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## The Benefits of Volunteering, Volunteers' Competencies, and their Integration into Business Education

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### ABSTRACT

*During voluntary work, volunteers acquire valuable new knowledge and skills, but they often do not recognize these newly developed competencies, cannot apply them in further education, and fail to make others, including potential employers, aware of them. The classification and validation of these competencies can help to facilitate the transfer of volunteers' competencies within the volunteer and labor markets; however, the required steps for validation of the acquired competencies are frequently complicated or unclear for volunteers. Additionally, accepted ways of validating are lacking in labor market. This paper starts by presenting the value and benefits of volunteering, especially in a business education context. Thereafter, the authors present a European partnership project—the Grundtvig Learning Partnership's Volunteering Validation Highway (VVH). The partnership aimed to facilitate the validation and transfer of volunteers' experience. The following paper discuss volunteering as important part of society and a business education approach integrating volunteering. To support the idea of integration, the authors present a study concerning volunteers' competencies, the benefits of volunteering, and the usefulness in business education of competencies gained through volunteering. The study used data from a questionnaire and group discussions. Regarding different countries, the partners expected different understandings of volunteering; therefore, the researchers conducted mixed-nationality group discussions to develop a mutual understanding of volunteering. The researchers also developed a questionnaire according to the group discussion categories (inductive) and included both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The results support the idea of integrating volunteering experiences in business education. First, the results showed benefits for society and for the volunteers*

*themselves. Second, the volunteers gain on the one hand professional competencies that were relevant to the labor market, like delegating tasks to other people. On the other hand, the volunteers mentioned social and process-oriented competencies, including communication and technical skills. Third, the researchers identified two major advantages of volunteering: volunteers learn networking and communicating, and volunteers experience opened new occupational fields. The authors presented in a fourth step opportunities to integrate volunteering into business education. Business education can therefore be a service learning or a social entrepreneurship education course.*

**Keywords:** volunteer, competencies, validation, motivation, business education, entrepreneurship education, service-learning, social entrepreneurship

This paper presents the most important advantages of volunteering for society and business education. Volunteering is generally seen as a force for good. Indeed, it can make the world a better place by helping others to solve a wide range of problems, on a small scale, such as by providing childcare to help parents attend educational classes, or a worldwide one, such as by combatting climate change. These problems vary in scope, leading to diverse requirements of the volunteers themselves. As a result, volunteers acquire many competencies during their volunteer activities, but seldom recognize or validate their gained learning and competencies. Since volunteers are essential to society, their achievements and competencies need to be recognized and validated in terms of a *learning society*. Learning cannot be separated from its social context and should be available for all (Ranson, 1998). People learn during all stages of their lives and in various contexts, including formal and informal learning environments. In paid work or volunteering contexts, people also form what are known as *communities of practice* to share their learning.

By encouraging volunteering, societies foster educational participation, which in turn leads to leadership development, problem-solving to fit the needs of communities, and an articulate and mature civil society. Additionally, volunteering builds citizenship based on cooperation, solidarity, and commitment. In many countries, lifelong learning policies have, since the 1990s, stressed the positive aspects of learning through volunteering and highlighted civil organizations' relationship with skill formation and the development of social capital, to mention a few positive outcomes (Fields, 2005). Since then, numerous studies and projects have explored volunteering and learning through volunteering. Additionally, initiatives to recognize and validate volunteers' experience and competencies have been evolving in formal education—especially in business education, which prepares people for business careers in different sectors and positions.

This paper presents the advantages of volunteering work for the volunteers, society, and business education. Therefore, the paper starts with giving a short introduction to volunteering and discussing the business education approach. Afterward, the paper presents an EU project and its outcomes. The EU project used social media and the Internet to make volunteers' learning visible, and the transfer of good practice was its primary aim. Within the EU Project, the authors conducted a small study and explored the following questions: Why should volunteers articulate their learning outcomes while volunteering? Is there a link between volunteers' competencies and future professional key competencies that can bridge the acquired competencies and formal systems to open opportunities for qualifications? How can we integrate volunteering into business education? Based on the results, this paper discusses the

benefits of volunteers' competencies and the integration of volunteers' experience and competencies into business education. The authors conclude by giving specific examples of implications for practice.

## **Volunteering and The Business Education Approach**

### ***Volunteers Make the World a Better Place***

The volunteering concept can be defined from many perspectives, including motivations, institutional factors, or rewards and benefits, to name a few. Kelemen et al. (2017) developed a typology of volunteering as unpaid work. The authors examined 30 volunteers in Great Britain (average age 25; 20 women and 10 men). The analysis suggested the existence of four interrelated types of volunteers: altruistic, instrumental, militant, and forced. The categories of instrumental and forced volunteering are linked to individualistic concepts, such as personal betterment or responsible citizenship. Altruistic volunteering is connected to ideas of selflessness, working toward the common good, and collective ideas. Militant volunteering is linked to collectivism in the sense that it resembles “new social movements” (Kelemen et al., 2017).

