

## Learning about volunteering – a path to personal development

Manuela Epure<sup>1, 2</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> The Academy of Romanian Scientists, Bucharest, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Universitatea Spiru Haret, Bucharest, Romania

Motto: “*The best way to find yourself, is to lose yourself in the service of others.*” ~ Ghandi

**Abstract.** *The paper aims to analyze the relationship between volunteering and personal development in early stage of professional life. The ‘learning by experience’ form of education has been gaining momentum lately among the young generation, along with the concept of non-formal and informal education, as it is less restrictive and has no specific objectives in terms of learning outcomes. This type of informal education may improve people’s employability and career prospects, strengthen the sense of solidarity and enhance active citizenship and the young people should be encouraged and supported in getting awareness of this fact.*

**Keywords:** formal learning, informal learning, non-formal education, volunteering, personal development.

**JEL codes:** I25, O15, Z13, Z19

### 1. Introduction

Young people are constantly engaged in formal and non-formal learning processes. It is obvious that they would like to acquire new skills, to develop their abilities and competencies in order to fit into the society and to contribute to their own personal and professional development as much as to the societal development. During their youth, people learn to become responsible for their own life paths and to give something back to those who help them to grow: parents, friends, teachers, society. Learning is a process that never ends and involves a lot of effort and commitment from learners during their entire life. Non-formal learning tends to become more popular, one of the reasons is that it is not organized or restrictive, it has no specific objective in terms of learning outcomes, and it is not intentional from the learner’s perspective. It refers to learning by experience or just having an experience that build some skills. Non-formal education means that individuals are constantly exposed to learning situations, at work, at home or during leisure time for instance, and they acquire knowledge doing things. This definition, with a few exceptions [6] also meets with a fair degree of consensus. Volunteering is often considered as informal education for various reasons: it exposes the individual to learning situations, it improves people’s employability and career prospects, it strengthens the sense of solidarity and enhances active citizenship [4].

### 2. Volunteering today

#### 2.1. What does volunteering mean in Europe nowadays?

Volunteering activities in EU have not had the expected development as we, the Europeans, would think. EU Commission understood the importance of volunteering and has taken action: a decision in favour of the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011) boosted volunteering at

the EU level. A lot of Youth Actions were designed to support and to encourage volunteering in any forms and the results became more visible.

EU official documents stated the conceptual framework of volunteering, described as *“a vehicle for individuals and associations to address human, social, intergenerational or environmental needs and concerns, and are often carried out in support of a nonprofit organization or community-based initiative”*. Voluntary engagements do not replace paid work, or professional development opportunities but add value to the society.

It is not necessary to focus on words that best define volunteering as far as “civic participation” term is understood in a very broad sense that incorporates also volunteering.

The degree of involvement in volunteering is quite different across EU, some studies were conducted in order to evaluate the volunteering rate. The volunteering rate is calculated as follows: the number of people volunteering as a percentage of a country’s entire population or a group of the population. Apart from the statistical definition of the volunteering rate, it is always important to take into consideration the cultural differences inside EU. For example, if volunteering for the family takes priority in a country, this would explain, for example, why these people have less time for formal volunteering in organizations. Also, looking at the current statistical data on citizens’ volunteering behavior one can easily identify the national differences. Accordingly, the “European Social Reality“ survey (Eurobarometer- 2011) , published in October 2011, came to the conclusion that involvement in volunteering is very widespread in the Netherlands, where more than half the respondents carry out a voluntary activity (57%), 31% on a regular basis. This is also the case in Denmark (43%, 21% on a regular basis). More than one-third of the respondents are involved in a voluntary activity in Finland (39%), Austria (37%), Luxembourg (35%), Germany (34%) and Slovenia (34%) are the countries where most people volunteer. The Lithuanians (11%) and Portuguese (12%) volunteer the least.

