

Evaluation of the NSW Volunteering Strategy 2012-13

Bathurst Grows Final Report

Prepared for:

NSW Office of Communities

Authors: Melanie Randle and Duncan Rintoul, University of Wollongong

9 December 2013

Table of contents

Executive summary	ii
1 Introduction and background.....	1
1.1 The overall evaluation project	1
1.2 Methodology and focus	1
2 Implementation, activity and outcomes	3
2.1 Overview	3
2.2 The original intentions of <i>Bathurst Grows</i>	5
2.3 Detailed description of program activity and outputs	6
2.4 Triggers, enablers and barriers for participation	8
2.5 Description of program outcomes	9
3 Discussion	12
3.1 The <i>Bathurst Grows</i> story at a glance	12
3.2 Key success factors.....	12
3.3 Challenges and limitations	15
3.4 Other lessons learned	17

Glossary

BCCC	Bathurst City Community Club
BINC	Bathurst Information and Neighbourhood Centre
OOC	NSW Office of Communities
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
JSA	Job Services Australia
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

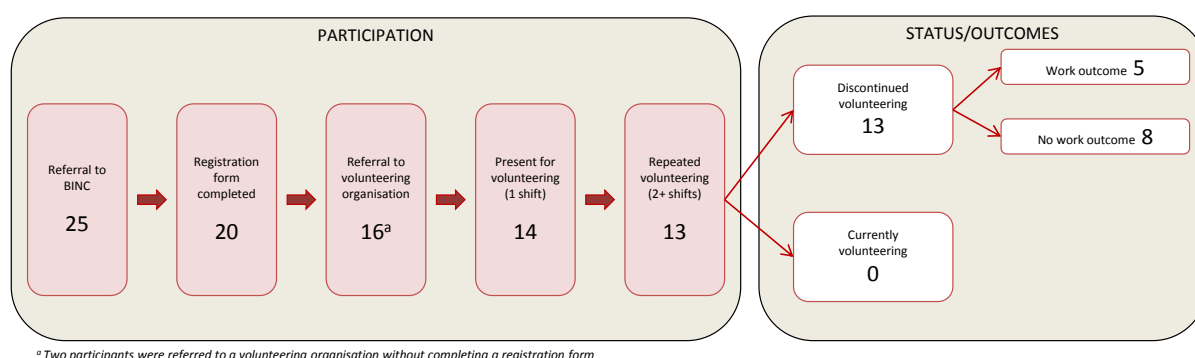
Bathurst Grows was one of the initiatives funded under the NSW Volunteering Strategy.

Auspiced by Bathurst Information and Neighbourhood Centre (BINC), the program targeted people experiencing disadvantage and sought to match them with community-based volunteering opportunities that would help them develop practical work skills that may lead to local paid employment.

A total of 25 participants were referred to *Bathurst Grows*, between October 2012 and April 2013. Two in three (16) were referred to a volunteering opportunity and just over half (13) presented for more than one volunteering shift (for the purposes of this report these individuals are referred to as the “active participants”).

All volunteering work under *Bathurst Grows* was performed with one partner organisation: the Bathurst City Community Club (BCCC). A total of 832 hours was volunteered, which is equivalent to over \$14,000 in wages had these hours been paid.

Volunteering activities under *Bathurst Grows* have now drawn to a close. Of the 13 active participants, five have since moved into paid employment, whilst eight remain unemployed.



By our best estimates, the five employment outcomes would have been equivalent to over \$50,000 in payments to a Job Services Australia (JSA) provider, had they been placed through that system.

Other direct outcomes reported by participants include strengthened motivation to find work, improved prospects and employability (both in terms of practical skills and their confidence to apply for roles), local references and contacts, and a range of other practical support for job-seeking activities. Participants also reported enjoying the challenge and social aspects of the volunteering, leading to demonstrated increases in community participation and engagement more generally.

Of course, not all participants received all of these benefits. Those who did all started with higher levels of internal motivation to find work and get the most out of their volunteering experience.

The evaluation also documents a number of valuable lessons, key success factors and challenges that can help inform successful development of similar programs elsewhere.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 THE OVERALL EVALUATION PROJECT

The Universities of Wollongong and Newcastle were jointly contracted in October 2012 by the NSW Office of Communities (OOC) to conduct a formative evaluation of the NSW Volunteering Strategy, with a particular focus on its two early flagship projects: *Bathurst Grows* and the *Timebanking* trial in the Hunter, Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Central Coast.

This evaluation work was designed for three primary audiences:

- a) The NSW Government has used the evaluation reporting to monitor and develop the Volunteering Strategy and its key components, with a view to deriving maximum return on investment.
- b) The partner organisations delivering the projects have used the evaluation to improve their planning and delivery. A central feature of the evaluation process was that it would be constructive and contribute to the ongoing learning process of all involved.
- c) The evaluation work has also begun to reach researchers and evaluators, to build the scholarly literature and improve the design and evaluation of future volunteering and related activities.

Bathurst Grows was designed to provide volunteering opportunities for people with backgrounds of disadvantage and who were looking to develop their skills and find paid work. The program sought to provide entry points for volunteers to participate in community activities that would develop and diversify their skill-base and provide on-the-job training that may lead to local employment.