What is common to the various typologies or definitions (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018; Kelemen et al., 2017; Maki & Snyder, 2017; Stukas et al., 2017) is that volunteering depends on an individual's own volition, benefits other people or a cause, and is unpaid. In many fields of education, including business education, service learning is a growing phenomenon. Service learning often entails obligatory (or at least accredited) periods of volunteering undertaken by school or university students. This integration of service learning into business education has also generated discussion about volunteering's voluntary nature. (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018.) Since volunteering is often value-based, it involves psychological factors such as motivation and altruism. Volunteers' services are part of the solution to various pressing current issues, such as disability, hunger, poverty, and social inequality. Despite advances in innovation and technology, however, it has not been possible to resolve all humanity's challenges, because many scientific discoveries do not benefit those who need them (Worldbank, 2008).

Despite its generally perceived altruistic nature, volunteering has benefits for volunteers, including intangible benefits, such as a sense of well-being, or more pragmatic ones, such as opportunities to move into paid employment (e.g., Stukas et al., 2017). Volunteering is a type of learning process. The organizations that offer volunteering opportunities usually provide training and other non-formal learning activities (i.e., planned educational activities that do not lead to formal qualifications) for their volunteers, who also acquire various skills in their learning-by-doing (Fields, 2005). Volunteer tasks are manifold, and volunteers play different roles and consequently acquire different competencies. To underpin the analysis and classification of volunteers' interests and activities from Maki and Snyder (2017) Fields (2019) conducted a Finnish volunteering survey in 2018 and identified the following types of volunteer activities based on participants' responses: (1) leadership/administration (chairing an association, paperwork, etc.); (2) sociopolitical and communication (campaigning, lobbying, communications, social media, etc.); (3) direct helping (peer support, taking care of animals, food bank work, etc.); (4) indirect helping (training others, mentoring, coaching, organizing groups, etc.); (5) financial (fundraising, account management, etc.); (6) construction/logistics (driving, building and maintaining facilities, cleaning, etc.); and (7) event volunteering (organizing, catering, etc.). Volunteers who had performed leadership/administration tasks or handled communication and other sociopolitical tasks, such as campaigning, reported the broadest range of acquired skills; on average, up to seven skills

or competencies gained by volunteering. Conversely, volunteers in direct helping positions reported a smaller number of new competencies (four on average), but were more likely to develop their interactional and relational skills. This analysis indicated a connection between the number of skills volunteers claimed to have gained through their volunteer tasks and the extent to which they could use them to their advantage in working life.

Some countries have tried to implement worldwide recognition, validation, and accreditation schemes for volunteer and informal learning; for instance, in the European Union (EU), the focus has been on aligning the recognition system with the “national vocational qualification (NVQ) framework”. This framework and the statement of 1972 from the UNESCO, about validating volunteering work, prove significant change and innovation (Singh & Duvekot, 2013). However, challenges still exist; for example, insufficient data on recognition and validation impacts and outcomes, the lack of infrastructure for validation stakeholders, and minimal consideration of different educational reforms or advocacy. One way to positively influence these factors is to transfer good practice and ensure the commitment of different stakeholders (Singh & Duvekot, 2013, p. 29–37); for example, in Portugal, the government (2005–2010) introduced a special kind of adult competency recognition, validation, and certification scheme. The key innovation introduced in these adult education training pathways was the possibility of positioning students about their previous learning processes by triggering a competencies’ recognition and validation mechanism. In this system, trainees submitted to a previous recognition and validation process of key competencies that they had already acquired in non-formal and informal contexts. They could, therefore, position themselves in training pathways that comprised only the competencies units (modules) that they still needed to acquire. (Gomes, 2013). Therefore, this paper endeavored to grasp the extent of volunteers’ -as Rego et al. (2014) said: “invisible work” (Rego et al., 2014, p. 14).

### **Volunteers’ Learning Benefits in Business Education**

People need to experience the richness of being part of a community and belonging to a group; therefore, volunteers should be recognized, and their competencies validated. Another perspective holds that people are part of a *learning society*, which should facilitate people’s learning across all life stages and through different learning forms. Empowerment is the focus of this strategy (Stiglitz & Greenwald, 2014, 12) and is an essential aspect of business education. Business problems are constantly changing (e.g., digitization, new forms of working, etc.), requiring business education processes to foster lifelong learning. Interaction with other people leads to learning, and people act as resources for each other, exchanging ideas and information, making sense of situations, keeping each other company, and enlivening each other’s (volunteering) days. Such activities can lead to *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1993), which facilitate learning and imply that people join such groups of their own free will. “Joining” therefore involves a volunteer choosing to be part of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1993; Wenger, 2010). Wenger stated that engagement in practice is a stage, an objective, a road, and a destination, so it is not static and thus requires participation in developing ongoing practices. In accordance with variations in the meanings of learning and daily life experiences, people in the voluntary sector face different situations in communities of practice (Wenger 2010).

As we have seen, volunteer experience is an essential component of a learning society or a community of practice, but it can also be part of business education. The main challenge in the instructional design of business education is to find and maintain a balance between academic rigor and the practical needs

of future business situations (Gerholz & Slepcevic-Zach, 2015). Volunteering is acting in practice, and the benefits of volunteering in business education can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, volunteers use their experience and knowledge to gain and develop business competencies, and the gaining of these competencies contributes to employability. On the other hand, business education students can learn something by investing their business knowledge in voluntary organizations and working with other volunteers. These investments and activities contribute to intergenerational learning and/or *social learning*.