Going deeper and trying to identify the types of volunteering activities most popular in the EU, the above-mentioned survey succeeded to fall into several categories such as:

- most of the European volunteers (24%) are engaged in voluntary work in a sports club or a club for outdoor pursuits.
- cultural or artistic associations (20%),
- charitable organizations or social aid organizations (16%),
- community or neighborhood associations (13%), and religious organizations (12%).
- organizations for the protection of the environment, animal rights, etc. (7%),
- associations or clubs for the elderly (7%) and for young people (7%),
- associations defending the interests of patients and/or of disabled people (6%).
- professional organizations, trade unions and political parties are cited least (5% or less).

The conclusion is that there is a lot of room for improvements in making volunteering more popular and attractive not only for young people but also for a various range of age cohorts that are willing to act as active citizens in Europe.

## 2.2. Why volunteering today?

One can become a **volunteer** having in mind various reasons: the desire to learn new skills, to have fun or make a difference in a certain cause, they believe in. The degree of involvement is quite different from person to person, some have time to spend and they want to spend it for a good cause and in their own benefit, others are less committed and they allocate time to volunteer only because they think it will be beneficial for their future career, or just because their peers are doing this. Most of them are completely devoted to the cause, while others simply want to do what they can to help others to live a better life. Volunteers often witness a memorable life changing experience which made them better persons and that means they shaped their character through a valuable learning experience. What have they learned while

volunteering? Well, they are no more ignorant of the problems facing the world, they become more confident and courageous when they confront difficulties for the first time, and their communication skills are better.

**Volunteering** is generally considered an altruistic activity and it is intended to promote good or improve human quality of life.

Also, volunteering means to interact with other young people sharing the same values and been engaged in the same type of activities, the learning process occur in working together, exchanging previous experiences and their results and that signifies actually learning by doing. 'Learning by doing' is considered the most efficient way of acquiring knowledge and the easiest too in terms of intellectual effort.

Looking at the personal growth, the testimonials are focused on the fact that the volunteers are becoming more compassionate, they bound more easily with less fortunate people and become aware of what they already got and more appreciative and responsible toward those who made this possible (parents, school, organizations and society).

Recent studies revealed the fact that volunteering generates a high emotional involvement that will drive people to volunteer again in the future, not necessarily in the same project, and not necessarily at the same scale of time allocation.

Also, volunteering goes beyond the beneficiaries' gain and benefits. Volunteering has the ability to give back on other levels. Some psychological studies demonstrate that volunteering can have a direct effect on the chemicals of the brain. Being socially engaged in cognitive activities - such as volunteering- in midlife and early late life may avoid risks for Alzheimer disease and dementia. Experience Corps organization (<http://www.aarp.org/experience-corps/>) has identified the characteristics of volunteering and how they work at the brain level too. The conclusion posted on their website is that: "giving back to your community may slow the ageing process in ways that lead to a higher quality of life in older adults".

Fostering the culture of volunteering among the young generation is important for individuals in their future older age as well as for society, so reasons for becoming a volunteer were listed, and the most relevant are : make new friends, explore careers and personal interests, earn recommendations for future employment applications, develop job skills, build a strong résumé in early stage of personal development, learn in a non formal manner, discover hidden skills and talents, build self-confidence, and make a difference.

### **2.3. Personal development as a result of volunteering**

In order to demonstrate the close relationship between personal development and volunteering, the UK National Youth Agency has conducted a research on young people's volunteering and skills development. The research report examines the relationship between skills development and volunteering as an informal learning process. Looking at the key findings of this report, it is clear that young people identify a wide range of personal and social skills developed just because they involved actively in volunteering. What is missing in some EU countries is a system that allows the flexible recognition of these learning outcomes. The field research confirmed the literature review evidences on the improved self-confidence and self-esteem of the volunteers and also the enhancement of their communication skills and their ability to work with people with various cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, volunteering acts "*as a catalyst for young people to engage more effectively with other learning, or in some cases re-engage with formal learning or training, putting them in a position where they can develop skills and potentially gain qualifications*"[5]. Many young people also develop practical skills related to their specific experiences of volunteering.

