

# Why Do Older Adults Commence, Re-Commence and Continue Volunteering? Prioritising Enablers and Barriers to Participation

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

Volunteering is recommended as a way for older adults to age healthily due to a variety of biopsychosocial health benefits. There are a range of previously identified enablers and barriers to volunteering participation that have been identified. Policymakers may benefit from knowing which strategies are likely to have the greatest immediate impact on recruitment and retention. This study aimed to prioritise enablers and barriers to volunteering and to compare priorities across four participant groups: Volunteer Program Representatives, Current volunteers, Former volunteers and Never volunteers.

Participants (n = 681) completed an online survey scoring enablers and barriers to volunteering using Likert scale responses to indicate the importance of each item to commencement and continuation in volunteering. Data were analysed descriptively for responses to each item for each participant group. Simple pairwise comparisons were conducted between Current and Former volunteers on items regarding volunteering continuation, and between Representatives with both Former and Never volunteers on items regarding volunteering commencement.

Feeling welcome scored the highest for all participant groups (Participant Group (Mean, SD): Representatives (4.86, 0.56); Current (4.70, 0.72); Former (4.25, 1.22); Never 4.57 (0.83). Former volunteers valued four items higher than Current volunteers: reimbursement vouchers, reliable transport, information technology training and online volunteering. Representatives largely scored items higher than Former and Never volunteers.

Increasing engagement in older adult volunteering requires targeted strategies due to differences in priorities of potential volunteers. Policymakers should consider these community priorities when assessing current volunteering recruitment strategies and to inform future decision-making for funding and resource allocation in order for older adults to maximise the benefits of volunteering on healthy ageing.

## Introduction

Volunteering has been recommended as one way for older adults to age well as part of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (UK Government, 2025b; World Health Organization, 2023) due to range of associated biopsychosocial health benefits, including reduced depression symptoms and increased life satisfaction (Williams et al., 2026). This is concerning as there has reportedly been a decrease in older adult volunteer participation in volunteering since the COVID-19 pandemic (Dederichs, 2023; Grotz et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need to investigate the modifiable factors that may increase older adult participation in volunteering to maximise the health benefits. Previous work has identified the need for further research into recruiting and retaining older adult volunteers (Morrow-Howell, 2010). Studies have identified a range of enablers and barriers to older adult commencement of and continued participation in volunteering, (Hansen & Slagsvold, 2020; Petriwskyj & Warburton, 2007; Warburton et al., 2007; Warburton & Stirling, 2007). There is a need to prioritise these modifiable factors due to the wide range of identified personal, socioenvironmental and program factor enablers and barriers. Addressing these factors in priority may inform interventions that may have the greatest immediate impact on increased participation.

There is a need to develop interventions to commence and sustain participation in older adult volunteering. It would be logical to investigate factors most strongly associated with commencement and continuation that

could potentially form part of an intervention package. However, given that there is a broad range of factors that could be addressed, there is a need to prioritise. Prioritising enablers and barriers to participation may allow for implementation of strategies that will be most effective and efficient.

This study aimed to:

1. Prioritise previously identified enablers and barriers to participation within the Australian context, to help determine which modifiable factors may be addressed in order to maximise participation and health benefits for older adults;
2. Compare priorities between:
  1. Current and Former volunteers to identify differences in priorities that may have potential to contribute to volunteering continuation or cessation; and
  2. Representatives of volunteer organisations, Former, and Never volunteers to determine if the priorities of Representatives are aligned with those whom they may be trying to reach.

## Methods

### Ethics approval

for this study was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 47057) in accordance with the provisions of Australia's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2025 (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2025).

## Design

This study was an online cross-sectional survey.

## Participants and Setting

Participants were older adults who lived in Australia or representatives of organisations involved in volunteering programs in Australia.

Four different participant groups were recruited based upon the nature and history of their volunteering. Volunteering was defined as being engaged in a program with the ability to voluntarily choose participation, no remuneration, a formal structure, participants not volunteering for short-term reasons, and the intended beneficiaries being both others and oneself (Cnaan et al., 1996). These groups were:

1. **Volunteer Program Representatives (Representatives):** those who coordinated or recruited volunteers on behalf of an organisation or program (in a paid or voluntary capacity), were living in Australia and were 18 years and older, or;
2. **Current Volunteers:** living in Australia and aged at least 60 years and older (50 years and older for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples) and were participating in volunteering at the time of the survey, or;

3. **Former Volunteers:** living in Australia and aged at least 60 years and older (50 years and older for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples), had previously volunteered but were no longer volunteering, or;
4. **Never Volunteers:** living in Australia and aged at least 60 years and older (50 years and older for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples) and had never volunteered.

