Lived experience of international students within a volunteering program: A hermeneutic phenomenological study

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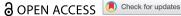Sojen Pradhan [ID][a], Aleksandr Litvinov [ID][a] and Laurel E. Dyson[b]

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ABSTRACT

International students face many challenges when embarking on a course of study overseas including language barriers, social isolation and an unfamiliar academic environment. Volunteering is one strategy that provides a holistic experience of the host country, allowing international students to acquire contextualised language and new skills, make friends and become part of the community. Considering the benefits of volunteering, various educational institutions offer different volunteering programs for students. This study is focused on investigating the lived experience of international students to make sense of the challenges and phases that are experienced during a specially designed volunteering program. The research contributes new insights into how students proceeded through the program, specifically by undergoing three phases: Uncertainty; Leaping into the Program; and Advancing, characterised by sub-themes defining their feelings and states, and also revealed the various internal and external elements that shaped their journey.

Introduction

Despite the long history of internationalisation of higher education, students from overseas often struggle linguistically, socially and academically (Ammigan et al., 2023). Language is by far one of the greatest barriers reported in the literature, with specific linguistic challenges including adjusting to local accents and colloquialisms (Ammigan et al., 2023) as well as academic writing and critical evaluation (Cena et al., 2021). Language ability, in turn, impacts on students' social engagement: those with poorer English report decreased social connectedness and more adjustment difficulties (Koo et al., 2021). Lack of social engagement further correlates with poor academic outcomes (Fontaine & Todd, 2011).

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Although there have been many studies defining and analysing the problem, few report on the actual implementation of programs to address the situation. Of the interventions described in the literature, the most promising have been those which encourage international students to engage in volunteering (Barton et al., 2022). Volunteering provides a holistic experience of the host country, with opportunities to improve language and employability skills, as well as allowing students to socialise and become part of the community (Andrew, 2011; Barton et al., 2022).

In general, student volunteering programs are well developed, at least in English-speaking countries (Cnaan et al., 2010). Some programs are run as an extra-curricular activity (Parker et al., 2009), while others are run as part of the curriculum (Andrew, 2011). However, despite the obvious benefits of student volunteering, Holmes et al. (2021) state that there is currently little research on how volunteering programs are organised. What are lacking, too, are *programs targeted specifically at international students*. In seeking volunteer positions, international students encounter barriers since they are often unfamiliar with volunteering opportunities, have limited local networks or lack the confidence to approach community groups (Andrew, 2011; Gribble et al., 2015). They may be daunted by the cumbersome application processes sometimes required (Manguvo et al., 2013). Their lack of confidence is influenced by their 'perceptions of themselves as cultural outsiders or as non-fluent users of English' (Andrew, 2011, p. 220). Therefore, students from abroad should be offered placements and volunteering opportunities facilitated by their university (Andrew, 2011). These can be enhanced by prior training to allow them to get the most from the experience (Kwenani & Yu, 2018).

With this in mind, the authors of this study launched AusLEAP, a community-focused program connecting international students in metropolitan and regional universities with community, charitable, not-for-profit and social enterprise organisations to undertake volunteering. The program includes a series of workshops to develop students' skills, engage them in volunteering, as well as match them with volunteer roles to suit their personal and academic interests and career paths.

In this study, the authors were interested in understanding the experience of international students undertaking the program. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to probe how international students made sense of their experiences and what they valued. This method of inquiry allowed a deep understanding of students' lived experience as they proceeded through the program (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). This provided insights and practical recommendations on improving the volunteering program, and these are detailed in this paper.