## **3. Case study - Young Volunteering for Social Entrepreneurship (YVSE)**

Currently, social entrepreneurship becomes more and more a viable alternative for entrepreneurs and society mostly due to the economic crisis and its consequences. Encouraging young people to get involved in social entrepreneurship is desirable but one needs to think to develop social entrepreneurial

skills to young people, and to train them to become real social entrepreneurs in the future starting from volunteering in this sector first.

The idea of a training seminar on the above-mentioned topic arose from a brainstorming session held in 2011, at the Pro Global Science Association, Bucharest, Romania. The idea was brought to the light drafting a project proposal for Youth in Action grant competition. The project proposal won and in March 2013, the implementation of the project RO-43-E080-2012-R3 started. The participants - young volunteers and students from Romania, Italy and Turkey joined together in April 2013 for a three-day workshop in Bucharest, aiming to share their volunteering experience, to discuss the issue of social entrepreneurship, to learn in a multicultural environment how to start their own social business.

Specialists from Pro Global Science Association taught them the basics of social entrepreneurship and help them to identify and to analyze successful social business initiatives in their own countries.

During the workshop a wide range of teaching/learning methods were used as well as different assessment methods just to make sure that the learning process on social entrepreneurship produced viable outcomes. Methods such as: lecturing, interactive discussion, role playing, presentation of case studies, multilingual communication, brainstorming were employed and each young participant got involved constantly in various activities.

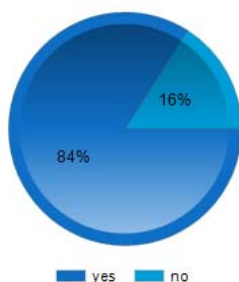
In order to measure the seminar's outcomes, a survey was conducted among all participants, a series of targeted questions were formulated. Mainly, the questions referred to: experience as volunteers, awareness on the seminar's topic, perception of the learning process and how much they acquired, perception on the role of volunteering as informal learning experience, multicultural experience, and shaped in socio-demographic portrait of participants.

Looking at the results, and doing some analytics, the main conclusions are (Fig. 1):

- over 85% of the participants attended a seminar having the topic Social Entrepreneurship;
- participants were experienced volunteers (only 16% did not have relevant experience as volunteers);
- the majority of participants had 1-2 years and more experience as a volunteer (76%);

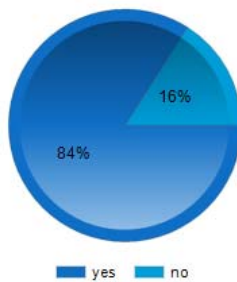
1. Are you participating for the first time in a seminar on this topic?

Response rate: 100.0%



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Response rate: 100.0%



3. Your experience as a volunteer is:

Response rate: 100.0%

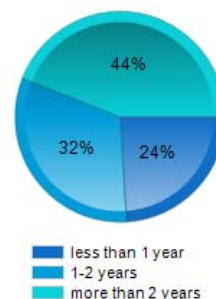


Fig. 1: Setting up the framework

Main variables included in this study were:

a) *What is the role of a volunteer?*

The survey aims to reveal the role of a volunteer as it is perceived by the participants. The results are presented in Fig.2 , it seems that the study confirmed the fact that volunteering *enhance active participation*

(68% of the citations), *promote solidarity* in a significant way (40% of the citations) and is also *fostering social cohesion* ( only 32% of the citations). The number of citations is greater than number of responses due to multiple responses, subjects choose 1 or more options.

#### b) Opportunity to learn

The majority (see Fig.2 56% very good opportunity + 40% good opportunity) of the questioned persons agreed that volunteering is a very good opportunity to learn, a useful informal learning form that helps those involved to register a real progress in personal development and skills and competencies building. Participants gave us a reliable feedback regarding the effectiveness of the seminar in terms of share knowledge and building skills.