The evaluation of *Bathurst Grows* was led by the University of Wollongong.

1.2 METHODOLOGY AND FOCUS

This final evaluation report for *Bathurst Grows* draws on a review of program documentation as well as in-depth interviews (a mix of phone, face-to-face and email) with:

- Four participants who volunteered in the *Bathurst Grows* program;¹
- The CEO, Programs Manager and *Bathurst Grows* Project Coordinator at Bathurst Information and Neighbourhood Centre (BINC);
- The Events Manager at the Bathurst City Community Club (BCCC) and the CEO of the Bathurst Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), two partner organisations in the project;
- A regular volunteer who was involved in facilitating the gardening opportunities on Bathurst LALC land; and

¹ The Events Manager at BCCC attempted to contact all fourteen participants who presented for at least one volunteering shift to request their participation in an interview. Of these, seven could not be contacted because their phones had been disconnected (4), the BCCC did not have their contact details (2), or they had moved interstate and could not be contacted (1). Of the seven who were contacted, four agreed and three declined to be interviewed. Of the four interviewees, three had since gained paid employment, one had not. Interviewees were given a \$50 gift voucher in appreciation of their time.

- A local representative of the then Australian Government Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR; now the Department of Employment).

The interviews sought to capture a balanced perspective on:

- The activity that took place within the project;
- The decisions that were made along the way about how to focus the program;
- The main outcomes from the program, including successes and challenges; and
- The main enabling and limiting factors that shaped the program and its outcomes.

Interviews were also sought with some of the other organisations that were part of the early discussions around the program (the Flannery Centre, TAFE NSW and Rahamim). These interviews were not able to be arranged within the initial fieldwork period, and were not subsequently pursued.

Ethics approval was gained for this project in two stages: first from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee in relation to governance (interviews with program staff and partner organisations and reviews of program documentation); then later from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee in relation to the participant interviews.

A progress report was submitted to the OOC in July 2013 and subsequently presented to BINC for comment. The main difference between the earlier report and this final report is the addition of findings from the participant interviews.

2 IMPLEMENTATION, ACTIVITY AND OUTCOMES

2.1 OVERVIEW

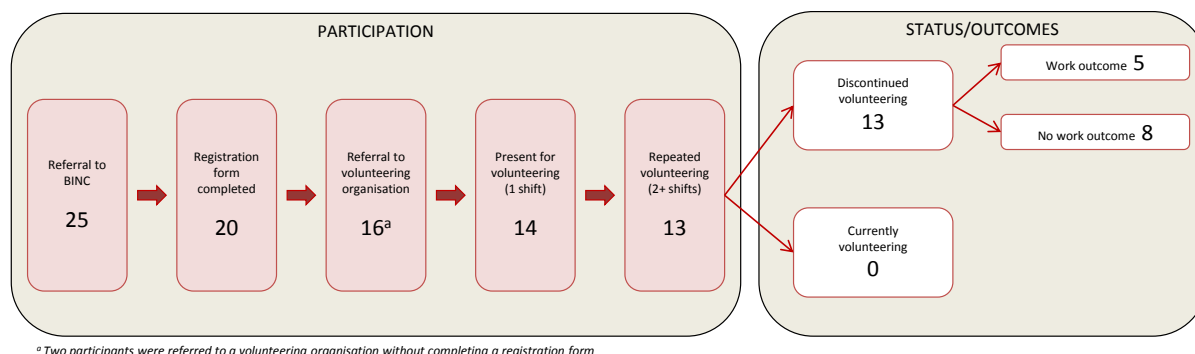
Bathurst Grows commenced according to schedule, and was implemented in four stages:

- Stage 1: Design and planning (July-September 2012):** The establishment and design phase focused on developing relationships with key stakeholders, articulating the structure and policies of the program, and developing a project plan and timeline for implementation. BINC was identified as the preferred auspicing body during this period and received \$20,000 seed-funding from OOC under the NSW Volunteering Strategy.
- Stage 2: Launch (October-December 2012):** 20 potential participants were referred to the *Bathurst Grows* program team at BINC in its first three months. Those who showed interest were then referred on to volunteering opportunities, and most commenced in their roles. The Bathurst City Community Club (BCCC) was in a position to accommodate volunteer participants immediately as it already had an established volunteer program operating.
- Stage 3: Development and expansion (January-April 2013):** A second allocation of \$20,000 was provided by OOC, to contribute to the ongoing operational and staffing expenses associated with the project. Five new referrals to the program were made during this period.
- Stage 4: Maintenance and close (April-November 2013):** No new volunteer registrations were received after April 2013, and the final volunteering shifts associated with the program took place in September.

Figure 1 summarises overall volunteer activity for all participants in *Bathurst Grows*, including work outcomes (numerals indicate the number of individuals at each stage). In summary:

- Two in three (16 of 25) of the initial referrals for *Bathurst Grows* were matched with a volunteering opportunity, and just over half (13) presented for more than one shift.
- Of the 13 active participants, five have moved into paid employment.