Literature review: International student volunteering and community engagement

Volunteering is defined as 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain' (Australia, 2022, p. 5). For students, it provides a learning experience, with the community becoming a partner in the process (Fontaine & Todd, 2011). Learning is holistic, with the workplace encountered in its full complexity, rather than as atomised items of educational content (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Students, most importantly, acquire soft skills during volunteering which, because these develop through practice, are gained more effectively than by academic study

(Khasanzyanova, 2017). One of the most important soft skills for international students is communication. Volunteering has been shown to provide a platform to practise language skills in an authentic context; and improve English language proficiency, build confidence in speaking; and acquire professional vocabulary, idioms and politeness terms (Andrew, 2011). They learn 'norms and values and other codes of behaviour' and how to 'communicate in a culturally appropriate way' (Manguvo et al., 2013, p. 123).

International students acquire job-specific knowledge through volunteering, for example, management, service and administrative tasks (Andrew, 2011). They acquire new work habits and gain tenacity in following things through (Manguvo et al., 2013). They value 'the opportunity to work and learn new skills … observing procedures in the workplace … see how various companies operate … actually performing in real life' (Barton et al., 2022, p. 786). In addition, they can learn about their future profession and begin to construct their professional identity, which can be highly motivating for their studies (Soong, 2013).

Unlike the university environment, where many international students fail to make friends with locals, as volunteers in an organisation they mostly report achieving social inclusion and a sense of belonging (Manguvo et al., 2013). 'Engaging with others, exchanging ideas, having a social experience, networking and getting to know more people' are seen by international students as benefits of volunteering (Kwenani & Yu, 2018, p. 36).

A boost in self-confidence is reported by many international student volunteers, with pride in having their skills valued (Manguvo et al., 2013). The intrinsic altruism of volunteering gives international students a sense of self-validation and provides a reciprocal reward by contributing to students feeling good and proud (Kwenani & Yu, 2018).

The AusLEAP program

AusLEAP was launched in February 2022 as a Study NSW Partner project, with funding from the NSW state government. It has worked with over 50 partners, including leading educational institutions, businesses, government and community organisations to facilitate volunteering opportunities for international students during their studies in Australia.

When running the program, we attempt to recruit a broad cross-section of students by advertising through University news outlets and social media. Multiple online sessions are organised to inform potential participants about the program and what they need to submit i.e. an expression of interest in the form of a one-page statement of their motivation to be part of the program. To date over 244 students have participated in this extra-curricular program, which lasts for 6 to 9 weeks. All applicants have been accepted into the program. It consists of four development workshops, in which relevant professional speakers nurture the students' interest in volunteering, and students meet with community organisations. They volunteer in matched organisations for a minimum of 10–20 hours. The workshops build volunteer-ready skills in public speaking, leadership and workplace readiness, include networking and team-building activities, and introduce participants to aspects of Australian culture.

Students are also invited to make videos of their experience in the program and are given training to do this: however, only about 20% of the participants produced these

videos. In the final workshop, their achievements were marked by an award ceremony for the best videos as well as certificates of completion for each participant. From the first 2022 program, 10 participants volunteered to be mentors to assist participants in 2023 and continued in 2024 as well. The program is considered an example of a multi-structured volunteering program that involves both educational components and volunteering experience.

Method

Study aims and research questions

The purpose of this research was to understand how international students made sense of their experience within the AusLEAP program and to interpret the factors that shaped this experience. Because AusLEAP represents a novel program, it was important to gain a deep understanding of it from the participants' viewpoint. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What is the lived experience of international students participating in the AusLEAP volunteering program?

RQ 2: What are the elements shaping international students' experience?

The phenomenological inquiry

Considering the aims of this research, a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was selected as a methodological approach. Phenomenology is a 'situated research approach' that maintains 'the holistic nature of the experience studied' (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 714). Hermeneutic, or interpretive, phenomenology is focused on understanding human experience at a deeper level (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). The interpretation of a phenomenon happens via 'the individual's lifeworld' (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 94). The application of hermeneutic phenomenology allows for the capture of the essence of the phenomenon by extracting it from the lived experiences of participants. The methodology has been actively used in studying the volunteering experience in various contexts (e.g. Clayton & Gillian Ragsdell, 2016; Furtak & Barnard, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect international students' stories about their experience within the program. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used to collect data for hermeneutic phenomenological studies (e.g. Claflin, 2020; Zeivots, 2015). These allowed researchers to ask questions related to the research aims and encouraged the students to add their own thoughts and understanding through stories, feelings and reflections. In this research, we asked them descriptive questions, such as:

- What was the experience like of participating in the AusLEAP program?
- Can you describe the challenges, if any, of participating in this program?
- Describe the activities you enjoyed the most/least while attending the program? Why?