Participants self-selected which group was applicable to them after the definition of volunteering. If a participant participated in multiple groups, for example, an older adult volunteer who was also a volunteer program coordinator, then we analysed their data based on the highest group number that is listed above. Therefore, the above example would have been classified as a Representative.

## Measurements

The authors specifically developed a survey questionnaire for this study (Supplementary Material A). Outcomes were measured using Likert-style responses. Participants were asked to rate their perceived importance of each enabler and barrier from 0 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). Current volunteers, Former volunteers and Never volunteers responded based on their personally perceived importance of each item. Representatives responded based on their perceived importance of each item to older adult volunteers. Survey items were piloted with two older adults in order to address potential issues with clarity of survey questions. Subsequent minor adjustments to the wording of one question were performed prior to releasing the survey online. Survey questions for each group were as follows:

Representatives were asked:

- How important do you believe each of the following items would be for older adults to commence participation in a volunteer program?
- How important do you believe each of the following items would be for older adults to continue participating in a volunteer program?

Current volunteers were asked:

- How important would each of the following items be to your continued participation in a volunteer program?

Current volunteers were not asked about hypothetical commencement as they had already commenced participation in a volunteering program.

Former volunteers were asked:

- How important would each of the following items be for you to re-commence participation in a volunteer program?
- How important would each of the following items be for you to continue participating in a volunteer program?

Never volunteers were asked:

- How important would each of the following items be for you to commence participating in a volunteer program?
- How important would each of the following items be for you to continue participating in a volunteer program?

## Procedure

Participants were recruited via social media advertisements and by email to volunteer organisations and contacts who were known to the research team. Participants were provided with a link to an online Qualtrics survey (Qualtrics, Provo UT). The survey first provided an explanatory statement and participants had to select that they provided their informed consent in order to continue. Participants were informed they could withdraw at any time. The Explanatory Statement and consent are in Supplementary Material B. After consenting to participate, participants were asked for demographic information and were asked to nominate the participant group they most identified with, which linked to an individual survey for each group. Participants were provided with a list of previously identified enablers and barriers to volunteering as items to rate (Table 1) (Williams, 2026). There were fifteen items for volunteering commencement and eleven items for volunteering continuation, as some items no longer applied once volunteering had commenced, for example, recruitment strategies. Data were collected from June to August 2025.

Table 1  
Survey items (enablers and barriers) for volunteering commencement and continuation.

|                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Commencement Only</b>                                             |
| Information sessions about the benefits of volunteering              |
| Information sessions about local opportunities                       |
| One-on-one assistance to find a program of interest                  |
| Wide range of recruitment strategies                                 |
| <b>Both Commencement and Continuation</b>                            |
| Reimbursement vouchers for associated costs                          |
| Training on using information technology                             |
| Reliable transport (e.g. carpooling)                                 |
| Flexibility with volunteers' schedules and other activities          |
| Volunteers made to feel welcome                                      |
| Easy environmental access (e.g. disabled parking, ramps)             |
| Role recognition (e.g. Volunteer Appreciation Month, certificates)   |
| Volunteers felt supported by supervisors and managers                |
| Assistance with administration tasks (e.g. organising police checks) |
| Volunteering online                                                  |

## Data Analyses

Survey responses were included if they completed the survey in full and were within the required age ranges for their group. Data were analysed descriptively using means (standard deviation) with medians (interquartile range) for responses to each item for each participant group.

Simple pairwise comparisons were conducted using ordered logistic regression between Current and Former volunteers on eleven items regarding volunteering continuation, and between Representatives with both Former and Never volunteers on fifteen items regarding volunteering commencement.

## Results

A total of 697 participants completed the survey in full. Sixteen respondents were excluded because they were below the age required for inclusion in the group they identified with, resulting in 681 participants in total (Table 2).

