

Welcome to the 3rd 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 #3

Breaking Barriers with Banter

I am speaking to Johanna from Romania about proverbs. She translates one of her favourites from back home into English: "If a guest arrives at someone's house empty-handed, it's as if they arrive with their hand in their ass." I love hearing proverbs from different parts of Europe, but this one makes me feel a bit self-conscious. The only thing I have brought with me to this house in north Glasgow where the volunteers are staying is a digital recorder to capture the interviews I will be doing with them. Better than nothing, I hope.

Johanna is one of 12 young people from 5 different European countries here for one-month volunteering with Achieve More Scotland. The volunteers have been helping support Achieve More's summer sports programme, working with 100s of young people from around north Glasgow on dance and football activities.

But there is much more to this project, as I find out, than helping with the summer programme. Project Co-ordinator, Carla Fyfe, explains: "Achieve More doesn't just work with Scottish people who have been here all their life. We have 92 different nationalities, we work with migrants and refugees. So, we wanted to bring the Erasmus+ volunteers over here to find common ground." This aim gives the project its title: 'Breaking Barriers with Banter'.

"For attitudes, I think it is life-changing", says Akis, one of the volunteers from Greece. "You go somewhere else completely away from your home, you are with different people from different countries and backgrounds, you are helping with others on a small level but also on a big level. You develop friendships by interacting with the kids, other volunteers and the locals."

Before going on this project Gheorghe from Romania had never met any Muslim people. »I had an idea before that they were bad. I think that came from the media – hearing bad stories. But when I met them, my ideas changed. So, meeting a different culture like that changed me."

As well as creating greater understanding, breaking barriers opens up new opportunities for learning and employment, as Gheorghe explains. "Now I know that I can live in another country away from home for some time. I am also more confident in speaking to others in another language."

This belief is echoed by the nearly all the volunteers I speak to, including Marta from Poland. “The most important thing was getting better in English and also being more confident. I am not afraid to talk to people now. So, it's a big experience and I think I can manage.”

Being placed in a project like this, living with 11 other strangers and helping run sports sessions with a diverse range of young people is an experience outside the comfort zone of most of these volunteers. Johanna from Romania sums it up: “Here you have to do things. I think I am more courageous now. Why? Because I needed to be that. Necessity.”

The new language skills, confidence and increased employability of the volunteers aren't the only results of this project that I hear about. I ask Carla about the impact of these volunteers on the local young people. “The majority of the young people we work with have never been overseas before, so it's quite a big thing for them – there's quite a lot of fear. We take away that fear by hosting young people here in Scotland. Our young people see other young people like them doing it. They get to then reflect on that situation and often decide to go for it themselves. So it's created a pipeline of opportunities for youth empowerment and figuring out who they want to be.”

Speaking to Carla reminds me of a Spanish proverb I once saw: “Where there is no want of will, there will be no want of opportunity”.

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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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