Figure 1: Volunteer participation and work outcomes



All volunteering work under *Bathurst Grows* was performed with one partner organisation: the BCCC. A total of 832 hours was volunteered – equivalent to over \$14,000 in wages had these hours been paid.

Table 1 shows a summary of volunteer and paid work hours for the 14 volunteers who presented for at least one volunteering shift at BCCC. These data show:

- The long-term volunteering relationship that was developed with a small number of volunteers (for example Person 3, Person 6 and Person 14);
- That half of the volunteers also gained at least some paid work at BCCC; and
- The cessation of new commencements after Stage 3.

Table 1: Volunteer and paid hours at the BCCC, October 2012 to October 2013

		Stage 2			Stage 3				Stage 4						Total
		Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Total
Volunteer hours	Person 1 ^b	21	36	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	57
	Person 2 ^a	9	49	48	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	106
	Person 3 ^{ab}	–	8	12	–	–	47	28	27	38	12	–	–	–	171
	Person 4 ^b	–	41	47	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	87
	Person 5	–	15	15	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	30
	Person 6 ^b	–	–	7	18	35	38	34	6	–	–	–	–	–	138
	Person 7 ^a	–	–	15	7	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	22
	Person 8 ^a	–	–	9	6	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	15
	Person 9	–	–	14	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	14
	Person 10 ^a	–	–	9	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	9
	Person 11	–	–	–	16	12	10	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	38
	Person 12 ^a	–	–	–	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	4
	Person 13	–	–	–	–	–	12	16	16	–	–	–	–	–	44
	Person 14 ^b	–	–	–	–	–	15	–	25	9	19	23	10	–	99
	TOTAL		30	148	174	51	47	121	78	73	47	30	23	10	0
Paid hours	Person 1 ^b	–	8	42	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	49
	Person 2 ^a	–	33	83	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	120
	Person 3 ^{ab}	–	–	29	4	11	–	15	12	–	35	82	99	113	400
	Person 4 ^b	–	–	72	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	72
	Person 5	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Person 6 ^b	–	–	–	–	18	–	14	–	–	–	–	–	–	32
	Person 7 ^a	–	–	4	5	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	9
	Person 8 ^a	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Person 9	–	–	5	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	5
	Person 10 ^a	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Person 11	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Person 12 ^a	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Person 13	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Person 14 ^b	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	6	6	5	16
	TOTAL		–	41	234	13	29	–	29	12	–	35	88	105	118

Note: numbers have been rounded to nearest whole number.

^a Participant of Aboriginal background.

^b Participant gained paid employment.

2.2 THE ORIGINAL INTENTIONS OF *BATHURST GROWS*

The original design of *Bathurst Grows* focused on enabling volunteers to develop practical work skills, including skills which could be credited towards formal qualifications and recognised by TAFE. The model also relied on local networks to actively identify potential partner organisations and facilitate pathways towards paid employment.

Initially, it was thought that the range of possible volunteering opportunities available to participants might include food production, bush regeneration, cultural tourism, bar work, food handling, event coordination and general grounds and building maintenance. The program was designed to be flexible and tailored to each person's interests and abilities.

An indicative list of the original potential key stakeholders in *Bathurst Grows* is provided in Table 2. Note that some of these organisations did not remain involved in *Bathurst Grows* beyond initial meetings in (see Section 2.3).

Table 2: Original potential stakeholder network (indicative)

Role	Organisation	Responsibilities
Funding	NSW Office of Communities	– Provide funding for pilot project
Program coordination	Bathurst Information and Neighbourhood Centre (BINC)	– Drive project and manage budget – Build/manage relationships between stakeholders – Identify, assess and refer suitable volunteers – Identify opportunities for paid employment
Potential partner organisations	Bathurst Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), Bathurst City Community Club (BCCC), VERTO, Rahamim, Skillset and the Flannery Centre, AgriFood Skills Australia, TAFE Western NSW Institute	– Place and manage referred volunteers in appropriate roles – Provide ongoing support and supervision for volunteers – Identify opportunities for paid employment – Contribute resources to support the program – Develop and facilitate courses and provide training

As originally conceived, the program was intended to offer participants a suite of benefits and opportunities, including:

- Gaining practical work experience to assist in securing paid employment;
- Gaining a formal qualification to assist in securing paid employment;
- Accessing support from coordinators to assist with the significant life change associated with moving from unemployment to employment;
- Choosing from a range of different work roles rather than the same activity repeatedly; and
- Meeting volunteering obligations that may be needed to access government assistance and/or as a requirement of a Work and Development Order (for those with outstanding fines).

Bathurst Grows was scheduled to launch in late 2012 with approximately 10 volunteers, with a view to expanding this number to a total of 50 volunteers in 2013. (This did not prove to be possible because additional funding was not available.)

