appropriate insurance;
- all written information provided to volunteers of CALD background is clear and easily understood;
- there are also ways for volunteers of CALD background to convey messages to their managers and others within the organisation;
- days of significance for other faiths and religions are recognised in addition to Christian holidays, and the impact that this may have on volunteers' availability is accommodated.



Courtesy of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.
2005 NAB Award National and State Winner:
Community Service and Development (VIC).

Concerns about English language proficiency are the biggest constraint to involving volunteers from CALD backgrounds.

Effective communication

The most common concern organisations have in relation to recruiting volunteers from CALD backgrounds is their English language proficiency. Following are some simple communication tips to help organisations overcome this barrier and communicate effectively:

- Remember to use simple English and avoid the use of jargon and acronyms. Do not raise your voice to reinforce your message.

- Confirm volunteers' understanding by seeking verbal acknowledgement, remembering that culture influences people's deportment and the way they communicate. Use the Cultural Dictionary (available as a resource in the online Subject Guide) to learn about gestures, words, pictures or communication cues that carry a particular meaning or are customary to the culture/s in your local community.

- Consider incorporating the use of universally recognised symbols and/or graphics into your orientation. For example, for occupational health and safety purposes show a picture of the correct way to lift objects rather than using a written explanation.

- Is there someone in your organisation who speaks the language of the volunteer? Consider implementing a buddy system which enhances communication, without detracting from opportunities for the volunteer to improve their English language skills, if this is one of the things the volunteer sees as a benefit of volunteering.

- Ensure volunteer orientation includes lots of face-to-face communication and that you allow enough time to go through each aspect of your organisation, such as internal policies and procedures. Have things provided in a written format as well, but remember that people have different levels of literacy. If you have the available resources, consider having your organisational policies translated into other languages. Perhaps this would be a good project for a volunteer? At the very least, make sure policies are written in plain language.

Face-to-face communication – where you can confirm volunteers' understanding and clarify if required – is important.

Putting it into practice – tips for recruiting volunteers of CALD background

Clear communication and effective ways of reaching people in CALD communities is key to recruiting volunteers.

Organisations ready to start involving volunteers from CALD backgrounds should ensure that information about their organisation and volunteer opportunities is available in accessible formats. If possible, translate your promotional materials into the language/s of local CALD communities. Also, advertise your local volunteer jobs and information on volunteering in local ethnic community newspapers, as these are often widely read within the different community groups. Contact your local ethnic media organisation for further information – contact details can be found in the Fast Facts section of Volunteering Australia's online Subject Guide – Involving Volunteers of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Background.

You can also advertise your volunteer opportunities free of charge on Volunteering Australia's online volunteer matching service GoVolunteer – www.volunteeringaustralia.org

- Remember that the concept of volunteering can be understood in many different ways by people from diverse backgrounds. Ensure your promotional materials reflect this by thinking of other ways you can describe (in plain language) what it means to be a volunteer.
- Think about what your organisation can offer volunteers and make sure you advertise and promote this. Be explicit about what you are offering: for example, a reference, contact with the broader community, work experience, the opportunity to practise English conversation.

Word-of-mouth promotion works best.

Hearing about your organisation from a friend, relative or other social contact is often seen as a more credible and trustworthy source of information than a brochure or a flyer in a supermarket.

- The most effective way of distributing information into different ethno-specific communities is by word-of-mouth communication or face-to-face contact. Information presented in this format is often seen as being more credible when a person rather than an institution delivers it. It is even better if someone from within the community recommends your organisation. Engage volunteers of CALD background in the process of designing and delivering information sessions on volunteering so that they are appropriate for the target community. There is no better ambassador for volunteering than volunteers themselves.
- Streamline your recruitment practices – make it easy for people to get involved. Cut down on the amount of paperwork they are required to complete, or consider making this part of your interview process. Too many forms to fill out can be seen as a barrier to volunteering.
- Many people may feel nervous on their first day of volunteering. People from CALD backgrounds may feel isolated, especially if they are new to an Australian work environment, or lack confidence with their English language ability. Minimise the risk of people feeling isolated by ensuring you introduce new volunteers to all existing staff as part of their orientation, and consider providing extra support to these volunteers such as establishing a mentor or buddy system.



Courtesy of Sport SA. 2005 NAB National and State Award Winner: Sport and Recreation (SA).

Make sure your volunteer roles are appropriate for the volunteer's English language skills.

Be sure that the safety of the volunteer, other staff members and volunteers, and the broader community is not compromised because of miscommunication.

- Volunteers' level of English language proficiency will have implications for what the best role is for the volunteer and the organisation. Develop or choose roles that take this into account, and ensure that all volunteers are given a clear position description with agreed duties and levels of responsibility. Make sure that the safety of your volunteers, staff and clients is not compromised because of the possibility of miscommunication. Roles requiring complex communication may not be the best option for volunteers in the early stages of developing their English language skills, but this does not mean that only menial roles can be assigned to volunteers developing their English skills.

Enjoy the benefits

Many organisations involve volunteers from CALD backgrounds successfully, and enjoy the benefits that this diversity brings to their volunteer program, their organisation and their client groups. These include:

- access to a wider pool of potential volunteers;
- access to new perspectives that volunteers from diverse backgrounds and experiences can offer;
- increased awareness of different cultures amongst both paid staff and volunteers, which helps break down negative stereotypes – a valuable end in itself;
- expanded awareness and knowledge of global issues;
- the creation of a multilingual organisation and enhanced communication with client groups from CALD backgrounds;
- strengthened relationships with groups within your local community;
- increased awareness of the way of life, beliefs and values of different cultures, leading to improvements in communication and program design, and more culturally sensitive service delivery;
- the creation of an accessible and inclusive volunteer program that reflects the diversity of the community.

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