#### c) Share experience

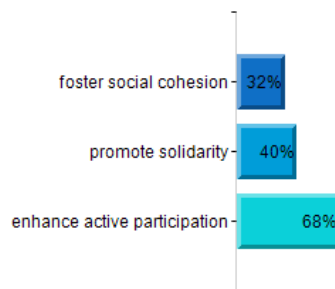
Volunteering means to share experience with your peers and the study results are clear in this sense: 64% of the respondents agree upon the fact that the seminar did give them the opportunity to share experience under very good conditions, 24% appreciated as good. A small but interested group (12%) declared that the seminar was OK in terms of sharing experience. We may ask ourselves why did they got this opinion? One cause may be the 24% of participants with less than 1 year experience; half of them did have much to share with the others.

#### d) Share good practices: (Fig. 3)

Looking at the results, one can easily see that the majority (60%) agreed upon the fact that the seminar gave them a very good chance to share good practices. This result also confirmed the achievement of one of the main project's objectives: to share good practices in the field of volunteering and to identify the ways to use them in developing new social entrepreneurial initiatives based on them.

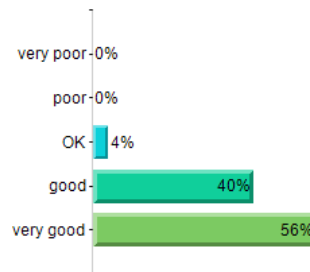
##### 5. A volunteer should :

Response rate: 100.0%



##### 6. In your opinion, volunteering provides an opportunity to learn (formal or informal):

Response rate: 100.0%



##### 7. During the YVSE seminar did you have the chance to share experience with your peers?

Response rate: 100.0%

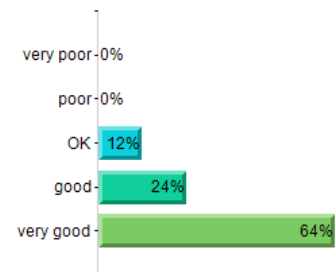
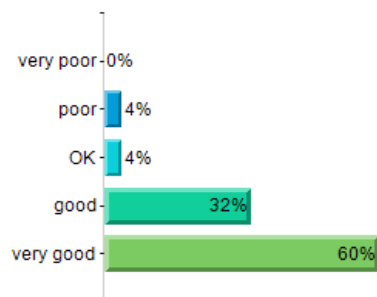


Fig. 2: What do the participants think about their experience in the project?

e) *Enhance expertise*: the figures are the same with those from the previous variable, and that means participants equally agree upon the enhancement of their expertise as much as sharing good practices.

8. Did you have the chance to share your good practices with your seminar's peers?

Response rate: 100.0%



9. Do you appreciate that your expertise enhanced by participating in YVSE seminar ?

Response rate: 100.0%

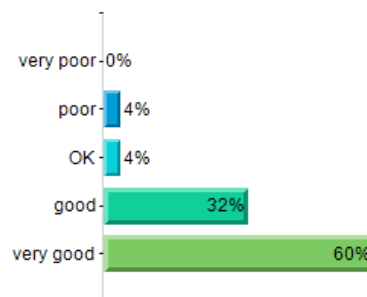


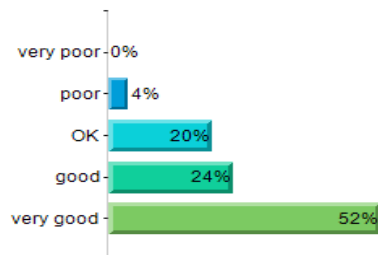
Fig. 3: What do the participants think about their acquired experience?