The mean (SD) and median (IQR) for responses to each item by each participant group are included in Table 3 (volunteering commencement) and Table 4 (volunteering continuation). The highest scoring items for commencement or recommencement for each group were that volunteers were made to feel welcome (Participant Group (Mean, SD): Representatives (4.84, 0.55), Former (4.30, 1.20) and Never volunteers (4.62, 0.83)). The second highest scoring priority for Representatives and Former volunteers was that volunteers felt supported by supervisors (Participant Group (Mean, SD): Representatives (4.67, 0.77), Former (4.12, 1.25), whereas for Never volunteers it was program flexibility (Mean, SD) (4.27, 1.27) (see Table 3). The highest scoring items for each group for continuation were also volunteers made to feel welcome (Participant Group (Mean, SD): Representatives (4.86, 0.56); Current (4.70, 0.72); Former (4.25, 1.22); Never 4.57 (0.83) and volunteers felt supported by supervisors for the Former group (4.25, 1.14). Lowest scoring items for commencement were reliable transport for Former (2.09, 1.26) and Never volunteers (2.11, 1.41) and online volunteering for Representatives (2.81, 0.98). Lowest scoring items for continuation were the same (Mean, SD): reliable transport for the Current (1.78, 1.16); Former (2.27, 1.30) and Never (2.38, 1.44) volunteers and online volunteering for Representatives (2.78, 0.99) (see Table 4).

Table 3

**Mean (SD) and Median (IQR) for volunteering (re)commencement** 1 = Not At All Important, 2 = Slightly Important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Moderately Important, 5 = Very Important

| Information Sessions – Benefits            | Representatives | Former       | Never        |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                            | Mean (SD)       | Mean (SD)    | Mean (SD)    |
|                                            | Median (IQR)    | Median (IQR) | Median (IQR) |
|                                            | 3.95 (0.98)     | 2.41 (1.31)  | 3.16 (1.24)  |
|                                            | 4 (4–5)         | 2 (1–3)      | 3 (3–4)      |
| Information Sessions – Local Opportunities | 4.32 (0.93)     | 3.46 (1.38)  | 3.73 (1.35)  |
|                                            | 5 (4–5)         | 4 (2–5)      | 4 (3–5)      |
| 1:1 Assistance Finding a Program           | 4.0 (0.88)      | 2.95 (1.27)  | 3.46 (1.39)  |
|                                            | 4 (4–5)         | 3 (2–4)      | 4 (3–5)      |
| Reimbursement Vouchers                     | 3.52 (1.17)     | 2.37 (1.27)  | 2.32 (1.40)  |
|                                            | 4 (3–4)         | 2 (1–3)      | 2 (1–4)      |
| Information Technology Training            | 3.96 (1.09)     | 2.90 (1.57)  | 2.65 (1.65)  |
|                                            | 4 (3–5)         | 3 (1–4)      | 2 (1–4)      |
| Reliable Transport                         | 3.29 (1.01)     | 2.09 (1.26)  | 2.11 (1.41)  |
|                                            | 3 (3–4)         | 2 (1–3)      | 1 (1–3)      |
| High Quality Training                      | 3.95 (1.04)     | 3.24 (1.30)  | 3.41 (1.28)  |
|                                            | 4 (3–5)         | 3.5 (2–4)    | 4 (2–4)      |
| Program Flexibility                        | 4.53 (0.73)     | 3.72 (1.38)  | 4.27 (1.17)  |
|                                            | 5 (4–5)         | 3 (3–5)      | 5 (4–5)      |
| Range of Recruitment Strategies            | 4.19 (0.83)     | 2.68 (1.25)  | 3.11 (1.13)  |
|                                            | 4 (4–5)         | 3 (1–4)      | 3 (3–4)      |
| Volunteers Made to Feel Welcome            | 4.84 (0.55)     | 4.30 (1.20)  | 4.62 (0.83)  |
|                                            | 5 (5–5)         | 5 (4–5)      | 5 (5–5)      |
| Easy Environmental Access                  | 4.48 (0.87)     | 3.63 (1.44)  | 3.62 (1.40)  |
|                                            | 5 (4–5)         | 4 (3–5)      | 4 (3–5)      |
| Volunteer Role Recognition                 | 4.40 (0.80)     | 3.43 (1.45)  | 3.54 (1.24)  |
|                                            | 5 (4–5)         | 4 (2–5)      | 4 (3–4)      |
| Volunteers Felt Supported by Supervisors   | 4.67 (0.77)     | 4.12 (1.25)  | 4.11 (1.24)  |
|                                            | 5 (5–5)         | 5 (4–5)      | 5 (4–5)      |