The main criterion for selecting interviewees was International students who successfully completed the AusLEAP program: 14 students were interviewed. Of these, 5 were male and 9 female. Most came from Asia and the Indian Subcontinent, with 1 from Africa and 1 from South America. They included 7 first-year, 4 second-year, 2 third-year and 1 fourth-year student, undertaking Bachelor and Master's degrees in Business Studies, Management, Information Technology and Science.

Data analysis

In this study, Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) six stages data analysis method was used to illuminate the international students' experience. The three researchers firstly immersed themselves individually in the data by reviewing transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews. To gain an understanding of the data, they then reviewed the transcripts a second time, again individually, taking notes and developing first-order constructs, taking into account participants' language and phrasing. To abstract sub-themes, each researcher reflected on the constructs with reference to the transcripts in an iterative process. Themes were then synthesised from the sub-themes in a collective discussion. At this meeting, linkages were made between the synthesised constructs and potential academic theories in order to derive answers to the research questions. Finally, a meeting was held with other researchers to critically evaluate and integrate the results and confirm the answers to the research questions.

Results

Lived experience of international students

Three themes related to RQ1 emerged from the analysis of international students' stories and these describe the phases of students' experience. Each theme includes several sub-themes that demonstrate the feelings and states of the students within each phase. Themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 1. This table also demonstrates the theme's definitions and descriptors that represent the keywords used by students when discussing the phases of their volunteering experience.

It was challenging for many international students to make sense of their experience at the beginning. This is characterised by the fact that, after being asked questions, the first reaction of some students was a long pause or confusion. '*Wow, let me think about it*' (Participant 1), '*Oh...difficult*' (Participant 3) were common first reactions. After asking some clarifying questions (e.g. let's try to describe what you experienced at different stages of the program, say at the beginning, in the middle and at the end) and also giving them an opportunity to think a little more, the participants were able to describe what they had experienced.

Phase of uncertainty

Uncertainty was the first theme that emerged from participants' descriptions of their experiences. Within this phase, international students indicated that they experienced a lack of understanding about what they were expected to do during the program (*Lack of details and expectations*). In addition, some students mentioned that they were unsure about their ability to undertake the program (*Lack of confidence*).

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes related to the students' lived experience.

Phase	Sub-theme	Definition	Descriptors	Example
Uncertainty	Lack of confidence	Students feel anxious because they do not understand whether they will be able to go through the program.	Initially, scared and not sure how to do it	Participant 13 – 'I was not sure how I am going to do this. I don't know how many people are there, how experienced they are, if are they all new or they are like me or they're different from me'.
	Lack of details and expectations	Students have low expectations due to lack of details about the program	Not knowing what to expect, and what to do	Participant 7 – "I didn't have any clue of what to expect. What are we going to do
Leaping into the Program	Leaving comfort zone	Under the influence of program activities, coordinators, peers, students do things they don't feel comfortable doing	Encouraged to leave comfort zone	Participant 14 - I am not that kind of person, but during the program I did.
	Learning about yourself and others	Under the influence of program activities, coordinators, peers, students learn something new about themselves and others	Exploring and learning more about self and others	Participant 13 - The program gave me the chance to learn more about myself.... I get to know about myself there. After finishing one day and entering into the second day of the program. There were a lot of things that changed in one day for me. And for the second day, I was just exploring myself because [a facilitator] pushed me that much and that day. So yeah, I started exploring myself after that day".
	Going through together	Students note that other program participants/ stakeholders helped them to go through the program	Doing it together	Participant 9 – 'But I did it because I just wanted to, feel what everyone else was feeling and experiencing, the vibes that we were getting. It was just phenomenal.... It helped me a lot'
Advancing	Achieving outcomes	Students mention specific outcomes that have been achieved during the program participation	Learning to communicate	Participant 10 – 'I learned how to communicate during the program. I had an interview recently, with my internship and I used my communication skills, and I think it went pretty well. I should continue to polish my communication skills as well'.
	Impact matters	As part of the program, students realise that their actions (volunteering) can have a positive impact on a broader community	Helping, changing, impacting something bigger	Participant 5 – 'It was very rewarding to see that even with our limited knowledge and expertise, we could help a bigger cause, a cause greater than us, a cause that will actually help many communities and many people touch the lives of people'

