

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond temporary migration: Exploring the work values of ex-Indonesian workers through the work and holiday visa program



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ABSTRACT

The Work and Holiday Visa (WHV) program offers young people an opportunity not only to travel but also to engage in temporary overseas employment amid increasing youth mobility in Indonesia. As well as a bilateral agreement between the governments of Indonesia and Australia, the WHV program aims to promote cultural exchange at both national and individual levels. However, participation in the program is far from straightforward. Applicants are required to meet strict eligibility criteria and demonstrate financial readiness to sustain themselves while seeking employment in Australia. These challenges make the WHV experience a significant context for the development and transformation of work values among participants. This study aims to explore the work values of former Indonesian Work and Holiday Makers during their stay in Australia and to understand the values they gained after completing the program and returning to Indonesia. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research seeks to capture the lived experiences and the essence of work values shaped through temporary labor migration. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with four former Indonesian WHV participants who had completed the program and returned to their home country. The findings reveal two overarching themes of work values: (1) values that enhance personal growth, including resilience and self-efficacy, and (2) values related to the pursuit of financial independence. These values contributed to participants' perceived quality of work life as temporary migrant workers, highlighting the transformative potential of the WHV program beyond economic outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The Work and Holiday Visa (WHV) program is a bilateral mobility initiative that allows young Indonesians to reside in Australia for a defined period, combining travel opportunities with paid employment. While initially conceptualized as a vehicle for cultural exchange and experiential learning, participation in the WHV program has increasingly assumed characteristics of temporary

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labor migration, in which participants navigate the demands of work alongside aspirations for cultural immersion and personal development (Reilly, 2015; Dewi & Setiawati, 2020).

Within the broader landscape of international labor mobility, temporary migration schemes, including working holiday visas, seasonal work permits, and other short-term employment channels, have experienced substantial growth in recent decades. Data from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations indicate that temporary labor migrants, such as working holiday makers, constitute a significant segment of the host-country workforce. While they contribute meaningfully to employment sectors, they also frequently encounter distinct precarity and variability in their working conditions (OECD, 2019, 2024).

Despite the socioeconomic significance of these programs, a scholarly and policy debate persists over whether WHV experiences predominantly serve host countries' labor needs or genuinely advance participants' developmental objectives, including cultural learning, skill acquisition, and subjective well-being (Howe & Reilly, 2025). Emerging research underscores the risks of exploitation and precarious employment conditions faced by temporary migrants across various visa categories, suggesting that structural uncertainty and limited legal protections profoundly shape their work experiences (Stringer et al., 2022; James, 2023; Joyce, 2024).

Within the literature on migration and work psychology, work values are defined as individuals' core beliefs and priorities concerning the role and meaning of work in their lives. These encompass intrinsic motivations, personal goals, and culturally embedded expectations (Li et al., 2025). Exposure to novel social and employment contexts through international mobility can catalyze significant shifts or reconceptualizations of these values, influencing how individuals prioritize autonomy, work-life balance, and long-term career trajectories. Research on international migrant workers indicates that both career adaptability and cultural intelligence are pivotal in facilitating adjustment, thereby affecting job satisfaction and psychological well-being during and after their overseas sojourn (Le et al., 2018; Ocampo et al., 2022).

Although extant studies on Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) have yielded valuable insights into participation motives, such as economic incentives and lifestyle exploration, and have examined the intersection of tourism and transient labor, few investigations have explicitly explored how WHV experiences reshape participants' work values following their return home. Existing research often overlooks the post-return perspective, thereby missing a critical understanding of how temporary international work influences subsequent career aspirations, perceptions of work quality, and reintegration into domestic labor markets (Bossavie & Wang, 2022; Chen, 2023). This constitutes a significant gap in comprehending the psychological and value-based outcomes of WHV participation beyond immediate host-country experiences. This gap is particularly salient in the Indonesian context, where WHV programs are increasingly perceived not merely as travel opportunities but also as potential pathways to meaningful international exposure and employability. Examining how these experiences influence returning participants' value systems, work identity, and quality of work life can yield important insights for career counselors, educators, and policymakers.