| Information Sessions – Benefits      | Representatives | Former       | Never        |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                      | Mean (SD)       | Mean (SD)    | Mean (SD)    |
|                                      | Median (IQR)    | Median (IQR) | Median (IQR) |
|                                      | 3.95 (0.98)     | 2.41 (1.31)  | 3.16 (1.24)  |
|                                      | 4 (4–5)         | 2 (1–3)      | 3 (3–4)      |
| Assistance with Administration Tasks | 4.37 (0.84)     | 3.43 (1.34)  | 3.32 (1.47)  |
|                                      | 5 (4–5)         | 4 (2.4–4)    | 4 (2–4)      |
| Online Volunteering                  | 2.81 (0.98)     | 3.03 (1.36)  | 3.0 (1.18)   |
|                                      | 3 (2–3)         | 3 (2–4)      | 3 (2–4)      |

Table 4

**Mean (SD) and Median (IQR) for volunteering** continuation 1 = Not At All Important, 2 = Slightly Important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Moderately Important, 5 = Very Important

| <b>Reimbursement Vouchers</b>            | <b>Representatives</b> | <b>Current</b>      | <b>Former</b>       | <b>Never</b>        |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                                          | <b>Mean (SD)</b>       | <b>Mean (SD)</b>    | <b>Mean (SD)</b>    | <b>Mean (SD)</b>    |
|                                          | <b>Median (IQR)</b>    | <b>Median (IQR)</b> | <b>Median (IQR)</b> | <b>Median (IQR)</b> |
|                                          | <b>3.40 (1.26)</b>     | <b>1.95 (1.22)</b>  | <b>2.50 (1.31)</b>  | <b>2.43 (1.34)</b>  |
|                                          | <b>4 (2–4)</b>         | <b>1 (1–3)</b>      | <b>2 (1–3.5)</b>    | <b>2 (1–4)</b>      |
| Information Technology Training          | 3.95 (1.14)            | 2.56 (1.48)         | 3.03 (1.47)         | 3.14 (1.46)         |
|                                          | 4 (3–5)                | 2 (1–4)             | 3 (1.5–4)           | 3 (2–4)             |
| Reliable Transport                       | 3.37 (1.11)            | 1.78 (1.16)         | 2.27 (1.30)         | 2.38 (1.44)         |
|                                          | 3 (3–4)                | 1 (1–3)             | 2 (1–3)             | 3 (1–3)             |
| High Quality Training                    | 4.05 (1.00)            | 3.24 (1.48)         | 3.41 (1.35)         | 3.68 (1.18)         |
|                                          | 4 (4–5)                | 4 (2–5)             | 4 (2–4)             | 4 (3–5)             |
| Program Flexibility                      | 4.53 (0.80)            | 4.01 (1.25)         | 3.97 (1.27)         | 4.54 (0.93)         |
|                                          | 5 (4–5)                | 4 (4–5)             | 4 (4–5)             | 5 (4–5)             |
| Volunteers Made to Feel Welcome          | 4.86 (0.56)            | 4.70 (0.72)         | 4.25 (1.22)         | 4.57 (0.90)         |
|                                          | 5 (5–5)                | 5 (5–5)             | 5 (4–5)             | 5 (4–5)             |
| Easy Environmental Access                | 4.38 (0.92)            | 3.59 (1.38)         | 3.45 (1.48)         | 3.30 (1.47)         |
|                                          | 5 (4–5)                | 4 (3–5)             | 4 (3–5)             | 4 (2–4)             |
| Volunteer Role Recognition               | 4.49 (0.80)            | 3.83 (1.31)         | 3.64 (1.43)         | 3.62 (1.23)         |
|                                          | 5 (4–5)                | 4 (3–5)             | 4 (3–5)             | 4 (3–4)             |
| Volunteers Felt Supported by Supervisors | 4.75 (0.66)            | 4.45 (0.88)         | 4.25 (1.14)         | 4.41 (1.07)         |
|                                          | 5 (5–5)                | 5 (4–5)             | 5 (4–5)             | 5 (4–5)             |
| Assistance with Administration Tasks     | 4.30 (0.79)            | 3.51 (1.29)         | 3.41 (1.30)         | 3.41 (1.48)         |
|                                          | 4 (4–5)                | 4 (3–4)             | 4 (3–4)             | 4 (2–5)             |
| Online Volunteering                      | 2.78 (0.99)            | 2.55 (1.34)         | 2.90 (1.37)         | 3.11 (1.24)         |
|                                          | 3 (2–3)                | 3 (1–3)             | 3 (2–4)             | 3 (3–4)             |