2.3 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM ACTIVITY AND OUTPUTS

ACTIVITY AND OUTPUTS DURING STAGE 1 (JULY-SEPTEMBER 2012)

Project governance

- A number of key stakeholders were identified during this period, and regular meetings were held to agree plans and gain verbal commitment from key partners.
- Agriculture sites were identified and preliminary development commenced (e.g. installing irrigation, ploughing).
- Initial discussions were held regarding the possibility of including Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as an option for *Bathurst Grows* participants. (This did not eventuate – see discussion at Section 3.3).
- Governance documentation was produced, including a project plan and draft Memorandum of Understanding between BINC and the *Bathurst Grows* Project Group (which included AgriFood Skills Australia, Bathurst LALC, Rahamim, Skillset and the Flannery Centre, TAFE NSW Western Institute Bathurst and VERTO).
- BINC has advised that the funds provided by OOC were directed towards staff time to resource the planning work, with the exception of 5%-10% allocated to establishment of the agriculture sites (equipment, pipes, fittings etc.).

ACTIVITY AND OUTPUTS DURING STAGE 2 (OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2012)

Referrals and registrations

Prior to the Christmas break in 2012, 20 individuals were referred to the *Bathurst Grows* program:

- Eleven were walk-in clients of BINC;
- Five were referred by the Bathurst LALC;
- Three were walk-in applicants for volunteering at BCCC – the club advised them to first contact BINC in order to access other benefits of the *Bathurst Grows* program; and
- One was referred by VERTO, a Registered Training Organisation.

Fifteen of these 20 individuals presented at BINC to complete registration forms, and 11 were then referred to volunteering organisations/sites. The other four had no further contact with BINC after completing the registration form, and were not referred on to any volunteering opportunities.

Another two people were referred to *Bathurst Grows* sites but did not register with BINC as part of the program. This takes the total number of referrals during this period to 13.

Activity and outputs at the Bathurst City Community Club (BCCC)

- Eleven participants were referred to BCCC to undertake volunteer work.
- All 11 presented at the agreed time for their first shift, variously commencing volunteer roles in hospitality, office administration and gardening.

Activity and outputs at Wahlu (Mt Panorama nature reserve)

- Two participants were referred to this site, however neither presented for their first shift.
- An agriculture site was established, including irrigation. However, no soil was turned because appropriate equipment would have needed to be hired and there was no volunteer workforce in place.

Activity and outputs at the Skillset and the Flannery Centre

- Development of this site as a volunteering opportunity did not progress beyond initial ploughing of the agricultural site.
- No volunteers were referred to the Flannery Centre by BINC during this period.

ACTIVITY AND OUTPUTS DURING STAGE 3 (JANUARY – APRIL 2013)

Progress across the program slowed significantly during the December 2012 – January 2013 period. Staff and stakeholders attribute this to:

- The weather being too hot for planting at the agriculture sites;
- Infrequency of events and bar work for hospitality roles during the post-Christmas period;
- Leave taken by staff associated with the project; and
- Volunteers having limited availability during the holiday period.

The project coordinator who established *Bathurst Grows* in 2012 also ceased work on project during this stage. *Bathurst Grows* partner organisations that had been actively involved in 2012 reported receiving little or no communications from BINC regarding the program in 2013.

The final five registrations for *Bathurst Grows* came sporadically between January and April 2013 (taking the total number of registrations to 25). All five were walk-in clients of BINC. Following registration, three of the five were referred to BCCC; the remaining two did not make further contact with BINC and were not referred to any volunteering opportunities. All three referrals to BCCC presented to volunteer at the agreed time, commencing roles in hospitality and gardening.

ACTIVITY AND OUTPUTS DURING STAGE 4 (MAY – NOVEMBER 2013)

Program activity at BINC ceased due to a lack of new referrals. However, a small number of *Bathurst Grows* participants continued to volunteer in roles established through the program, up to September 2013 (see Table 1, p4).

2.4 TRIGGERS, ENABLERS AND BARRIERS FOR PARTICIPATION

TRIGGERS AND SUPPORTS FOR INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

All four of the interviewed participants reported volunteering at BCCC because they believed it would ultimately lead to paid employment. Specifically in relation to finding work, volunteers were hoping to obtain:

- On-the-job experience in particular roles such as bar work, after applying for local jobs but being told they would not be considered without training and experience; and
- Local and/or recent references which were lacking from their *résumé* and preventing employers from seriously considering their job applications (e.g. because they had just moved to the area or had been out of the workforce for an extended period due to child caring responsibilities).

In addition to paid employment, volunteering was a way for some participants to meet people and form social networks as they were relatively new to the local area.

Participants came to volunteer at BCCC as part of the *Bathurst Grows* program in a number of ways including:

- Being referred to BINC by a Job Services Australia (JSA) provider to gain volunteer work experience and improve their employability;
- Being directly referred to BCCC by local businesses as an avenue for gaining work experience before they would be considered for employment; and
- Searching the internet to find volunteering opportunities in Bathurst and contacting BINC as a result.

SUPPORTING FACTORS FOR SUSTAINED PARTICIPATION

Once they had started volunteering, the main reasons for continuing with more shifts were:

- Finding the work was to be enjoyable and social;
- Finding the staff (particularly the Events Manager at BCCC) to be pleasant and nice to work with;
- The flexibility of the BCCC in catering for their personal circumstances (e.g. family situation involving young children).