Theoretically, this study is anchored in work values theory, which conceptualizes work values as relatively stable yet dynamic constructs shaped by socio-cultural environments and life-stage transitions (Porfeli, 2007), and career adaptability theory (Ye, 2015), which emphasizes an individual's capacity to navigate change through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. WHV participation, characterized by cultural adjustment, temporary employment, and new social roles, constitutes a formative context in which career adaptability may be activated and subsequently translated into reconfigured work values. Furthermore, frameworks of migrant identity and acculturation posit that

cross-cultural experiences can prompt individuals to reassess their relationship to work, autonomy, and life priorities. Collectively, these perspectives position WHV experiences not merely as economic engagements but as developmental arenas wherein individuals negotiate and reconstruct the fundamental meaning of work.

Understanding the work values of former Indonesian WHV participants carries implications at both individual and policy levels. Individually, identifying how WHV experiences foster values such as independence, personal growth, and work-life harmony can inform targeted career development programs and reintegration support for returning migrants. At the policy level, elucidating the non-economic outcomes of WHV participation challenges reductionist interpretations of the program as a solely labor-supply mechanism. It underscores its potential contribution to youth empowerment and human capital development, with relevance for bilateral policy dialogues between Indonesia and Australia.

The present study aims to examine and gain an in-depth understanding of the work values held by former Indonesian participants of the Work and Holiday Visa (WHV) program. Furthermore, this research seeks to contribute to the field of industrial and organizational psychology by enriching the empirical knowledge base concerning the work values of Indonesian workers with international experience.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design anchored in a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology was selected to explore the lived experiences and subjective meanings that former Indonesian Work and Holiday Visa (WHV) participants ascribe to work and their resulting work values. This methodology is particularly appropriate for investigating how individuals construct, interpret, and re-evaluate their work-related values within distinct socio-cultural and occupational contexts. It facilitates an in-depth understanding of experience as it is directly perceived and narrated by participants (van Manen, 2016).

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to identify information-rich cases that align with the research objectives. The sample consisted of four former Indonesian WHV participants who had completed the program and returned to Indonesia. Inclusion criteria were (1) completion of the Australian WHV program; (2) a stay in Australia of at least three years to allow for the exploration of evolving work value dynamics; and (3) unmarried status during their WHV participation, to minimize the potential confounding influence of spousal or family-related responsibilities on work value orientations. This sampling approach enabled a focused examination of how work values were formed and transformed through diverse work experiences within the WHV context (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data were collected through two primary methods: semi-structured, in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. Each participant engaged in two separate interview sessions. This design allowed for prolonged engagement and iterative clarification of meanings, thereby enhancing analytical depth and credibility. The semi-structured interview format allowed probing of emergent themes while maintaining consistency with the core research questions. Non-participant observation contextualized and enriched the interpretation of participants' verbal accounts.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This model involves three concurrent flows of activity: (1) data condensation (the process of selecting, focusing, and transforming raw data), (2) data display (organizing condensed information into

structured formats such as matrices or networks to facilitate conclusion drawing), and (3) conclusion drawing and verification (interpreting the displayed data and checking the validity of conclusions).

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. Prolonged engagement was achieved through multiple interview sessions with each participant. Repeated interviews served as a validation strategy, enabling the researcher to confirm interpretive consistency, explore ambiguities, and refine analytical insights across rounds of data collection (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). These techniques strengthened the depth and reliability of the phenomenological analysis.

RESULT

Analysis of the interview and observational data revealed several core work-value categories consistently articulated by the four participants. These values reflect how experiences during the Work and Holiday Visa (WHV) program shaped participants' orientations toward work, self-development, and life after returning to Indonesia. Overall, participants described their WHV experience as a significant personal achievement that facilitated inner fulfillment and enduring changes in how they perceive work and life priorities. Externally, they were motivated to pursue financial independence, which they perceived as difficult to attain within the Indonesian labor market.