The priorities of each group are displayed in order from most important to least important for (re)commencement (Fig. 1) and continuation (Fig. 2).

Differences between participant groups are outlined in Tables 5–7. Pairwise comparisons were conducted between Current volunteers and Former volunteers on survey items regarding continuation of volunteering.

Former volunteers gave significantly higher importance scores for items of reimbursement vouchers, information technology training, reliable transport and the option for online volunteering ( $p < 0.03$ ). Current volunteers scored being made to feel welcome significantly higher ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 5

**Current Volunteers v Former Volunteers on survey items regarding continuation of volunteering** (Positive coef scores indicate Former volunteers scored items as more important)

| Item                                     | Current, Mean (SD) | Former, Mean (SD) | Coef [95% CI]          | p value   |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Reimbursement Vouchers                   | 1.95 (1.22)        | 2.50 (1.31)       | 0.81 [0.42 to 1.20]    | < 0.001 * |
| Information Technology Training          | 2.56 (1.48)        | 3.03 (1.47)       | 0.56 [0.18 to 0.95]    | < 0.001 * |
| Reliable Transport                       | 1.78 (1.16)        | 2.27 (1.30)       | 0.77 [0.37 to 1.17]    | < 0.001 * |
| High Quality Training                    | 3.24 (1.48)        | 3.41 (1.35)       | 0.15 [-0.23 to 0.52]   | 0.44      |
| Program Flexibility                      | 4.01 (1.25)        | 3.97 (1.27)       | -0.07 [-0.47 to 0.33]  | 0.73      |
| Volunteers Made to Feel Welcome          | 4.70 (0.72)        | 4.25 (1.22)       | -0.91 [-1.37 to -0.45] | < 0.001 * |
| Easy Environmental Access                | 3.59 (1.38)        | 3.45 (1.48)       | -0.15 [-0.54 to 0.24]  | 0.45      |
| Volunteer Role Recognition               | 3.83 (1.31)        | 3.64 (1.43)       | -0.22 [-0.62 to 0.17]  | 0.26      |
| Volunteers Felt Supported by Supervisors | 4.45 (0.88)        | 4.25 (1.14)       | -0.27 [-0.70 to 0.16]  | 0.23      |
| Assistance with Administration Tasks     | 3.51 (1.29)        | 3.41 (1.30)       | -0.15 [-0.53 to 0.24]  | 0.45      |
| Online Volunteering                      | 2.55 (1.34)        | 2.90 (1.37)       | 0.46 [0.07 to 0.84]    | 0.02 *    |
| * = $p < 0.05$                           |                    |                   |                        |           |

Pairwise comparisons were conducted between Representatives and Former volunteers regarding volunteering commencement. Former volunteers had significantly lower ( $p = 0.00$ ) importance scores for all but one item (online volunteering). Pairwise comparisons were also conducted between Representatives and Never volunteers regarding commencement. Never volunteers had significantly lower importance scores ( $p < 0.03$ ) for all but three items (1:1 assistance, being made to feel welcome and online volunteering).

