

UNIVERSITY GRADUATES AND THE EUROPEAN VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Sorin, MITULESCU¹ and Elena Mihaela, DAMIAN²

¹Institute of Educational Sciences, Bucharest, România

²Institute of Educational Sciences, Bucharest, România

ABSTRACT: The European Voluntary Service, part of Youth in Action Program (financed by European Commission), offers young people the possibility to do voluntary internships mainly in one of the European countries. Aiming to develop solidarity between young graduates under the coordination of a host organization, EVS represents a learning opportunity through non formal experiences. EVS stimulates personal and educational development of the young and lightens the social integration. This paper focus on the benefits of EVS. More exactly, our purpose is to find out if this program can be an option for graduate students to acquire practical experience that could help them to find easier a job on their field of expertise. The findings from this study show that graduates get involved in international voluntary projects for two main reasons: to get professional experience, due to the lack of practical courses during their studies, and to take part in new experiences.

KEY WORDS: international volunteering, work, graduates, education, university

1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers and the academic and business environment should be all concerned about what happens with university students after graduation: how many of them manage to find a job in their area; how they can continue to improve their skills after obtaining the diploma; and which retraining opportunities they have in case of employability failure. The solution to such problems should be found jointly by the interested parts.

Trying to find answers to such questions, we have tried to find out in the context of Life Long Learning, by noticing the increasing participation of graduates of higher education in the international volunteering proposed by European Voluntary Service (EVS). EVS is part of Youth in Action Programme, financed by the European Commission. Its main goal is to offer young people the opportunity to do voluntary work within a nongovernmental organization from one of the programme's countries. Moreover, it aims to develop the solidarity, to promote tolerance and mutual understanding among young Europeans. Therefore, EVS is a learning opportunity through non formal activities. By participating in internships, EVS stimulates both the personal and educational development of young graduates and eases their social integration. The volunteer internships have different durations depending on the volunteer's particularities, from short internships (minimum 2 weeks) reserved exclusively for young people with fewer opportunities for social integration, to long-term placements (6-12 months) that may be attend by any person between 18 to 30 years old in one of the Programme's Countries (European countries and, more recently, also countries from Africa or Latin America).

2. EVS AFTER GRADUATING FROM UNIVERSITY

Even if the European Voluntary Service is open to all young people and primarily was designed mainly as an alternative opportunity to formal education (including university), EVS lately attracts more and more graduate students, becoming for them an educational complement with more and more clear functions.

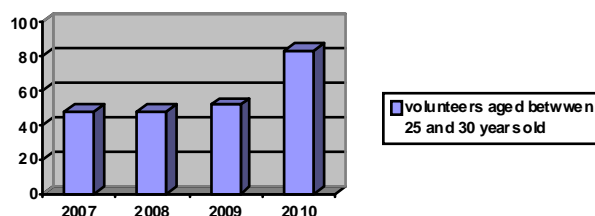


Figure 1. EVS volunteers in Romanian projects by age

Source: Romanian National Agency (ANPCDEFP)

The National Agency for Youth Statistics on Youth in Action program, although they do not have clear data on the participants' educational status, show a trend of increasing in the average age, which could mean that the postponing by more and more young people the participation in EVS until after graduation.

This assumption is confirmed by EVS coordinators from different European youth agencies who had responded at a few questions regarding the participation of graduates in EVS projects via e-mail. For instance, an EVS responsible from

Croatia, states that 70-80% of volunteers

have a University degree, or at least were students when they had began their international project. Moreover, a responsible from Austria observes that the volunteers' profile that has done internships in this country is changing: there are more young people with higher education degrees, passing from "EVS after high school" to "EVS after university".

In March 2011 we conducted an analysis on the motivational letters of 200 young people who have had a profile on Youth Networks (<http://youthnetworks.eu>). This website allows young people who are interested in applying for and EVS project to create profiles from which the NGO representatives can select what candidates are the most suitable for their project. The profiles include: a motivation letter, a resume, and their preferences about the type of project they and the country were they would like to volunteer. The 200 applicants in our sample are from United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, France, Romania, Macedonia, Slovakia, Armenia, Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia.