Assertiveness and self-advocacy

All four participants demonstrated the development of assertiveness as a central work value. Exposure to diverse workplace cultures and power relations encouraged participants to set clearer boundaries and to critically evaluate workplace demands. They reported becoming more confident in asserting their rights, particularly when facing unfair treatment or role ambiguity. This shift marked a departure from their earlier tendency to comply unquestioningly with authority, indicating a reorientation toward self-advocacy and ethical judgment in work situations.

Renewed resilience

Participants also reflected a re-evaluation of their prior work attitudes, particularly regarding discipline, emotional regulation, and resilience. High work intensity and performance expectations in sectors such as hospitality and agriculture prompted participants to adopt a more pragmatic and resilient approach to feedback and criticism. Rather than internalizing criticism emotionally, they learned to process it constructively, which enhanced productivity and strengthened their commitment to perseverance and hard work.

Initiative and problem-solving orientation

Another prominent category was the value placed on initiative and proactive problem-solving. Participants reported increased awareness of the importance of efficiency, multitasking, and responsiveness in fast-paced work environments. Challenging, unpredictable work conditions required them to generate creative solutions while maintaining their personal and moral values. This experience fostered a sense of agency and adaptability, reinforcing initiative as a key work value necessary for sustaining employment and achieving performance goals.

Self-challenge orientation

A strong desire for self-challenge emerged across participants, particularly in relation to their decision to leave familiar social and cultural environments. Participants described prior life contexts as overly comfortable and insufficiently challenging, which motivated them to seek international work

experiences. The WHV program was perceived as an opportunity to test personal limits, confront uncertainty, and grow through exposure to different cultural, linguistic, and occupational demands.

Financial independence and future orientation

Financial independence emerged as a fundamental value underpinning participants' motivation and long-term planning. Participants associated financial autonomy with self-reliance, reduced dependence on family, and the ability to pursue future aspirations such as entrepreneurship. Comparisons between work conditions in Australia and Indonesia reinforced a stronger appreciation of work effort, income proportionality, and work ethic. Financial independence thus functioned both as a practical outcome and as a symbolic marker of adulthood and personal responsibility.

Table 1. Categorization of work values among former Indonesian WHV participants

Categories		Descriptive Summary
Internal	Assertiveness and Self-Advocacy	Participants developed stronger self-advocacy skills, including the ability to set boundaries, question unfair demands, and assert personal and professional rights in the workplace.
	Resilience	Exposure to high-performance work environments fostered emotional regulation, acceptance of feedback, leading to more disciplined and pragmatic work attitudes.
	Initiative and Problem-Solving Orientation	Participants demonstrated initiative, efficiency, and adaptability, particularly in fast-paced and unpredictable work settings that required multitasking and creative problem-solving.
	Orientation Toward Self-Challenge	WHV participation was motivated by a desire to escape comfort zones, confront uncertainty, and pursue personal growth through challenging international work experiences.
External	Financial Independence and Future Orientation	Financial autonomy was viewed as a marker of self-reliance and adulthood, enabling long-term planning, reduced dependence on family, and future-oriented goals such as entrepreneurship.

DISCUSSION

The development of assertiveness and self-advocacy as a salient work value among former Indonesian WHV participants reflects a significant shift in personal agency shaped by cross-cultural work exposure. Working in diverse organisational settings with different power relations appears to have encouraged participants to articulate boundaries more clearly and to critically evaluate workplace demands. This finding aligns with recent organisational psychology research suggesting that assertiveness and self-advocacy are adaptive career behaviours that enable individuals to negotiate role ambiguity, respond to unfair treatment, and maintain professional dignity in dynamic work environments (Rudolph et al., 2019). Exposure to labour systems with clearer rights-based norms may therefore challenge previously internalised compliance-oriented work values, particularly among workers from more hierarchical cultural contexts.