BARRIERS TO ONGOING PARTICIPATION

Three of the four participants interviewed had volunteered for 5-6 months until they gained paid employment, and reported few barriers to participation. The other interviewee had volunteered for three months but stopped because of family circumstances which made it difficult for her to balance volunteering shifts with family commitments.

The other participants who only volunteered for one shift, or performed a small number of volunteer shifts but then discontinued, were either not willing to be interviewed for the evaluation or could not be contacted.

Instead, BCCC management were asked to offer any insights they might have into the circumstances which led to the departure of each volunteer, and any patterns they had observed. Factors they identified included:

- Changes in personal circumstances (e.g. gaining custody of children, being in serious accidents, moving away from Bathurst);
- Participants not seeing value of volunteering, including not seeing a potential pathway between volunteering and paid work;
- The requirement to present for set shifts being too much of a commitment and requiring 'too much effort';
- Being 'too selective' about the tasks and types of work they were willing to perform;
- Not 'fitting in' with the organisational culture of the club and causing disruption with other staff;
- A perception among some participants that there were other, easier, ways of meeting the requirements to receive Centrelink benefits; and
- Having difficulty accepting direction from the (female) Events Manager.

The impact of paid shifts on willingness to volunteer is another interesting story here. As set out in Table 1 (p4), several of the early participants who had been volunteering behind the bar (and in related roles) in late 2012 were offered some additional paid shifts during the busy pre-Christmas events period. When the paid work dried up in the quieter January-February period but the volunteer roles were still available, most of these people said they were no longer prepared to 'work for free' and ceased their volunteering with BCCC altogether.

2.5 DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM OUTCOMES

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

Of the 13 volunteers who participated actively at the Bathurst City Community Club (BCCC), all have now discontinued volunteering in the program. Five have since found paid employment, while (to the best knowledge of BINC and BCCC staff) eight have remained unemployed.

Of the five participants who found paid employment:

- Two obtained work largely through their own means (external to BCCC); and
- Three obtained work directly as a result of the enabling relationship established with their supervisor at BCCC (e.g. help with *résumé* writing and application paperwork, as well as providing a reference) or because of employment opportunities arranged by BCCC staff.²

² The three paid jobs arranged by BCCC are in a range of fields including retail, waitressing/bar work, and event management.

Eight of the volunteers were also engaged as casual staff members on paid shifts during the life of the program. These shifts were mostly, but not entirely, during the busy end of year and Christmas period (Table 1, p4). The drop in paid and hours between December and January illustrates the seasonal nature of the hospitality industry for both volunteering and paid work, and demonstrates the challenges associated with sustaining consistent volunteering programs through the natural fluctuations associated with different industries. The increase in paid hours later in 2013 is due to one *Bathurst Grows* volunteer (Person 3) being employed part-time as an assistant to the Events Manager at the BCCC (see below for more details).

OTHER OUTCOMES

All four of the participants interviewed as part of this evaluation had a history of job seeking and commenced volunteering with the motivation to find paid work. Their volunteering experience served to reinforce or 'fan the flames' of this motivation.

The three who were interested in hospitality had already completed their Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) qualification prior to volunteering at BCCC. Although they did not gain further formal qualifications during their time volunteering, they did obtain the on-the job training, practical skills and experience and references required to obtain paid employment.

Crucially, BCCC's approach to managing these volunteers provided them with enabling relationships that gave them access to support such as professional advice, driving volunteers to pick up job application forms, and arranging job interviews through personal contacts at local businesses.

None of the interviewees had any fines to pay off, so outcomes regarding Work and Development Orders are not identifiable in these instances.

Participants reported increased confidence in their practical and social skills as a result of volunteering at BCCC. They also reported building friendships with staff and customers of the club, and that this positive social interaction was one of the most enjoyable aspects of volunteering. Participants who became involved to meet new people also reported feeling more a part of the Bathurst community now that they had more friends and knew more people than previously. The experience also opened up new opportunities for volunteering which has further expanded their network of local contacts and friends.

Since volunteering through *Bathurst Grows*, one participant has obtained her first stable job, as an assistant to the Events Manager at BCCC. She is also about to commence an apprenticeship through her JSA provider which involves an online study component and at least 21 hours per week work at BCCC, and which will lead to a Certificate IV in events and customer service. She has also recently obtained her driver's license for the first time. She describes these achievements (which include earning double what she used to receive from Centrelink) with pride and the Events Manager describes her progress in very positive terms, with regard to her skills development, increased confidence and increased willingness to take on responsibility.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Two partial measures that are helpful for interpreting the value of the program in financial terms are:

- **Employment placement costs:** If the five participants who are now working had been placed by a JSA provider, the payment from the Australian Government (to the JSA provider/s) would most likely have been up to \$10,000-12,000 per person.³
- **Estimated value of the volunteered hours:** If the 832 volunteering hours at BCCC had been paid at the minimum rate of \$16.85 per hour, this would have cost the Club \$14,019 in wages alone.⁴

Interpretation of these figures needs to be approached with caution, as there are a number of important assumptions. The reader should also note that each measure relates only to one narrow aspect of the outcomes from volunteering, leaving other outcomes to one side.