Regarding the first approach, research about volunteering has claimed that volunteers learn continuously and gain new work skills, qualifications, and competencies, which increases their ability to meet the future demands of the labor market (Zainea et al., 2019). Some valuable surveys have also been conducted. A survey in the United Kingdom (UK) stated that there is little evidence that volunteering has a positive relationship with paid employment (Hoskins et al., 2020); however, there are hints that the volunteers learn something that contributes to their further personal and professional development. Personal and professional development can involve different kinds of competencies. These competencies or knowledge, skills and experiences, underpin specific competences, which can be understood as an individual's capability to act appropriately in a given situation and according to specific requirements (Illeris, 2010). In this paper's context, a volunteer might acquire the ability to act appropriately in each volunteer task, and this action depends on the articulation of his/her learning outcomes and reflection on them. Different outcomes and reflections can be based on different competencies. To structure these different competencies, a suitable model in this context is the model of key competencies of lifelong learning outlined in the European Commission's (EC's) proposal for a Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018). Zainea et al. (2019) described different competencies that volunteers could gain through their tasks, and this study combined the key competencies for lifelong learning with the new competencies for future jobs suggested by Zainea et al. (2019), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Types of Competencies (European Commission, 2018, p. 38-61; Zainea et al., 2019, p. 207)*

	<b>Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning</b>	<b>New Competencies for the Jobs of the Future</b>
<b>1</b>	Language competencies	Social, mobile, analytics, and cloud (SMAC) communication in the digital environment
<b>2</b>	Scientific, technological, engineering, and mathematical competencies	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)
<b>3</b>	Digital competencies	Social, mobile, analytics, and cloud (SMAC) communication in the digital environment
<b>4</b>	Personal, social, and learning competencies	Adaptability; personal branding; and understanding philosophy, arts, and emotions
<b>5</b>	Civic competencies	
<b>6</b>	Entrepreneurial competencies	Creativity, taking responsibility (considering the ethics of actions), resilience (turning obstacles into opportunities), and critical thinking during decision-making
<b>7</b>	Cultural awareness and expression	Interdisciplinary knowledge and cultural expression

From these lists of competencies, language is likely to become more digital in the future. Another noteworthy aspect of these lists relates to entrepreneurial behavior, which is not surprising in view of the changing labor market. The whole economy is increasingly driving independent working (self-employment, gig economy, etc.), requiring volunteers to develop different kinds of competencies through their volunteer tasks.

Having discussed volunteers' learning in relation to employment, the paper now considers the benefits of learning from or with other volunteers. This kind of learning can occur in different learning environments and, in the context of volunteering, the instructional concept of service learning is a potential facilitator in business education (Gerholz & Slepcevic-Zach, 2015; Godfrey et al., 2005; Steiner & Watson, 2006). Service learning is an experience-based learning approach that furnishes students with a broader educational experience. From a business education perspective, service learning can be described as a parallel process of service and learning in which service is combined with a problem-solving process in response to a community problem. The community problem in turn links to a business situation (e.g., the need to finance a vehicle fleet for a community organization). The learning process refers to the acquisition of skills and the development of personal aptitudes that can be linked to business curricular content (Gerholz et al., 2017). Service-learning pedagogy provides a solution to the significant problem of narrow business education by balancing academic rigor with practical relevance in the context of civic engagement. The four benefits of service learning are its correspondence to academic and social realities, its provision of reflective opportunities that facilitate learning, the



reciprocity fostered between volunteers and students, and personal and corporate social responsibility (Godfrey et al., 2005, pp. 315–319). Maximizing these benefits entails teachers developing course objectives that relate to civic values and responsibilities (Steiner & Watson, 2006, p. 422). Teachers should also consider different stakeholders and values when organizing service-learning courses (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017). Service learning offers business educators a teaching and learning tool to help them solve the challenge of combining academic rigor and practical needs (Gerholz & Slepcevic-Zach, 2015).

Having addressed the need to integrate service learning into business education and considered the requirements for successful implementation, their importance is evident. Now the paper considers their effects. Yorio and Ye (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 40 papers and found support for service learning positively affecting understanding of social issues, personal insight, and cognitive development. Another survey, conducted by Gerholz et al. (2017), made further progress regarding the link between learning design and its effectiveness. The authors proved that students' learning and development have a strong effect on their self-efficacy. Additionally, the authors identified an increased attitude of engagement.

Service learning is one learning approach, and another is social entrepreneurship education, which is based on experiential learning, meaning that students experience social entrepreneurship through practice. The benefits of social entrepreneurship education resemble those of service learning (Smith et al., 2008); however, social entrepreneurship education does not focus on a single organization, but on students creating new social institutions. Reciprocity is therefore a benefit for students and the environment or society. Awaysheh and Bonfiglio (2017) developed a pedagogical model for integrating social entrepreneurship education into business education that, like entrepreneurship courses, included a social responsibility facet. Other authors recommended Web 2.0 technologies for encouraging social entrepreneurship action in higher education institutions. The key aspect of these approaches is their focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR). The authors proved that students' absorptive capacity has a positive effect on their learning of, and passion for, CSR, leading to a positive effect on students' intentions to engage in social entrepreneurship (Garcia-Morales et al. 2020, pp. 342–343).