From a career development perspective, the emergence of assertiveness can be understood as part of a broader process of career adaptability and identity reconstruction. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) argue that adaptive career resources enable individuals to actively shape their work experiences rather than passively adjust to them. In temporary international employment contexts, assertiveness functions not only as a behavioural skill but also as a value-laden orientation toward ethical judgement, autonomy, and self-respect at work. Recent studies on international workers further suggest that the capacity to advocate for oneself contributes to psychological wellbeing and sustained employability across career transitions (Akkermans et al., 2021). Thus, the participants' shift toward assertiveness indicates a durable transformation in work values, positioning self-advocacy as a critical resource for navigating both global and domestic labour markets after return.

The re-evaluation of prior work attitudes among participants, particularly in relation to discipline, emotional regulation, and resilience, highlights how demanding work environments can function as catalysts for adaptive psychological development. Employment in high-intensity sectors such as hospitality and agriculture exposed participants to sustained performance pressure, time constraints, and direct feedback, requiring them to regulate emotional responses and maintain productivity. Consistent with organizational psychology literature, such environments often promote the development of resilience, defined as the capacity to recover, adapt, and persist in the face of work-related stressors (King et al., 2021). Rather than interpreting criticism as a personal threat, participants learned to approach feedback pragmatically, reflecting a shift from affective reactivity toward cognitive appraisal and task-focused coping.

From a career development perspective, this renewed resilience can be understood as an adaptive resource that supports long-term employability and sustainable work engagement. Research on career adaptability and resilience suggests that individuals who can regulate emotions and reinterpret challenges constructively are better equipped to navigate demanding work transitions and maintain motivation under pressure (Johnston et al., 2013). In the context of temporary international work, resilience becomes not only a coping mechanism but also a value-laden orientation toward perseverance and disciplined effort. The participants' accounts indicate that resilience was internalised as a durable work value, shaping their commitment to hard work and productivity beyond the WHV context. This finding supports the view that challenging work experiences can transform short-term adaptive responses into enduring work values that influence future career behaviour and work ethics.

The prominence of initiative and proactive problem-solving among participants underscores the role of demanding work environments in cultivating agentic work values. Fast-paced sectors such as hospitality and agriculture typically require workers to respond quickly, manage multiple tasks simultaneously, and anticipate problems without explicit instructions. Such conditions encourage individuals to move beyond rule-following behaviour toward proactive engagement with work demands. Consistent with organisational behaviour literature, initiative is closely linked to proactive work behaviour, which involves self-starting actions, anticipatory thinking, and the capacity to effect change in one's work environment (Parker & Grote, 2019). Exposure to unpredictable tasks appears to have heightened participants' awareness that sustained employability depends not only on compliance but also on the ability to contribute actively to work processes.

From a career development perspective, initiative-oriented behaviour reflects a broader process of career adaptability and personal agency. Individuals who develop problem-solving orientations are better positioned to navigate uncertainty, manage transitions, and align performance demands with personal values. Recent research suggests that proactive problem-solving strengthens adaptability by enabling workers to reinterpret challenges as opportunities for learning and competence development, thereby supporting performance outcomes and psychological well-being (Rudolph et al., 2017). Importantly, participants' efforts to maintain personal and moral values while generating creative solutions indicate that initiative functioned not merely as a behavioural skill but as a value-laden orientation toward responsible and ethical action at work. This finding supports the view that international work experiences can transform situational demands into enduring work values that shape how individuals approach work across different career contexts.