Phase of leaping into the program

This was the second theme that emerged from the sense-making process by the students. This theme involves the following sub-themes: *Leaving comfort zone, Learning about yourself and others*, and *Going through together*. After the uncertainty in the initial stage, international students made the leap into the program. The leap metaphor is used because the structure and mentors of the program helped students 'quickly enough' leave their comfort zone, which was experienced similarly to a swift leap in feelings. The leap and the process of leaving their comfort zone were happening at the same time as they became aware of their own potential. International students also noted that leaving their comfort zone, as well as learning about themselves, occurred when interacting with other participants in the program (peers). Students clarified that during the program they felt a sense of belonging and highlighted the crucial role of help from others.

Phase of advancing

Advancing was the third theme that emerged from the analysis of students' stories. The following sub-themes constitute this theme: *Achieving outcomes* and *Impact matters*. This theme characterises the phase after the completion of the program. The chosen metaphor means that the international students at this phase had acquired certain knowledge and skills (advancing their employability), as well as forming a personal meaning of volunteering and its impact.

Elements that shaped international students' experience

It is worth noting that certain elements influenced (shaped the form of) how international students lived through the experience but were not the sources of the experience. These provided the answer to RQ2. In this study, internal and external elements were identified. The internal elements that shaped the experience were related directly to participants and represented their feelings, characteristics or thoughts that arose within a specific phase of the experience. External elements were related to the environment and structure of the program. Below are presented both internal and external elements that shaped each phase of the international students' experience.

Elements that shaped the phase of uncertainty

This phase was shaped under the influence of many different internal elements, mainly represented by various feelings of the international students which influenced (shaped) how this phase proceeded. The most common feeling, or element, was fear. For example, Participant 6 mentioned that they felt fear '*that you won't be able to do it*' during the phase of Uncertainty. Participant 9 was afraid because they doubted that they would be able to volunteer and communicate with others: '*I kind of felt a little fear that I couldn't do it or that I could not volunteer. How can I communicate? How can I behave?*'. While Participant 5 experienced fear associated with social awkwardness:

> My main fear was not exactly related to making friends but not having people I could talk to. I was a bit of a socially awkward person when I first met people, so I thought, okay, maybe everyone's going to make friends, be a good team, and I'm just going to be like an outsider within my group.

Another common feeling among international students was nervousness during the phase of Uncertainty. Participant 14 stated, '*I guess in the beginning, I was kind of nervous*'. Participant 11 added, '*I was pretty nervous, like, I'm not sure how it going to go. It is a new place for me, how the social thing going to work for me*'. Similarly, Participant 13 mentioned: '*I was a little concerned and nervous*', whereas Participant 5 was nervous due to lack of experience and said: '*I was very nervous when I just joined AusLEAP. I had never had a job. Even though it is volunteering, it is a job*'.

The phase of Uncertainty is also associated with an external element, namely the lack of details about the program. Participants stated that due to the lack of a detailed description of the program, they had little understanding of structure and expectations. For example, Participant 1 stated, '*Before joining the program, I did not know what the expectations are. I wish there was a detailed guide or a website*'. Participant 3 added, '*I was not quite sure about the volunteering organisation and responsibilities*'.