Table 6

**Representatives v Former Volunteers on items regarding volunteer commencement** (Negative coef scores indicate Former volunteers scored items as less important)

| Item                                       | Representatives, Mean (SD) | Former, Mean (SD) | Coef [95% CI]          | p value   |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Information Sessions – Benefits            | 3.95 (0.98)                | 2.41 (1.31)       | -2.27 [-2.90 to -1.64] | < 0.001 * |
| Information Sessions – Local Opportunities | 4.32 (0.93)                | 3.46 (1.38)       | -1.26 [-1.84 to -0.68] | < 0.001 * |
| 1:1 Assistance Finding a Program           | 4.0 (0.88)                 | 2.95 (1.27)       | -1.73 [-2.34 to -1.12] | < 0.001 * |
| Reimbursement Vouchers                     | 3.52 (1.17)                | 2.37 (1.27)       | -1.63 [-2.21 to -1.04] | < 0.001 * |
| Information Technology Training            | 3.96 (1.09)                | 2.90 (1.57)       | -1.23 [-1.79 to -0.67] | < 0.001 * |
| Reliable Transport                         | 3.29 (1.01)                | 2.09 (1.26)       | -1.87 [-2.47 to -1.27] | < 0.001 * |
| High Quality Training                      | 3.95 (1.04)                | 3.24 (1.30)       | -1.00 [-1.56 to -0.45] | < 0.001 * |
| Program Flexibility                        | 4.53 (0.73)                | 3.72 (1.38)       | -1.22 [-1.82 to -0.63] | < 0.001 * |
| Range of Recruitment Strategies            | 4.19 (0.83)                | 2.68 (1.25)       | -2.56 [-3.23 to -1.89] | < 0.001 * |
| Volunteers Made to Feel Welcome            | 4.84 (0.55)                | 4.30 (1.20)       | -1.45 [-2.29 to -0.61] | < 0.001 * |
| Easy Environmental Access                  | 4.48 (0.87)                | 3.63 (1.44)       | -1.29 [-1.89 to -0.69] | < 0.001 * |
| Volunteer Role Recognition                 | 4.40 (0.80)                | 3.43 (1.45)       | -1.26 [-1.84 to -0.69] | < 0.001 * |
| Volunteers Felt Supported by Supervisors   | 4.67 (0.77)                | 4.12 (1.25)       | -1.17 [-1.85 to -0.49] | < 0.001 * |
| Assistance with Administration Tasks       | 4.37 (0.84)                | 3.43 (1.34)       | -1.48 [-2.07 to -0.88] | < 0.001 * |
| Online Volunteering                        | 2.81 (0.98)                | 3.03 (1.36)       | 0.43 [-0.11 to 0.97]   | 0.12      |
| * = p < 0.05                               |                            |                   |                        |           |

Table 7

**Representatives v Never Volunteers on items regarding volunteer commencement** (Negative scores indicate Never volunteers scored items as less important)

| Item                                       | Representatives, Mean (SD) | Never, Mean (SD) | Coef [95% CI]          | p value   |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Information Sessions – Benefits            | 3.95 (0.98)                | 3.16 (1.24)      | -1.33 [-2.09 to -0.57] | < 0.001 * |
| Information Sessions – Local Opportunities | 4.32 (0.93)                | 3.73 (1.35)      | -0.84 [-1.60 to -0.08] | 0.02 *    |
| 1:1 Assistance Finding a Program           | 4.0 (0.88)                 | 3.46 (1.39)      | -0.74 [-1.50 to 0.03]  | 0.06      |
| Reimbursement Vouchers                     | 3.52 (1.17)                | 2.32 (1.40)      | -1.65 [-2.43 to -0.88] | < 0.001 * |
| Information Technology Training            | 3.96 (1.09)                | 2.65 (1.65)      | -1.66 [-2.46 to -0.86] | < 0.001 * |
| Reliable Transport                         | 3.29 (1.01)                | 2.11 (1.41)      | -1.90 [-2.72 to -1.07] | < 0.001 * |
| High Quality Training                      | 3.95 (1.04)                | 3.41 (1.28)      | -0.79 [-1.52 to -0.06] | 0.03 *    |
| Program Flexibility                        | 4.53 (0.73)                | 4.27 (1.17)      | -0.29 [-1.09 to 0.51]  | 0.47      |
| Range of Recruitment Strategies            | 4.19 (0.83)                | 3.11 (1.13)      | -2.08 [-2.91 to -1.25] | < 0.001 * |
| Volunteers Made to Feel Welcome            | 4.84 (0.55)                | 4.62 (0.83)      | -0.99 [-2.04 to 0.05]  | 0.06      |
| Easy Environmental Access                  | 4.48 (0.87)                | 3.62 (1.40)      | -1.39 [-2.17 to -0.61] | < 0.001 * |
| Volunteer Role Recognition                 | 4.40 (0.80)                | 3.54 (1.24)      | -1.54 [-2.32 to -0.76] | < 0.001 * |
| Volunteers Felt Supported by Supervisors   | 4.67 (0.77)                | 4.11 (1.24)      | -1.27 [-2.10 to -0.43] | < 0.001 * |
| Assistance with Administration Tasks       | 4.37 (0.84)                | 3.32 (1.47)      | -1.56 [-2.34 to -0.77] | < 0.001 * |
| Online Volunteering                        | 2.81 (0.98)                | 3.0 (1.18)       | 0.47 [-0.28 to 1.21]   | 0.22      |
| * = p < 0.05                               |                            |                  |                        |           |