### **EU Project: Volunteering Validation Highway (Vvh)**

The VVH—Grundtvig's learning partnership—was established on the premise that learning in a volunteering context is valid not only for the individual, but also on a broader community and societal level, and deserves to be made visible. The visibility of experience and outcomes is essential because learning in volunteering is often a “by-product” of activity that remains unrecognized (Fields 2005). Recognition and awareness of volunteering and its related learning outcomes is relatively low in Europe (GHK, 2010); however, volunteering is increasingly making use of social media and other web-based resources to attract people, to communicate with society, and to show success'. Based on these observations, the VVH project aimed to combine the two aspects—recognition and social media—and explore the prospects of using social media and other tools to validate volunteers' learning outcomes. There were many opportunities on offer, from virtual micro-learning accreditation systems such as Open Badges (Mozilla Firefox Open Badges, online) to informal endorsement between peers on social media sites (e.g., Facebook groups or European Voluntary Service (EVS), online). Both are meaningful for volunteers, but when an organization decides to validate its volunteers' competencies, it needs to apply



a defined set of criteria to ensure quality and transparency; thus, the project also produced pedagogical guidelines for volunteer managers.

The VVH learning partnership also discussed existing qualifications and accreditation frameworks for learning in volunteering. Since such learning is relatively sporadic, and its outcomes cannot always be pinpointed accurately, the focus of the partnership was on the European key competencies for lifelong learning. This decision was the result of a discussion process conducted at the beginning of the partnership. The key competencies for lifelong learning were relevant for all partners and provided common ground. These key competencies relate to knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary for active citizenship and should be developed and updated throughout life. These competencies (mentioned in Table 1) provide a reference framework on the national and European levels (European Parliament, 2006 and European Commission, 2018) and established standards and orientations for the analysis of the survey results in this research study.

The partnership brought together organizations from eight European countries, all of which had experience of managing volunteer programs or operating in the voluntary sector, the education sector, or validation in general. The Finnish Sivi Study Centre—an informal adult education provider specializing in the voluntary sector—coordinated the project. Other partners included AKAD Bildungsgesellschaft mbH (a German University); Cooperazione Paesi Emergenti (an Italian development NGO); Kerigma, Instituto de Inovação e Desenvolvimento Social de Barcelos (a Portuguese nonprofit organization focusing on social issues, which maintains a center for vocational training and qualification); Societatea de Geografie din România Filiala Suceava (the Suceava branch of the Rumanian Geographical Society); Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Ankara İl Müdürlüğü (the City of Ankara social service in Turkey); Fundación CV Pacto Empleo Valencia (a government organization that supports people with few opportunities); and Eco Communities (a London-based social enterprise in the UK).

### **Pilot Study of the VVH Project**

During the VVH project, the partners collaboratively conducted a pilot study to better understand volunteers and volunteering fields in Europe. The partnership felt that it needed more detailed information about the reasons for people volunteering. In particular, it needed more information about the volunteers' motivations for engaging in voluntary work and their embedded need for recognition and validation. Additionally, the researchers aimed to determine what kinds of competencies people developed through volunteering, and whether these competencies could be useful in other contexts and translate to qualifications in formal systems to enhance their usability.

### **Research Methodology and Sample**

The pilot study was developed by the partners (lead: German University) during the project and involved two elements: group discussions and questionnaires.

The group discussions helped to develop a corporate understanding of volunteering. In summary, the researchers asked 30 volunteers who took part in a project seminar from all eight countries to answer the following questions:

1. "What was your motivation for volunteering?"
2. "What did you learn during the volunteering?"

3. “Can you use what you have learned through volunteering in other contexts?”

Through five group discussions, the researchers collected statements from volunteers regarding their motivations, competencies, and the developed skills that they could use in other areas of their lives. Thereafter, the statements were analyzed using content analysis (Schreier, 2012). This method has the advantage to analyze short qualitative notes. First, the project partners observed the group discussions and protocolled and transcript the sayings. Afterwards two researchers searched the text based on three categories: (i) motivation, (ii) learnings, (iii) transfer of learnings. The researchers collected the individual words and sentences of each category, counted them, and summarized them.

Based on the group discussion results, the researchers developed the second part of the pilot study: the questionnaire. The aims of the questionnaire were:

1. Validate the motivational categories from the group discussions and gain further insight.
2. Validate the competencies gained through volunteering that were identified in the group discussions and obtain hints for validation.

The researchers developed the questionnaire according to the group discussion categories (inductive) and included both open-ended and multiple-choice questions (using a five-point Likert scale). Thereafter, the researchers asked the volunteers to provide information about themselves and their volunteering. They also included questions about their reasons for volunteering. Forty-six volunteers (12 male, 34 female) from all eight partner countries completed the questionnaire. The project partners conducted the volunteers through their volunteering organizations. The volunteers had the right to withdraw the participation, the partners handled the completed questionnaires confidential to protect the data. The results presented in general and do not present individual data. The volunteers were mainly between 16 and 35 years old, and most of them (32) had a university degree.