Nonetheless, these two measures alone put *Bathurst Grows* on the positive side of the ledger, comfortably exceeding full the \$40,000 initial investment made by OOC.

³ The amount payable to a JSA is different for each job seeker, based on their individual circumstances, length of time unemployed, length of time required to find employment and the nature of the paid position obtained. Consultation with representatives from the local Department of Employment office and BINC indicates that all bar two of the participants in *Bathurst Grows* would most likely have been classified as 'Stream 4' job seekers, due to their backgrounds of disadvantage and the significant time they had been out of paid work.

⁴ Hourly rate taken from the Registered and Licensed Clubs Award 2010 (NSW), Food and Beverage Attendant Grade 1 (of 5). Estimate includes wages only; other costs (e.g. payroll tax) would be in addition.

3 DISCUSSION

3.1 THE *BATHURST GROWS* STORY AT A GLANCE

The findings presented in Section 2 show that *Bathurst Grows* was successful in generating valuable work experience and paid work opportunities for over a dozen volunteers who were not working or developing their skills at the time and who may not have sought or had opportunities to do so otherwise. Their ongoing participation was well supported by the host organisation (BCCC), and concrete employment outcomes have been observed for over one third of participants.

The challenges of arranging and sustaining successful volunteering experiences such as these have been significant. It is very promising to see the kind of outcomes that can be produced at minimal cost when committed stakeholders assemble around the shared vision of volunteering as skills development for community members who have a background of disadvantage.

Importantly, therefore, *Bathurst Grows* represents a ‘**proof of concept**’ for the notion of developing volunteering programs that seek to harness community spirit and social capital to improve the employment prospects of people with backgrounds of disadvantage.

However, the program has not developed to the scale that was originally anticipated. Almost half of the community members identified as good candidates for *Bathurst Grows* opted out early on, either (i) not registering for Bathurst Grows with BINC, (ii) not following through on obtaining a referral to a volunteering opportunity, or (iii) not presenting for their first volunteering shift. In addition, a number of the potential organisational partnerships have not been as fruitful as initially hoped, while others have lapsed.

The evidence available to this evaluation indicates that programs like *Bathurst Grows* require ongoing promotion, attention and development if they are to build on their initial successes to further develop potential partnerships and participant outcomes in new directions.

The remainder of this progress report discusses:

- Key success factors for *Bathurst Grows*;
- Challenges and limitations faced in the implementation of the program; and
- Other lessons learned for other similar projects in the future.

3.2 KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Programs like *Bathurst Grows* can only succeed when the conditions are right for development of volunteering opportunities that align well with the participants’ interests and support needs.

At a high level, the two main enabling factors of *Bathurst Grows* were the range of attractive volunteer roles available at BCCC and the approach to volunteer management taken by BINC’s Project Coordinator and BCCC’s Events Manager. Many programs manage unpaid volunteers

according to employee management principles, effectively treating them similarly to paid staff. However, the *Bathurst Grows* approach to volunteers was more consistent with the principles of case management often found in the social services arena, which takes a more holistic view of individuals and their circumstances. This typically includes, for example:

- Identifying individual strengths;
- Promoting client-centered practice;
- Supporting active participation of clients in planning processes and goal setting; and
- Being responsive to individual cultural beliefs and needs, including supporting self-determination for Aboriginal people.

Through these practices, enabling relationships in *Bathurst Grows* were created and the initial motivation of volunteers to find paid work was both nurtured. Notably, the background, experiences and barriers for the five individuals who gained employment were diverse. However, this holistic, person-centred approach to volunteer management enabled each of these five participants to overcome their individual barriers and successfully achieve their goal of paid employment.

More specific enablers of the *Bathurst Grows* program included the following.

- **Innovative and creative approach to volunteering:** The successes of *Bathurst Grows* were a product of a flexible and innovative attitude towards potential volunteering activities that match the individual needs and interests of participants. Given the backgrounds of disadvantage which characterised participants, volunteering plans needed to be personally interesting and appropriately challenging in order to maintain participant motivation.
- **Suitable central project coordination:** The central project coordination role was crucial to the success of *Bathurst Grows* and required a high level of interpersonal and communications skills. This role was critical in delivering a number of key functions, including:
 - Actively driving the program;
 - Developing relationships with partner organisations, developing them from ‘in principle supporters’ into active partners, and maintaining ongoing communication with them;
 - Dealing with a broad range of stakeholders, including Aboriginal groups, people with English as a second language, people with backgrounds of disadvantage and non-participating younger people;
 - Seeking out participants who were suitable for the program, while maintaining a flexible approach to tailoring the program to cater for a range of individuals with different backgrounds and characteristics;
 - Referring participants to appropriate partner organisations (if the central project coordinator does not see value in the program they may gravitate back to referring potential participants to more traditional volunteering opportunities); and
 - Providing ongoing support to participants throughout the program.

It should be noted that some of the most productive relationships between the central project coordinator of *Bathurst Grows* and key stakeholders did not exist prior to the program being developed. Indeed, the establishment and development of these relationships was one of the

main achievements from Stages 1 and 2 of this project. This reinforces the need for an individual with high level interpersonal and relationship building skills in the central project coordination role.