## Discussion

Potential and current older adult volunteers value programs and organisations with an inclusive culture and with supportive management as the most important factors in their decisions to commence and continue volunteering. Our research indicates that there are factors that volunteers find important that relate to how an

organisation interacts with them at an interpersonal level and may be a useful starting point for considering how to maximise participation. There is a need to investigate what volunteer organisations and programs can tangibly action to make their volunteers feel more welcome and supported.

Former volunteers valued four items higher than Current volunteers: reimbursement vouchers, reliable transport, information technology training and the opportunity to volunteer online. These differences may explain why some older adults continue volunteering and others cease. Volunteer organisations and governments may choose to explicitly address these items to encourage continued participation and when targeting recruitment towards the re-commencement of former volunteers. Online volunteering was rated more important by Former volunteers compared with Current volunteers. This may imply that online volunteering is more highly regarded by those who are not currently volunteering. There is a need to further investigate opportunities to volunteer online for those who are not currently volunteering via more traditional avenues. In addition, these differences suggest that it is inappropriate to only seek input from current volunteers about what is important to their continued participation, as their responses seemingly do not apply to all older adults.

Representatives significantly overestimated how highly Former and Never volunteers value almost all items. Current recruitment and retention strategies addressing these items may not be the best use of funding and resources, as they may not be considered important by potential volunteers. One group that attempts to recruit older adult volunteers provides online and in-person resources and an attempt to match potential older adult volunteers to a program of their interest, and targeted training (South East Volunteers, 2025b), yet the effectiveness of these programs has not been evaluated. These results suggest that the priorities of Never and Former volunteers may be misunderstood and there may be priorities that are currently being overrepresented and others that are being unaddressed.

Governments and volunteer organisations may be able to use the results of this research to inform their older adult volunteer recruitment and retention strategies. Policy-makers should consider these priority enabling factors when creating strategies to recruit volunteers and when allocating funds. For example, the UK Government provides a short list of volunteer opportunities (UK Government, 2025b), including the National Health Service website, which allows you to search for programs close to your address (UK Government, 2025a). However, this involves more active research to be undertaken by potential volunteers and does not address the more important factors identified in this paper. In Australia, Volunteering Australia (a charitable organisation) has introduced a mobile phone application that aims to match interested people with appropriate volunteer opportunities (Volunteering Australia, 2025). This research did not address the use of mobile phone applications; this may be an area for future research. Volunteering Victoria (2025) is another Australian organisation that has a website allowing potential volunteers to search for their local Volunteer Support Service Center. These centers provide in-person, online and telephone support and aim to address some of the enablers and barriers in this paper (South East Volunteers, 2025a). There is potential for these Service Centers to consider the importance of inclusive cultures, supervisor support and flexibility of volunteering programs and organisations. This research supports previous work investigating enablers and barriers to older adult volunteering. Multiple papers reported on the importance of volunteer organisations having an inclusive culture (Cheung et al., 2006; Mehta & Yunong, 2004); supportive supervisors (Kritz et al., 2021; Mehta & Yunong, 2004); and flexibility (McBride et al., 2012; Pardasani, 2018) as enabling factors to

increased and maintained volunteering participation. This paper further contributes to the literature by prioritising these previously identified modifiable enabling factors, which may inform government and volunteer organisation policy and practice.