### **Results of the Group Discussions: Developing a Corporate Understanding**

Regarding different countries, the partners expected different understandings of volunteering; therefore, the researchers conducted mixed-nationality group discussions to develop a mutual understanding of volunteering.

### ***Reasons for Volunteering***

The first question in the group discussions was: What was your motivation for volunteering? The volunteers told stories about how they came to volunteer and their reasons for continuing. The statements considering the reasons for volunteering could be divided into two categories: (1) contributing “benefits for society” and (2) earning “benefits for myself,” with “benefits for myself” reflecting a lifelong learning mentality.

Table 2

*Results of the Group Discussions—Benefits of Volunteering (numbers represent the frequencies of the mentions, n = 30)*

Main Category	Sub-Category		
Benefits for society	Helping somebody	(14)	
	Doing useful things for society/solidarity	(10)	
	Sharing experience	(5)	
	Making a difference	(5)	
Benefits for myself	Learning oriented	Learning something	(21)
		Finding a job afterwards	(8)
		Having a structured daily routine	(5)
	Social oriented	Experiencing good/positive feelings	(11)
		Meeting people	(5)
		Feeling part of something	(4)
		Keeping in shape/staying physically fit	(2)

The “benefits for society” included supporting others, who could be of all ages and come from different religions and cultures. The volunteers wanted to offer their knowledge to other people and share their life experiences. A socially oriented person considers the community’s needs and takes responsibility for doing useful things for society, including demonstrating active solidarity. The benefits for the volunteers themselves were, on the one hand, learning oriented, and on the other, socially oriented. Here, “learning oriented” means that volunteers were motivated to volunteer because they could learn something, structure their lives, and maybe find a job later. These aims mainly focused on usability or employability. Beyond that, the volunteers were motivated by social awareness, such as feeling part of a group, feeling satisfied because they had helped someone, or meeting people and gaining social contacts. These volunteers were certainly motivated by their social constitutions.

### **Competencies Developed through Volunteering**

The second question asked about learning experiences. The volunteers’ statements focused, on the one hand, on professional growth, meaning the strengthening of professional competencies that were relevant to the labor market. This meant that volunteers developed their ability to delegate tasks to other people or to train them to perform various tasks independently (leadership skills). On the other hand, respondents mentioned social and process-oriented competencies, including communication and technical skills. Communication skills included communicating in challenging situations, and technical skills included, for example, assisting people with disabilities. For this survey, a comparison with the EU’s key competencies for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2018) provided a framework for categorization, facilitated an overview of the findings, and highlighted similarities and differences.

Table 3

*Results of the Group Discussions—Competencies for Volunteering Compared with Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning*

<b>Volunteers' Competencies</b>	<b>Volunteers' Statements</b>	<b>Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning</b>
Skills for communicating with different people, handling conflict communication, and/or persuading others.	<i>"I have learned to influence the media and local councilors to make changes."</i>	Language competencies
Skills for communicating with people from different cultures.	<i>"I have learned to interact with different people and learned about their different cultures and traditions."</i>	Language competencies civic competencies
The volunteers did not mention this category.		Scientific, technological, engineering, and mathematical competencies
The volunteers did not mention this category.		Digital competencies
Teaching or training others	<i>"I have learned to design, for example, teaching materials that I can use in other projects."</i>	Personal, social, and learning competencies
Listening to people, understanding other people's problems, working in a team, and assisting disabled people.	<i>"There have been different kinds of people, but they have all been good at something. You should let everyone shine in what they can do best." "I have learned to assist a person who is in a wheelchair."</i>	Personal, social, learning, and civic competencies
Becoming a leader and learning to delegate.	<i>"I have learned how to run meetings, as I have chaired an association for many years."</i>	Entrepreneurial competencies
Intercultural understanding, open-mindedness, and collaboration with different people.	<i>"I have learned to listen to others and to see and understand their inner pain."</i>	Cultural awareness and expression

The comparison between the EU key competencies for lifelong learning and the group discussion results showed many similarities. Particularly regarding communication and cultural understanding, the voluntary sector provided an excellent opportunity for developing these skills. The key competencies for lifelong learning in the mathematical and digital areas were not mentioned by the volunteers in this study but may have been more relevant in other volunteer fields. These results showed that the voluntary sector focused more on communication than on product production through new technologies.

### ***Usability of Volunteers' Competencies in Other Contexts***

The third question concerned the usability of competencies gained through volunteering. The volunteers perceived their competencies as useful in other areas. During the group discussions, the volunteers mentioned, on the one hand, personal growth and, on the other, improved communication skills. Personal growth included: (1) improved organizational skills; (2) gaining diverse experience, which opened their minds and broadened their horizons; and (3) increased adaptability due to handling different tasks with and for different people. The volunteers' communication skills improved due to their experience of (1) working in teams, (2) dealing with conflict, (3) persuading others, and (4) teaching people. The range of communication opportunities was comprehensive and represented a vast field of learning. This could be compared to a community of practice, since a community of practice (Wenger, 2010) offers the possibility of facing different situations and considering different people's experiences. A group of volunteers in a community of practice can handle new situations with familiar methods.

