

VAPE
Volunteering in Central, East and West Europe – a pathway to
employment

Policy recommendations

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Volunteering in Central, East and West Europe – a pathway to employment

VAPE is a two years (2012-2014) Learning Partnership project financed by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Grundtvig Programme that intends to foster and exchange learning experiences of staff in adult education working with young adults (18-30) with fewer opportunities. VAPE considers the different historical backgrounds on volunteering across the EU. In Central and East Europe various forms and programmes existed during the socialist era (obligatory aspect). In Western Europe volunteering was a charitable act offered freely. Nowadays volunteering work is seen more and more as a pathway to employment or as part of the preparation for education or training.

VAPE focuses on questions that stimulate, motivate and educate people with acknowledgement and recognition of historical backgrounds. The partners examine the local, regional, national and European context of volunteering work, share best practice and develop educational insights to translate and carry out the learned aspects in the daily work of the staff.

Policy recommendations

Being more than just an intermediate solution before entering the job market, volunteering develops skills and competences and it also promotes **solidarity** and **social inclusion**.

✓ **Understanding of volunteering**

When discussing volunteering at European level, it is important to acknowledge that different definitions of volunteering are present throughout the EU since every country has its own volunteering tradition. This entails the necessity to encourage and support different approaches in different environments. Furthermore, clear delineations between volunteering, internship and employment need to be considered.

- **Awareness about volunteering should be raised in education systems from a very early stage (primary school).** As school drop-out rates tend to be the highest among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is important to introduce them and their parents to the benefits of volunteering as early as possible.
- Awareness should be raised throughout all the member states with regard to the value and importance of volunteering as an expression of active participation; **extra effort** is necessary to build a **positive public image in the Central and Eastern European member states**, where the communist legacy left citizens with a negative attitude towards volunteering, which they often associate with the obligatory activities during the socialist regime.
- **The social environment** of the volunteer, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, should be **involved** when encouraging young people to volunteer. If parents, who generally might have a negative or cynical image of volunteering, discover the personal and professional development benefits for their children, they can become sources of support and encouragement.
- The link between **volunteering and employability** should be recognised, with an emphasis on the learning dimension of the volunteering experience.

- In order to prevent a growing tendency towards **job substitution** following the impact of public spending cuts across all EU member states:
 - o **volunteering** should be **encouraged**, but **not enforced** on the citizens.
 - o authorities, labour and trade unions, and the coordinating organisations should take appropriate measures to ensure that the involvement of volunteers is **complementary and supplementary to the work of paid staff**, not a replacement.
 - o the **roles and responsibilities** of volunteers should be **clearly defined**. Furthermore, a ceiling to the amount of time volunteers can work in for profit organisations could be introduced; although, non-profit organisations should not be subject to this time limitation.
- Awareness campaigns should promote an **attractive image** of volunteering for young people, emphasising its value and benefits.

✓ **Role of the state**

The impact of volunteering is dependent, among others, on the volunteering policy context in which it operates.

- Member states should ensure a **general legal framework to the appropriate degree**, where the rights and responsibilities of volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations and their beneficiaries and stakeholders are respected, **without overburdening** the organisations with excessive bureaucracy, expensive checks and procedures.
- **Adequate social protection** (health, accident and liability insurance) for volunteers should be assured by all EU member states.
- **Volunteering during unemployment** should not cause the loss of social benefits (unemployed benefits and social security benefits).

✓ **Disadvantaged young people in volunteering**

Inactive and unemployed young people are the least likely to volunteer, probably because they have no access to volunteering opportunities through employment or education.¹ If volunteering is to be a tool for the empowerment of disadvantaged groups in society, additional support needs to be provided:

- to enable them to volunteer through the promotion of **equal access** and by increasing **accessible funding** for volunteering
- to **attract young vulnerable people** into volunteering. As they are very hard to reach through the communication channels used for active youth, time and resources must be invested in building trusting relationships with a few ones which can gain a positive volunteering experience and afterwards attract others.
- to **keep young vulnerable people engaged**. Special individual support is needed during volunteering work.
- to **match the capabilities** of vulnerable young people according to their needs and to the necessities of the host organisation.
- for the **professionalisation** of volunteers. Enhancing their skills and competences will only buttress the critical role of volunteering in increasing employability, personal development and active citizenship.

¹ <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1404.htm>