Elements that shaped the phase of leaping into the program

International students noted that their experience within the Leaping into the Program stage was shaped by many different external elements that were associated with the atmosphere within the program, as well as related to support from various people involved in the program. Regarding atmosphere, overseas students highlighted the important role of fun and a safe environment. For example, Participant 7, answering the question of what helped them pass the program, without hesitation gave the following reply:

> We enjoyed it much like I personally did the activities and the way they took the entire session. None of it was boring because it's a whole day and sitting in a whole day and a Saturday really hard from [almost] nine to five.

Participant 3 also mentioned the fun component as an important element of the program:

> It's fun to work, work with your teammates sometimes, it may sound stupid, but it's fun. Like they ask you to find some objects or find a statue on campus [during the Scavenger Hunt].

Participant 9, when answering the question about what helped them to go through this program, mentioned a safe environment: 'I just felt more comfortable and safer'. Participants 6 and 14 added that the safe environment provided by mentors and peers helped the participants not to think about communication problems.

> Well, it's really good that the speakers always provide a safe environment for us. It doesn't matter if you have an accent, they won't give you that look like they're not understanding what you're saying. (Participant 6).

> You know, we were encouraged to feel whatever we wanted to feel at that moment, and there was no judgment at all even when we did our volunteering activities... I think that was one of the most comfortable things about this program. You can engage in whatever way you want. Regardless, no one's going to pressure you to open up to everyone else. I mean, even till the last workshop, no one, there was no pressure on anyone to raise their hand and contribute (Participant 14).

As external elements during the phase of Leaping into the Program, international students also emphasised the important role of support and help from program mentors and coordinators:

> The people there helped us during the program. The coordinator that was actually with us actually helped us out and told us a few basic steps, and yeah, just, we just learned, and we went through it, and it was good in the end. (Participant 10)

> … mainly those facilitators, coordinators and other mentors were there. They were pretty helpful to us and created an environment for international students to interact with each other. (Participant 11)

On the other hand, Participant 8 stressed the role of peers in helping them get through this phase:

> I was being supported by the new people in the program. They may not be my friends, but they give me the knowledge and help. (Participant 8)

As for internal elements, students noted that various personal qualities helped them in completing this program. Participant 8 stated that adaptability helped them to go through the program: 'I was [able to] very quickly adapt to the atmosphere. I raised my hand to answer the question a lot. That helped me to go, meet new people and go through this program smoothly'. Participant 10 mentioned that their initiative helped them during the program: 'I [took] initiative. I helped like to transport this stuff, and I helped, and I taught two other volunteers to do so.' While Participant 3 noted proactiveness as an essential characteristic: 'I think you have to be proactive [to do this program]. You must actively chase it.'

Elements that shaped the phase of advancing

Within this phase, international students also described both internal and external elements that shaped their experience. The internal element was the sense of accomplishment. Participant 9 mentioned this: '*I also felt a kind of accomplishment, like a feeling of something that I had at the end of the program*.' Participants 6 and 8 mentioned their pride in what they had achieved:

> And at the end of the workshop, I felt very happy and proud of myself when I was granted the second prize for the video. So, I prepared a video with all the notes and the summary from myself because, I took notes along the way (Participant 8).

> I was excited, and I was happy that I finished the program. I felt like I was achieving something important… I was proud of myself. I was here representing my country. I didn't know that about myself, and I realised it there when the coordinator asked that question, and I felt like I needed to answer this (Participant 6)

As external elements, international students highlighted different artefacts, such as certificates, or the videos they produced. Participants 1 and 2 stated that certificates helped make the final phase of the program more important and solemn, which in turn demonstrated how much they had advanced during the program.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that international students' experience within the AusLEAP program represented a multi-phased phenomenon and that students experienced different feelings, challenges and thoughts within each phase. Hustinx et al. (2010) state that volunteering is complex and may be multi-dimensional and multiform. Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) created the 'volunteer stages and transitions model' (VSTM) which highlighted that local students and workers who volunteer also go through stages and transitions over time (nominee; new volunteer; involved volunteer; senior volunteer and retired). In contrast to the VSTM model, the international students of our study found that the transition process was not always easy, and they had to overcome challenges and leave their comfort zone when transitioning. Our findings show the need for volunteering programs which are customised for international students to help them overcome these challenges.