The researchers asked the group discussion volunteers how they could use, in their work or private lives, the competencies they gained through their volunteering. The volunteers mentioned making friends as the most significant personal advantage of their voluntary work. Most frequently, they mentioned that the volunteer experience opened new occupational fields. They gained greater insight into other occupational areas and realized that they needed further education for future work. This situation could be the point at which volunteers started to attend business courses or pursue further training.

### **Results of the Questionnaire: The Understanding and Benefits of Volunteering**

After analyzing the group discussion results, the researchers developed a questionnaire based on the qualitative results to gain greater insight into the possibilities for volunteer experience validation.

### ***Understanding Volunteerism***

The researchers asked the volunteers to state the numbers of volunteer fields they had worked in and, thereafter, indicate the specific fields in which they had worked or were working. On average, the number of volunteer fields mentioned was lower than the specified fields, indicating that the volunteers did not fully realize what volunteering involved.

**Figure 1: Questions 7 and 8 of the Questionnaire**

7. In how many different fields of volunteering have you worked? \_\_\_\_\_
8. In which field of volunteering have you worked, or are you working at the moment?
- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> sports, gymnastics | <input type="checkbox"/> art and music  | <input type="checkbox"/> school, kindergarten            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> church, religion   | <input type="checkbox"/> spare time     | <input type="checkbox"/> environment, animal welfare     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> social area        | <input type="checkbox"/> politics       | <input type="checkbox"/> labor union                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> adult education    | <input type="checkbox"/> health area    | <input type="checkbox"/> rescue service, fire department |
| <input type="checkbox"/> criminality        | <input type="checkbox"/> other area(s): |  |

*Figure 1. These questions were taken from the questionnaire and related to different fields of volunteering.*

There were cultural differences concerning the term volunteering: for instance, volunteers from Turkey mentioned a single day when they collected waste as volunteering, whereas volunteers from Finland mentioned it as an activity routinely undertaken in a voluntary organization for some years. The ranges and durations of volunteering differed, highlighting the need to define validation and develop a mutual understanding of volunteering in Europe.

The researchers asked the volunteers to describe an ideal volunteer, and the volunteers mentioned a wide range of competencies, most of which were social competencies. The volunteers mentioned the need for volunteers to demonstrate:

- commitment and team spirit (19)
- openness to other people (14)
- empathy (12),
- active engagement in volunteering (12)
- friendliness (11)
- sufficient time input (10)
- adaptability (7)

These results showed that communication competencies seemed to be especially important to the volunteers themselves. In line with the group discussions about the volunteers' competencies gained through volunteering, volunteers believed that they did not need specific competencies to become volunteers. However, they thought that potential volunteers should have strong social competencies (e.g., empathy), since they would learn on the job what was necessary to fulfill specific tasks. It seemed that, if volunteers took care of other people's problems, they became motivated to learn new ways of solving problems.

### ***Elaboration on the Benefits of Volunteering***

The researchers asked the volunteers about their motivations for volunteering and what they considered to be the benefits. The possible options were based on the results of the group discussions.

The most important reasons for volunteers to volunteer were social benefits, meaning doing something useful for society and helping others.

**Figure 2: Results from the Questionnaire—Part 1**

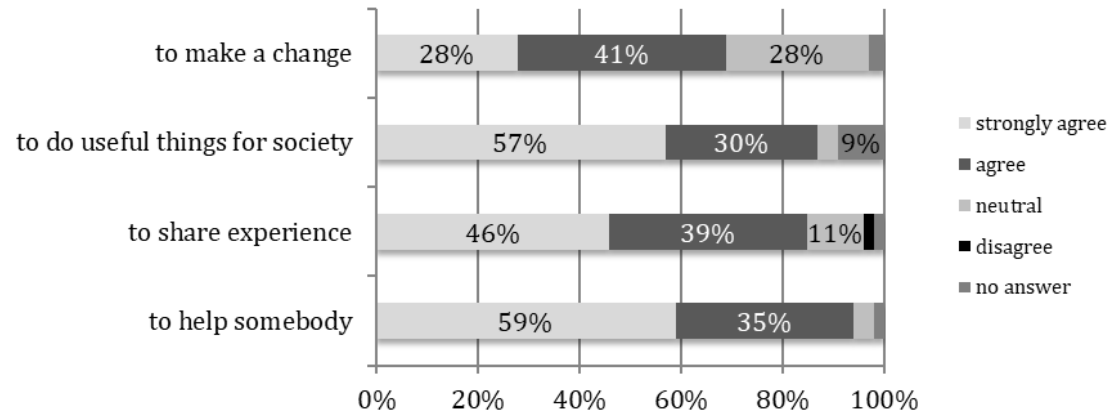


Figure 2. The results for the section “benefits for society” (own presentation of results).

The respondents mainly agreed with statements expressing the wish to help somebody and do something useful for society. The third most important answer was that volunteers wanted to share their experience. In line with the group discussion quotes, the importance of helping somebody and doing useful things for society were evidently key motivations. However, personal benefits were also essential, with volunteers stating that they learned something, shared their experience, had positive feelings after volunteering, or felt part of something.