This study has some limitations. The study was conducted in the Australian context, so survey results may only be applicable to older adults of a similar demographic and may not apply to different cultures or older adults with different socioeconomic backgrounds and health statuses. There was sampling bias, whereby only those willing to voluntarily complete the survey provided their opinions. In addition, people with no volunteering experience or interest may be less inclined to complete this survey and therefore their perspectives may be under-represented. Questions in this survey were hypothetical in nature, measuring the potential importance of each item. No true measure of actual behaviour change was measured. There was an increased risk of a Type I statistical error due to conducting multiple pairwise comparisons in the analysis. Participants were predominantly based in metropolitan areas and in Victoria, despite the online survey being available to all of Australia. There is a need for further research in rural areas and different socioeconomic and cultural community contexts.

Future research should investigate how volunteer organisations and other stakeholders can practically implement ways to make volunteers feel welcome and supported. Future research would likely assist in gaining various perspectives to potentially make these concepts more actionable. There is an opportunity to further investigate online volunteering and whether it would increase the participation of older adults who have formerly or never volunteered. It would be appropriate to conduct similar studies in different cultural contexts and in areas with known socioeconomic and health disparities. Further analysis of the reasoning behind the highest rated priorities is needed to inform interventions that may enhance participation. The impact of such interventions on actual older adult volunteer participation rates could then be investigated.

## Conclusion

Older adults reported that feeling welcomed and well supported by supervisors and management were the most important factors influencing their participation in volunteering. Different groups of older adults had different priorities, so increasing future engagement in volunteering requires targeted and bespoke strategies.

## Abbreviations

SD  
Standard deviation  
IQR  
Interquartile range  
UK  
United Kingdom.

## Declarations

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 47057) in accordance with the provisions of Australia's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2025 (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2025). Informed consent to participate was obtained from all individual participants. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed they could withdraw at any time.

### **Consent for publication**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants for the publication of this study and accompanying confidential data. The Explanatory Statement is available in Supplementary Materials.

### **Availability of data and materials**

The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available in Bridges at <https://doi.org/10.26180/32583231>.

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

### **Funding**

The authors declare that this research received no funding.

### **Authors' contributions**

All authors contributed to conception and methodology. N.W contributed to data curation, investigation, administration, resources, validation and visualisation. N.W and T.H contributed to analysis. D.P, M.M, D.M and T.H (lead) contributed to supervision. All authors contributed to writing original draft preparation, review and editing, led by N.W.

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# Table 2

Table 2 is available in the Supplementary Files section.

## Figures



Figure 1

Ranked priorities of each group for volunteering (re)commencement.

|                                                                                             | Representatives                      | Current                              | Former                               | Never                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <div> <div>↑</div> <div>MOST IMPORTANT</div> <div>↓</div> <div>LEAST IMPORTANT</div> </div> | Made to feel welcome                 | Made to feel welcome                 | Made to feel welcome                 | Made to feel welcome                 |
|                                                                                             | Felt supported by supervisors        | Felt supported by supervisors        | Felt supported by supervisors        | Felt supported by supervisors        |
|                                                                                             | Flexibility                          | Flexibility                          | Flexibility                          | Flexibility                          |
|                                                                                             | Role Recognition                     | Role Recognition                     | Role Recognition                     | High Quality Training                |
|                                                                                             | Easy Environmental Access            | Easy Environmental Access            | Easy Environmental Access            | Role Recognition                     |
|                                                                                             | Assistance with Administration Tasks | Assistance with Administration Tasks | Assistance with Administration Tasks | Assistance with Administration Tasks |
|                                                                                             | High Quality Training                | High Quality Training                | High Quality Training                | Easy Environmental Access            |
|                                                                                             | Information Technology Training      | Information Technology Training      | Information Technology Training      | Information Technology Training      |
|                                                                                             | Reimbursement Vouchers               | Online Volunteering                  | Online Volunteering                  | Online Volunteering                  |
|                                                                                             | Reliable Transport                   | Reimbursement Vouchers               | Reimbursement Vouchers               | Reimbursement Vouchers               |
|                                                                                             | Online Volunteering                  | Reliable Transport                   | Reliable Transport                   | Reliable Transport                   |

**Figure 2**

Ranked priorities of each group for volunteering continuation.

## Supplementary Files

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- [SupplementaryMaterials.docx](#)
- [Table2.docx](#)