- **Effective onsite supervision:** Also crucial to the success of the program was the attitude and interpersonal skills of the on-site supervisor. Volunteers reported how welcoming, sincere and pleasant the Events Manager was at BCCC and that she was a key reason for them returning again and again to volunteer. Scenarios in which volunteers have successfully obtained paid employment involved the on-site manager:
 - Being willing to customise the volunteering experience for each individual;
 - Providing not only professional but also emotional support for volunteers;
 - Showing a genuine interest in developing their skills and finding them employment; and
 - Being willing to use her personal network of contacts to identify job opportunities.
- **Customisation of the volunteering experience:** Each volunteer brings a different set of background circumstances, and it is important that the volunteering experience takes this into account. For example, it might be important to not give a volunteer too many shifts if they need time to look for work and are already navigating family commitments including caring for young children. In addition, a key to sustained volunteering is enabling individuals to perform the type of work they enjoy, or a range of different experiences if that is what they desire. *Bathurst Grows'* success stories are those where a good match was found between the type of work/experience sought by the participant and the volunteer work arranged by the on-site manager. BCCC was a particularly effective site in this respect because it could offer a range of opportunities including gardening, bar work, office administration, waitressing and events.
- **Sufficient and appropriate participant supervision and support:** *Bathurst Grows* required levels of support and supervision beyond those usually needed by most volunteers in their roles. This was essential for assisting individuals to make the significant and challenging transition from a life of unemployment and government benefits to one of paid employment. Examples include mentoring in appropriate work behaviours, assistance getting to and from work and support regarding personal issues that are impacting their work.
- **Volunteering being an enjoyable experience:** Participants who volunteered for three months or more reported wanting to come back, feeling as though they were amongst friends and that they were valued member of the team.
- **Referral pathways:** The referral process from JSA providers to BINC and then from BINC to the *Bathurst Grows* program and BCCC was critical to the success of the program. Similar programs should think carefully about potential referral pathways, and build relationships with partner organisations to support effective flow.

The evaluation has also identified a number of other key enabling factors for programs like *Bathurst Grows* that should be considered in future programs.

- **Effective communication with partners:** In the early stages, project partners reported effective communication between themselves and a range of key stakeholders associated with *Bathurst Grows*. Partner organisations suggest that regular meetings or other communications are

important for retaining momentum and enthusiasm for programs such as *Bathurst Grows*, and enabling information sharing and learning between organisations.

- **Team-based relationship brokerage:** The central project coordination role for *Bathurst Grows* was performed almost entirely by one person. The vacation of this role requires a full handover to a suitable replacement in order to avoid detriment to the program. It is recommended that the relationship brokerage for programs such as *Bathurst Grows* involve more than one person at key meetings, to avoid potential handover problems that may be experienced in the case of staff turnover.
- **Effective participant assessment:** Identifying appropriate candidates for the program *before* referring them to volunteering opportunities with partner organisations is essential. This needs to include a process for checking that the candidate has enough genuine interest in gaining paid employment to make the commitment that would be asked of them in a volunteering role. In addition, relevant information from the screening process (which would include goals, past work experience, work interests etc.) should be passed on to partner organisations so they are able to (i) make arrangements for them to commence volunteering as soon as possible and (ii) plan for matching volunteer work to their particular needs and interests.

3.3 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

A combination of factors worked together to prevent the program from progressing as initially planned, and achieving the potential scale and range of outcomes originally anticipated.

INHERENT CHALLENGES THAT MADE THIS A COMPLEX AND RESOURCE-INTENSIVE PROGRAM TO IMPLEMENT

Bathurst Grows differed from other volunteering programs in that it deliberately recruited participants who were yet to overcome some significant barriers to employment and social engagement, and aimed to support them through a transformation to employment and engagement.

This represented a major life change for participants and required a commitment from individuals who were genuinely interested in making such a change. It also made the program inherently resource-intensive, placing natural constraints on the scale that could be expected.

Two specific examples already mentioned above relate to pre-placement assessment and placement support. The experience of *Bathurst Grows* highlights the importance of the both of these functions in safe and efficient management of the program.

FACTORS LEADING TO VARIATION FROM THE ORIGINAL PLAN

- **Stakeholder willingness to participate:** For some of the potential partner organisations, their initial verbal support did not develop into practical commitment of resources and genuine

partnership on the project. Naturally, this required the project team to adjust its focus areas onto the opportunities that remained active.

- **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL):** It was originally envisaged that *Bathurst Grows* participants would have the option of having their skills formally recognised by TAFE and receiving a qualification or part-qualification. This aspect of the project was not pursued, primarily because most individuals in the program were long-term unemployed with a background of disadvantage and therefore typically did not have kind of skills that would be suitable for RPL. Instead, direct training was deemed more appropriate for developing the skills of *Bathurst Grows* participants. Further resources were not available to sustain the project to this point.
- **Community appeal of different volunteering opportunities:** Originally it was assumed that members of the Aboriginal community would have more interest and ownership in the agricultural work associated with community-owned sites such as that at Wahlu, the agricultural site on Mt Panorama. As it happened, there was greater interest from participants in hospitality roles than the agricultural alternatives. This was due to participants more strongly associating hospitality roles with paid employment opportunities, and preferring indoor work that was located in the city centre. The volunteer coordinator at Wahlu reports that no-one presented to volunteer at the site through the *Bathurst Grows* program, despite the fact that the site was irrigated and ready to be ploughed.