**Figure 3: Results from the Questionnaire—Part 2**

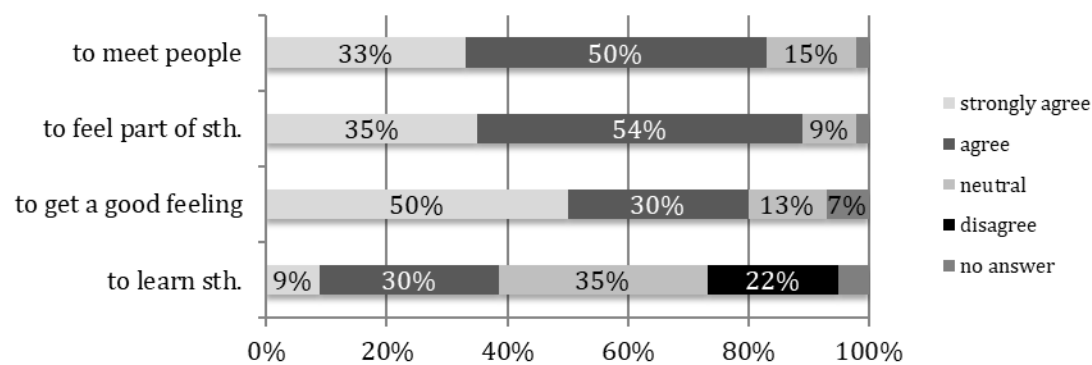


Figure 3. The results for the section “benefits for myself” (own presentation of results). The abbreviation “sth.” means “something”.



Most importantly, the volunteers felt good after they had volunteered and learned something, but the social factor was also essential, including the feeling of being part of something and meeting people. In line with the group discussion results, the volunteers focused on social orientation in the questionnaire, with learning taking fourth place on the priority list. This positioning could reflect social desirability in the group discussion responses, because people in our performance-driven societies typically focus on learning rather than feeling good.

To compare countries, the researchers chose countries for which sound data were available (in summary, 29 people from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany, and Turkey), and the researchers conducted a Kruskal–Wallis test. Due to the small sample, a nonparametric test was chosen (Bortz & Lienert, 2008). The researchers found significant results for the “benefits for society” categories: to help somebody and to share experience. Some “benefits for myself” categories, however, displayed significant differences: to learn something, to find a job afterwards, and to meet people. In other words, within these categories, there was a relationship between the countries and the motivation categories. Table 4 shows the biggest differences in the mean scores in one category between two countries: one country having the lowest score and one country having the highest score. The Likert scale ran from one to five, with answers ranging from 1 “strongly agree”, though 3 “neutral”, to 5 “strongly disagree”. For interpretation of the mean scores, a low score meant that people strongly agreed with a statement, whereas a high score meant that, on average, people were neutral or disagreed with it.

Table 4

*Results from the Questionnaire: Kruskal–Wallis Test*

	Category	Significance	Country	N	Mean scores
<b>Benefits for society</b>	Helping somebody	0.036	Portugal	9	10.50
			Germany	3	24.50
	Sharing experience	0.013	Italy	5	9.80
			Turkey	8	21.94
<b>Benefits for myself</b>	<b>Learning oriented</b> Learning something	0.010	Italy	5	6.50
			Spain	2	24.50
	Finding a job afterwards	0.036	Italy	5	6.50
			Spain	3	24.83
	<b>Socially oriented</b> Meeting people	0.009	Germany	3	3.50
			Turkey	8	20.38

The results need to be interpreted with caution due to the small sample; however, the results could provide the basis for further research. Considering the “benefits for society,” it seemed that Portuguese volunteers were motivated to volunteer “to help somebody,” whereas in Germany, volunteers were more neutrally oriented. Furthermore, it seemed that volunteers in Italy were more interested in “sharing their experience” than those in Turkey. Focusing on the category “benefits for myself,” the results showed three significant categories. For the learning-oriented focus, responses in the categories “learning something” and “finding a job” were strong in Italy but neutral in Spain. This probably meant that volunteers in Italy focused more heavily on employability through volunteering activities than those

in Spain. Regarding social orientation, responses in the “meeting people” category were robust in Germany and neutral in Turkey. This difference could be a cultural because, in Germany, single-person households are widespread, leading to people wanting to meet others through their volunteering, whereas in Turkey, people live in extended family households and therefore do not need to go out to meet other people. However, these are generalizations based on small numbers of participants, so they are not definitive.

### **Discussion**

The results of the pilot study supported the need to discuss a European definition of volunteering. Besides the different understandings of volunteering in different countries, the researchers identified different motivations for volunteering. It seems that if people take care of other people’s problems, they are motivated to learn new ways to solve them. The benefits of volunteering could be divided into benefits for society and benefits for myself, meaning that, on the one hand, volunteers benefit from volunteering because they wish to help others (active solidarity). On the other hand, volunteers benefit from volunteering because they feel better afterwards, develop communication skills, and gain cultural and social understanding.

It therefore seems that benefits are balanced between external and internal benefits (i.e., a balance between giving and taking). This understanding of giving and taking is in line with the octagon model of volunteer motivation presented by Pessi (2010). In her model, Pessi did not see the give/take motivation factor as a question of egoism versus altruism, but in more complex terms: “Volunteering is a particular arena for change, personal search, and individuality, as well as continuity and communality” (Pessi, 2010, p. 187).