The themes which defined the lived experience of the international students undergoing the program (RQ1) and the elements that shaped each phase (RQ2) aligned in a number of ways with the literature. Specifically, the Phase of Uncertainty reflects international students' lack of confidence and view of themselves as outsiders (Andrew, 2011), as well as having poor social engagement (Koo et al., 2021). The Leaping into the Program Phase, and its elements of 'Learning about yourself and others' and 'Going through together', align with reports from the literature regarding the beneficial effects of volunteering on international students' achievement of social inclusion, networking and making friends (Manguvo et al., 2013). The Advancing Phase showed students mastering soft skills, such as the ability to communicate well, and their pride in having a positive impact on the community, and this is also in accord with the literature (Kwenani & Yu, 2018; Manguvo et al., 2013). In their paper, Profiroiu and Păceşilă (2017) state that while most volunteering programs are primarily focused on fulfilling community needs, volunteering also provides an opportunity for personal development, and we can see this happening as students progress through the three phases until they achieve a sense of accomplishment in the Advancing Phase.

As part of phenomenological research, mentioning any limitations and critiquing the acquired results is important. The first limitation is related to the nature of the phenomenological research. The results of this study were made relying on students' stories and descriptions of their experiences, which represent subjective views and perspectives, meaning that the findings of this study are relevant only to the participants of the AusLEAP program. As mentioned before, the program represents a combination of developmental workshops and workplace volunteering activities. If volunteering programs do not involve the workshop component, the volunteering experience may differ from the AusLEAP program experience.

Another limitation is that we had no way of knowing if our aim of recruiting a broad cross-section of international students into the program was successful, or whether the students were exceptional in some way. Given that students experienced uncertainty about what to expect but were still willing to undertake the program, perhaps they were highly motivated students.

Conclusions

This study aimed to understand and make sense of the lived experience of international students taking part in the AusLEAP program. The program provided volunteering opportunities and preparatory developmental activities to international students through a series of workshops and by introducing them to community organisations. The purpose of the program was to help them adjust to academic life in Australia and overcome barriers of language and social isolation. For those students whom we did keep in contact with following the completion of the program, this purpose was fulfilled: their confidence was raised, they were able to do well in their studies, and also obtained good jobs after their graduation. We have no reason to believe that this would not also apply to others whom we lost track of, but follow-up research to track the longer-term outcomes of a greater number of students would be needed.

Our study, by using a hermeneutic phenomenological method, revealed a detailed understanding of the phases that international students move through during the program, that is, the three phases of Uncertainty, Leaping into the Program and Advancing. Students went from fear and nervousness to a sense of achievement which became most obvious in the final phase, Advancing. The intermediate phase involved students leaving their comfort zone, learning about themselves, and going through the experience together. Where our study added substantially to the literature was in defining these phases and the various internal and external elements which affected students' progress through them.

Given the Phase of Uncertainty that students experienced initially, and its sub-theme 'Lack of details and expectations', providing students with more information before the program commences is one obvious suggestion from our research, particularly necessary for students new to the host country. Testimonials and videoed interviews with students who completed the program will be made available to applicants via a new online platform on our next iteration.

Other external elements, particularly those revealed in the Phase of Leaping into the Program, provide guidelines to other universities establishing volunteering programs for international students, for example, the value that students placed on having activities which were fun and being given a safe environment in which they received support and help from mentors and co-ordinators, and were encouraged to interact with other students. We hope that our findings will inspire others to develop similar programs for international students.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Sojen Pradhan 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.

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