f) *Skills acquired* – One of the project objectives was to develop a set of basic social entrepreneurial skills that will enable the participants to build , in the near future, their own social enterprise. At the end of the project, only half of the participants ( 52%) were confident enough to declare that their new skills are exactly what they need in order to consider a social entrepreneurial initiative. Coming from different cultural backgrounds, and their young age (21-25 years old) may affect their opinion, based on the fact that they are engaged in a formal learning process (60% of them are students). The Romanian participants (48%) may influence the overall opinion mainly due to the fact that social entrepreneurship is not well spread and not yet legally regulated, so they did not have landmarks to refer to just in case they consider to start a social business.

g) *Overall opinion*(Fig.4) – 64% of participants found the seminar very good, 24% appreciated the seminar as being good and 8% just OK, only 4% of the respondents were dissatisfied and were identified being those over 30 years old, that could be considered as more demanding due to their past working and learning experience. There is always room for improvement and the organisers have understood this and they were asked to formulate suggestions and proposals for the next similar events.

11. Do you appreciate that your social entrepreneurial skills has developed during YVSE seminar?

Response rate: 100.0%



12. What is your overall opinion about how YVSE was organised?

Response rate: 100.0%

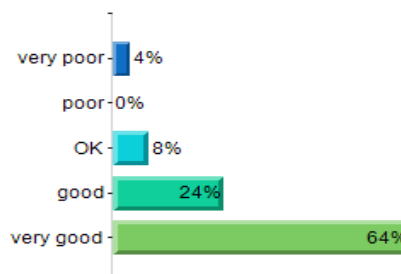


Fig. 4: What do the participants believe about their social entrepreneurial skills developed during the seminar?

The survey results should be analysed and interpreted in the light of demographical profile of the respondents (Fig.5)



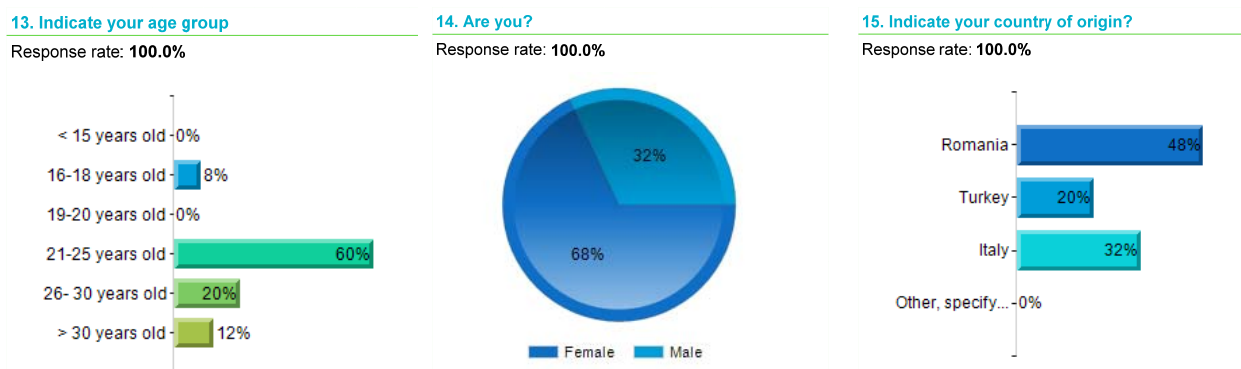


Fig. 5: Socio-demographic coordinates

We may say that Italy has a wider experience in developing social enterprises, and the participants from Italy played an important role in sharing experiences and presenting interesting case studies. Turkey was less represented, but the participants were very active in observing the cultural differences and how they may affect the impact of the social entrepreneurial initiatives.

#### 4. Conclusion

The survey results help me to demonstrate that volunteering enhances active participation, stimulates the learning process, even that it is an informal one. Participants perceived a real upgrade of their skills and they agreed upon the fact that it was a useful experience that may boost their personal development.

Sometimes the photos are more convincing when one tries to demonstrate that volunteering means also new friends, having fun and discovering one hidden talent and skills. I strongly advise readers to visit the YVSE website ([www.reaser.eu/yvse](http://www.reaser.eu/yvse)) in support to my conclusions.

#### 5. Acknowledgements

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