However, such change depends on a working environment of recognition and validation, which requires individuals to be interested in personal development. The voluntary sector offers different learning situations within multiple communities of practice (Wenger 2010), and handling different situations is more likely to be successful because different people with different experience are involved. Volunteer communities also learn from each other through various boundary encounters (Wenger 1999), such as visits and situations where members share their experience on a more individual basis. Also, active volunteers who participate in many communities of practice are vital in this process. It depends on the volunteers themselves whether they realize the learning outcomes of successful/unsuccessful encounters, because learning situations are very personal. Volunteers generally realize that they have learned something during their voluntary work, as shown in this study. Additionally, the volunteers mentioned personal growth and an increase in communication skills as benefits, frequently stating that the volunteering opened up new occupational fields. They gained greater insight into other occupational areas and realized that they needed further education to become employable.

The pilot study should be considered with caution. The limitations of the pilot study were due to the small number of participants who completed the questionnaire. Some answers could also have been socially desirable because the volunteers felt expected to help others or learn something. Mostly, the results regarding the differences between countries were based on small numbers and plausible assumptions. These assumptions could generate ideas for more detailed research with many

participants. A more extensive study in each country would have given a clearer picture of the differences in understanding and benefits across different countries, and more research and discussion are required regarding the capacity of volunteering to enhance business education.

### **Implications for Practice**

A chance to boost volunteer learning might be to integrate volunteers and their experience into business education, which could enhance volunteers' competencies through further formal education. Service learning seems a suitable instructional tool for such integration, and it could lead to intergenerational learning opportunities for both students and other volunteers. No matter how business education includes the learning of volunteers because volunteering can support learning. In particular, the idea of learning as a lifelong process is relevant to voluntary work. The learning outcomes could be structured according to the different key competence areas, such as leadership or learning, to enhance competencies. In other words, integrating volunteers or volunteer experience into business education would lead to new insights, which in turn could encourage students' social thinking and action. In service learning or social entrepreneurship education, students are trained in social thinking and action. Service learning helps students to connect with social topics and supports awareness of major difficulties in society. Social entrepreneurship education provides an opportunity to start a business with social content and social aims and sensitizes students through experience. Finally, integrating volunteering into any kind of business education supports students' and volunteers' competencies and promotes diversity and new thinking for the labor market.

A broader approach to integrating service learning or social entrepreneurship education in higher education curriculum should be considered. Possible integration into specific courses could begin with interdisciplinary elective courses, with the overall aim of extending interest in, and recognition of, voluntary work or social entrepreneurship to different programs. Another aim could be to expand the understanding of entrepreneurship in business administration programs by including social entrepreneurship as well as standard entrepreneurship. Such changes in curricula could change whole master's programs and meet the demands of an ever-changing society. Social entrepreneurship education or service learning could also be effectively offered in teacher education programs, leading to multiplied effects if students learn to integrate volunteering into their future teaching routines.

Both in higher education and other education sectors, teachers have the power to introduce service learning or social entrepreneurship education in their courses. Such integration could focus on specific key competencies for lifelong learning or even on specific volunteer tasks. Depending on the time and effort involved, teachers could develop possible learning objectives by combining key competencies with volunteer tasks.

### **Conclusion**

Within the presented VVH project partnership, the focus on the key competencies for lifelong learning was used as a basis for group discussions and a method for operationalizing volunteers' competencies in different countries. The group discussion results showed differing motivations for volunteering depending on individual biographies and, sometimes, different countries. In other words, people have different motivational factors, and countries' individual cultures might influence those factors. Nevertheless, people are not purely selfish or altruistic in their motivations; instead, volunteers balance

giving and taking in their volunteering and act on different motivations for volunteering. Within a community of practice, volunteers have an opportunity to learn from each other and gain a wide range of ideas and information within a learning situation. In a volunteering context, the ideological backdrop of the learning process often generates particularly profound learning outcomes. Within the volunteering situations, the next step in personal development involves recognizing outcomes and individuals' potential to grow. This personal development orientation could be integrated into formal education, especially business education, to improve students' employability. This paper provides opportunities to integrate the idea of volunteering into business education and foster students' motivation to volunteer. Such integration could be through narrow or broad approaches to service learning or social entrepreneurship education. The authors have therefore discussed the importance of voluntary work and the opportunities it offers to develop competencies through volunteering.

The results underlined the importance of the VVH project and led to the follow-up project DesTeVa (Destination eValidation)—an Erasmus+ strategic partnership concentrating on the validation of volunteers' competencies. The DesTeVa project designed an online tool to validate volunteers' competencies, utilizing the findings of the VVH project. A more recent project partly involving the same partners (Improving Validation in the Voluntary Sector) studied the use of this and other validation tools in volunteering, making recommendations concerning their correspondence to volunteers' needs and avenues for promoting the tools (Aichinger et al., 2020). A vital recommendation for such initiatives is the standardization of validation outcomes from the tools from a business education perspective, ensuring quality for both volunteers and the educational institution that foster volunteering or service learning.

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