The emergence of a self-challenge orientation highlights participants' intrinsic motivation to pursue growth through experiences that disrupt familiarity and comfort. Decisions to leave established social and cultural environments reflect a deliberate engagement with uncertainty as a developmental resource rather than a threat. This orientation aligns with theories of self-

determination, which posit that individuals are motivated to seek challenges that satisfy fundamental psychological needs for autonomy and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). International work experiences, such as the Working Holiday Visa (WHV) program, provide structured yet uncertain contexts that allow individuals to test their personal limits while exercising choice, thereby facilitating meaningful learning and self-expansion. The participants' narratives suggest that challenge-seeking was not incidental but a central driver shaping their engagement with transnational mobility.

From a career and identity development perspective, self-challenge functions as a mechanism for enhancing career adaptability and identity clarity. Exposure to unfamiliar cultural, linguistic, and occupational demands requires individuals to continuously reassess their capabilities, values, and coping strategies. Prior research indicates that international assignments and boundary-crossing experiences foster adaptability by promoting problem-focused coping, resilience, and reflexive self-evaluation (McNulty & Selmer, 2017). Moreover, the perception of prior life contexts as "too comfortable" resonates with contemporary discussions of emerging adulthood, in which individuals actively seek transformative experiences to construct coherent life narratives and future-oriented career identities (Arnett, 2015). Thus, the WHV program can be understood as a developmental arena in which self-challenge operates as a key work and life orientation, enabling participants to convert uncertainty into personal growth and long-term career capital.

Financial independence emerged as a central work value that shaped participants' motivation, career decisions, and future orientation following their WHV experience. Consistent with life-span and career development perspectives, financial autonomy is often associated with the transition to psychological adulthood, marked by increased self-reliance, responsibility, and long-term planning (Arnett, 2015). Participants' narratives indicate that earning income independently abroad reduced reliance on family support and strengthened their sense of agency in shaping future aspirations, including entrepreneurship and flexible career pathways. This finding aligns with research on migrant and mobile workers showing that financial capability enhances perceived control over life choices and supports proactive career behaviors, particularly among young adults navigating uncertain labor markets (Baruch et al., 2016; De Vos et al., 2020).

Moreover, participants' comparisons of work conditions in Australia and Indonesia contributed to recalibrating how they evaluated effort–reward relationships and work ethics. Exposure to employment systems characterized by clearer wage structures, stronger labor protections, and income proportionality reinforced the value of disciplined work effort and fair compensation. Prior studies suggest that such cross-national comparisons can reshape individuals' work values by highlighting structural inequalities and alternative models of decent work (Duffy et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2020). In this sense, financial independence functioned not only as a material outcome but also as a symbolic marker of maturity and personal accountability, influencing how participants envisioned sustainable careers and meaningful work upon return. This future-oriented orientation reflects a broader shift toward values-driven career planning, where economic security is integrated with autonomy, purpose, and ethical considerations in work (Allan et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2018).

This study is limited by its small, homogeneous sample, which constrains the generalizability of its findings to broader populations of former WHV participants with diverse socio-economic and occupational backgrounds. Additionally, reliance on retrospective self-reports may introduce recall bias and lead to socially desirable interpretations of participants' experiences. Future studies could address these limitations by employing longitudinal and mixed-method designs with larger, more diverse samples to capture changes in work values over time and to strengthen the robustness of the findings.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that participation in the Work and Holiday Visa (WHV) program plays a significant role in reshaping Indonesian participants' work values and life orientations. Through exposure to demanding and culturally diverse work environments, former WHV holders developed greater assertiveness, resilience, initiative, self-challenge orientation, autonomy, and Yogyakarta independence. These values contributed to enhanced perceptions of work quality and personal growth, both during their time abroad and after returning to Yogyakarta. Overall, the findings highlight the WHV program not merely as a temporary mobility scheme but as a formative experience that influences long-term attitudes toward work, responsibility, and future career planning.

DECLARATION

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Author contribution statement

Candra Indraswari was fully responsible for all stages of the research process, including the conceptualization and design of the study, development of the theoretical framework, and formulation of research questions.

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Data access statement

The data described in this article can be accessed by contacting the author.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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