Our findings show that most of the young people were university graduates (with a Bachelor's or Master's diploma), and only 21% of them were high school graduates. Moreover, of all the countries, only a few maintain that "traditional" volunteering model (involving in an international project after high school): Germany, Austria, and to some extent the U.K. Instead, there are no differences (although it was expected) between the voluntary model of Eastern and Western European countries, such as France, The Netherlands and Sweden, which mark the trend of involvement in EVS after graduation. It seems that some differences are due to peculiarities of public financing of higher education (e.g. provision of scholarships), but the general trend is to do volunteering between graduation and employment.

3. UNIVERSITY GRADUATES' MOTIVATION TO BE INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING

International volunteering has the characteristics of modern or "reflective" volunteering, as Rehberg (2005) calls it. If the traditional volunteering (collective) is specific to a particular social environment (political or religious communities), involves a long-term commitment, and the altruistic motivations play a key role for the involvement of individuals, the new type of volunteering is "project oriented" - volunteers have specific expectations regarding the form, timing and content of their involvement. However, it combines self-oriented reasons and the instrumental ones with a sense of compassion and duty. A form of individualistic altruism (Beck, 1997) is the base characteristic of reflective or modern volunteering (Rehberg 2005). Another proof of reflexive volunteering is that religious elements are not important in terms of the motivation, all young people stated that religious values had no influence in the decision to involve in voluntary work, more than half of them claiming that are not religious people.

Moreover, the Report on young volunteers mobility (2010) shows that international volunteering (or transnational) stands out (from the internal one) by having a wider range of motivations. Young people feel attracted primarily by the opportunity to "know another country" and to be part of an intercultural experience. Also, international volunteering is seen as a form of breaking the daily routine of studies or other regular activities as a true "act of rebellion." Mentioned also as an opportunity to take a break - "Taking Time Off," an opportunity to reflect on what should be done in the future, or what direction would be better to follow. This is why volunteering takes place, with great frequency in significant moments in the life of young people: between school and university or between university graduation and employment. For some volunteers is also a way to avoid the status of unemployed in their own country.

The same report shows that among the professional gains of volunteering are mentioned also: practicing or learning a foreign language, intercultural experience, and work experience, or the development of certain soft skills (e.g., teamwork, interpersonal communication) necessary in their future career. Volunteers expect that this experience would enhance their chances to find a "proper" job, but considered to be also an opportunity to test other career. The report presents the case of a British IT graduate who was involved in a project called "European Capital" (Luxembourg) and had the opportunity to retrain and then to find a job in the cultural field.

Other studies show that higher education is a good predictor of the involvement in volunteering. More specifically, according to Oesterle (2004) educational institutions are a major source of social capital for individuals. For example, the universities encourage students to help their communities through voluntary activities, and often organize student clubs or associations and other activities for the benefit of the school or community. Thus, educational participation not only facilitates volunteering by providing human capital, but also by creating opportunities and by encouraging this type of activity (Oesterle et al., 2004, p.1128). Moreover, group membership is often seen as a generator of psychological benefits and increases the social skills of students acquired in school. On the same argumentative thread, associational activities are generally thought to be a form of social capital as members tend to meet others who are not like them, which can be seen as a positive reward for personal development. More generally, the volunteering status is designed as a shelter for a sense of responsibility and obligation that can affect the educational outcomes as students become more effective in class. In the context of school, students with a higher confidence level have a more positive orientation towards academic studies, and gain also an ability to solve problems at a collective level (Peter John, 2005). Furthermore, Burns (2006) argues that education is a source of civic skills, but facilitates also social integration and fosters civic values. The Involvement of young people in voluntary work is deeply affected by each educational background. More exactly, young people who are enrolled in school volunteer twice more than those who are not enrolled.

