

Welcome to the 1st blog post on the effects of international volunteering projects that are being written regularly by the researcher Jonathan Robertson from Scotland in the frame of the research, which has started in March 2017 and will continue until November 2018. In the frame of his research, Jonathan is following volunteers participating in different volunteering activities all over Europe and finding out how volunteering is changing their lives and helping them in building a career and in personal development. Apart from volunteers, we are also following the work of their hosting organisations. We are interested in how they see the added value of volunteering projects for their organisation and how international youth work has changed their local communities.

Reading this blog will take you: 5 minutes

BLOG #1

Why this matters?

Setting the scene

*“How about if we turned everything upside down and got another chance of getting to know ourselves through discovering the world anew?” (Dagna Gmitrowicz, *The Undiscovered Country*, 2014)*

In 1996 Édith Cresson, the member in charge of Education, Training and Youth Policies for the European Commission, launched a new programme. It was called European Voluntary Service (EVS). Cresson announced: “the aim [of the programme] is to make young Europeans know Europe and, during their voluntary service abroad, to learn the language and culture of another country so that contact networks may be created.” These volunteering activities were to be a part of the ‘Youth for Europe’ programme, which was “designed, in particular, to encourage the participation of young people who experience the most difficulties in being included” ([European Parliament, 1988](#)).

Since then, volunteering activities have been a central part of successive European youth programmes, resulting in over 100.000 young Europeans volunteering in another country. Now as part of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) volunteering activities provide the opportunity for organisations to host a young person (aged 18-30) for up to 1 year as a full-time volunteer. The focus on inclusivity remains. Volunteering activities are not just for the few, but intended for the many - including young people with fewer opportunities.

Those born around the time when Cresson introduced volunteering activities into the European youth programme are now themselves moving into adulthood. What is the Europe they are growing up into? From the economic meltdown of 2009 (and subsequent austerity) to the recent upturn in Right Wing populism, to name just two, these young people face some almighty challenges.

The destructive levels of youth unemployment have been well documented in recent years. Today youth organisations and young people across Europe are seeking responses to shared challenges and uncertain futures. Given this context, how do volunteering activities actually impact the lives of the young people and contribute to their employability? Building on existing work, the Slovenian and UK National Agencies of the Erasmus+ programme have teamed up to better understand the impact of volunteering activities and how organisations

can best work to support young people. In particular, this research project was set up to investigate 3 things...

1) The impact of volunteering activities on the employability of the young people. As the researcher I am following 25 young people from a diverse range of backgrounds across Europe through the journey of their volunteering activities. By entering into dialogue with the young people and engaging them as co-investigators I hope the research will be able to get nearer to hearing their authentic voices. After all, the young people themselves are the leading experts in their own experiences. On top of that, by interviewing the young people at different stages of their journey, I hope to get a richer picture of how the volunteering contributes to their life and their employability.

2) Effective practice from youth organisations in supporting young people through their volunteering activities. The story of the experiences of the young people would be incomplete without hearing the perspectives and learning from the practices of the organisations that support them. By visiting organisations where they work and interviewing key staff members I hope to gather examples of effective practice that is transferable to other organisations across Europe working with young people.

3) Innovative partnership working between youth organisations and other institutions. Youth organisations do not exist in isolation. I will be looking at how youth organisations collaborate with other bodies - such as employment offices, municipalities and educational institutions – to make volunteering activities a reality for the wide range of young people for whom the opportunity is intended. The hope is that these case studies will inform and inspire other organisations and institutions to work together in new ways.

This research project will continue until the end of 2018 and a final report will be published in 2019. Before then, I will be sharing highlights of the findings from the 3 areas of this research here in a monthly blog. This research has already created a lot of new knowledge I know will be valued by those involved in volunteering activities, Erasmus+ and anyone with an interest in creating a better world for our young people. So, over the coming months look out for the monthly blogs, do share them with anyone who may be interested and do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, requests or suggestions related to the research.

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Written by Jonathan Robertson, freelance researcher and youth work trainer, currently working on a research project on how Erasmus+ volunteering activities contribute to the employability of young people.



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