ADDITIONAL FACTORS THAT ADDED TO THE CHALLENGE OF THIS PROGRAM

- **Timing:** Launching the program in late Spring and early summer 2012 led to some inevitable clashes over the Christmas/New Year break in terms of staff availability, volunteer availability and capacity of the main partners to accommodate volunteers.
- **Continuity following staffing changes:** After the original central project coordinator from BINC ceased work on the project in January 2013, stakeholders reported a marked drop in communication about *Bathurst Grows*. This led to a waning of some partners' enthusiasm for the program.
- **Future funding uncertainty:** One of the key enablers for *Bathurst Grows* was the seed funding provided by OOC, which was used to facilitate the program design and initial launch. Although OOC had originally intended to continue funding the program further into the future, follow up funding was not available to facilitate this and no other external funding sources for *Bathurst Grows* were identified during the pilot period.
- **Factors beyond the control of program managers:** Despite the background preparation and support provided to volunteers (e.g. preparing *résumés*, providing references and arranging interviews) the ultimate responsibility for obtaining work rests with the volunteer themselves. For example, multiple interviews were organised for one participant, but in each instance they failed to progress past the interview stage for reasons that were never disclosed to the program managers. The personal presentation and impressions given by individuals to potential employers can be a barrier to individuals obtaining paid employment. Beyond advice and encouragement, there is little program managers can do about this obstacle to employment if the participant does not elect to take matters into their own hands and make changes.

3.4 OTHER LESSONS LEARNED

Other factors that require consideration if similar programs are to be rolled out to other locations include the following:

- The program needs to be conceptualised in two parts: (i) opportunities to gain practical experience and skills through volunteering; and (ii) mapping these to potential sources of paid employment in the local economy. This requires a good understanding not just of volunteering opportunities, but also of local industries, labour supply dynamics and skills shortages.
- Ideally, for similar future programs, funding needs to be allocated not only to central project coordination but also to partner organisations for facilitating provision of on-site activities and supervision which suitably accommodates the volunteer workers on-site.
- Stories of success from the first batch of participants should be captured and (with consent, of course) used to inspire new entrants and reduce no-shows and drop-outs among volunteers who may otherwise find it difficult to see the pathway from volunteering to paid work.

In monitoring programs such as *Bathurst Grows* in future, the following output metrics are recommended:

- Number and origin of participants registered in the program.
- Number of referrals by the coordinating organisation to partner organisations.
- Number of referred volunteers who (i) started their first shift, (ii) came back for a second shift, and (iii) were still volunteering 6 weeks later.
- Number of participating volunteers who:
 - Achieve formal qualifications or certifications that open up employment opportunities (e.g. Responsible Service of Alcohol certification or a Workplace Health and Safety ‘White Card’);
 - Pay off or reduce fines debt via a Work and Development Order (including, if possible, the amount by which that debt has been reduced); and
 - Gain casual/permanent paid employment.
- Total and average number and dollar value of volunteer hours contributed.

APPENDIX A:

Discussion guide for interviews with *Bathurst Grows* participants.

Background to involvement in *Bathurst Grows*

- Firstly, could you tell me how you came to be involved in the program?
How they found out about it, any prompting/recommendation from others
- What was involved for you?
No. volunteer hours/shifts, when the volunteering took place, what type of work
- Had you done any other volunteering in the past?

Enablers for participation	Barriers for participation
• What did you hope to get out of the program? <i>Probe for employment outcomes cf others, e.g. meeting Centrelink / WDO requirements</i> • What is it about the <i>Bathurst Grows</i> program that encouraged you to keep coming back to volunteer?	• Can you tell me why you decide to stop volunteering with the program? • Is there anything that would have helped you continue to volunteer?
• Is there anything else that you particularly liked/disliked about your experience with <i>Bathurst Grows</i>?	

Outcomes

UNPROMPTED:

- Has anything changed for you since you started volunteering with *Bathurst Grows*?
Is there anything that you're doing now that they were not doing before?
How much of that change stems from your volunteering through Bathurst Grows?

PROMPTED:

- Can you think of any positive outcomes from your involvement
Probe r.e. tangible benefits e.g. work, fines paid, qualification, skills, work reference etc.
- Do you think you have changed personally at all since you became involved in the program?
Probe r.e. intangible benefits e.g. confidence, friendships/relationships, physical/mental health, mindset/attitude, self-esteem, connectedness, sense of ownership/belonging, pride in achievements etc.
- Do you feel there have been any downsides or negative outcomes from volunteering through *Bathurst Grows*?

Overall

- Would you recommend *Bathurst Grows* to others? Why/why not?
- How do you think the program could be improved?