4. WHAT DETERMINES IF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES CHOOSE TO JOIN THE EUROPEAN VOLUNTARY SERVICE?

To find out why young people apply for a project within European Voluntary Service Programme, we analyzed the responses of nine young people with a university degree. According to the results, almost all of the young people affirmed that they want to do international volunteer work in order to gain professional experience and, implicitly, to acquire necessary skills for their future career, and because they want to experience something new (e.g. to experience a new culture).

The acquisition of professional experience. All nine young people reported that EVS is an opportunity to gain experience for employment: "Work experience is one of the main advantages that EVS offers. When I return I will have more chances to get the job I want" (D., 26, Romania). "I need more experience and feel that my diploma does not qualify me for many jobs" (S., 23, Ireland). "Firstly I wanted to take a break from my studies (I want to start a PhD after). Secondly, I could not get the type of job I wanted" (N., 25, Bulgaria). This motivation can be explained by the fact that non-formal education (extra curricular activities) is increasingly important in order to get hired, and volunteering is one of the possibilities of acquiring practical knowledge. In addition, Jenner (1982) states that people are volunteering because they want to explore the work opportunities or make some contacts that could help them to find a good job. The importance of this motivation is demonstrated in a study about young volunteers who stated as a motivation the preparation for a new job or to obtain relevant skills for his career (as cited in Burns, 2006).

What is more, when asked how satisfied are about the curricula during their bachelor and / or master programme, six of the nine youngster stated that they did not have enough practical

training: "I liked the courses, but certainly did not offer me enough experience to work after graduation" (S., 23, Ireland). "I am mostly dissatisfied with the practical courses during the my bachelor and master. There were strictly theoretical or referring to the old techniques which are no longer used" (D., 25, Romania). Therefore, from these results confirm that young people find in international volunteering an opportunity to gain practical experience.

The desire to do something new. This type of motivation can be explained by the fact that, in general, young people feel the need of diversity, of new activities and experiences. Being curious and energetic, they feel the need to interact with others and to experience as much as they can and for a part of them volunteering is the solution: "I wanted to know also another part of the world and not to already work at 21" (P., 22, The Netherlands). "For the desire to experience something else (...) something that could enrich me from a spiritual point" (D., 25, Romania). "I applied after bachelor because of the desire to live new experiences in a new field" (A., 25, France).

Regarding how EVS would help them in the future, the youngster state that international volunteering will help them grow both on professional and personal level. This is confirmed also by the stated motivations. "First, I think volunteering will help me to develop myself form a professional point of view and to acquire a better work ethic" (D., 25, Romania). "I think volunteering will help me to develop easier relations with others; to be more effective in achieving my objectives, goals; and through EVS experience, I will be more useful to the society" (N., 24, Macedonia).

5. CONCLUSIONS

International volunteering, and particularly European Voluntary Service projects, seems to offer university graduates what currently higher education institutions do not/cannot offer: various concrete experiences, self-knowledge and stimulating human relations. Therefore, the universities should draw some lessons for their educational plans because more and more graduate students choose to involve in volunteering project after graduation. If many graduates do not feel able to

take responsibility for a job or consider that entering directly in the work force may be a loss on a personal level, perhaps universities should pay more attention to international mobility, and also to the cooperation with business environment, non-profit organizations, and local communities in order to offer diverse and practical experiences during their Bachelor's or Master's programmes.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. <http://www.evs4u.ro/infogeneral/ce-este-serviciul-european-de-voluntariat>
2. <http://www.studentie.ro/cariera/Ghid-cariera-i69/Voluntariat-C41>
3. How it used to be in the beginning of volunteering when it was seen as being close to missionaryism.
4. IV. Public Policy and Management Institute, Mobility of Young Volunteers across Europe, European Union, 2010, page. 75.
5. All nine young people have had profiles on <http://youthnetworks.net> and had the amability to answer at a short questionnaire regarding their expectations about EVS, via e-mail.

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