

Welcome to the 6th 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 #6

Volunteering Activities and the Golden Ticket

Last year I wrote about the collaboration between MC Trbovlje (MCT) and the employment office in the area [link]. The article focussed on the work the staff members were doing to bring opportunities like Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities closer to young people, and particularly unemployed young people, in the area. Coming back to Trbovlje this year, I wanted to know what some of these young people have gained from the experience.

“I was about 27 when I figured out what I don’t want to do with my life”, Mojca explains. “So about 2 weeks later I went back to school. I enrolled back to get a higher education.” Another month or so later, she found out about Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities through an email from the employment office inviting her to an info session at MCT. A couple of months later she was starting a 6-month project with Teatro Metaphora on the Portuguese island of Madeira.

“I had major problems with anxiety in the past... So, yeah, my biggest aspiration was to grow on a personal level and leave the fear behind. Because I really didn’t have anything to fear, but I feared everything (laughs).”

I asked Mojca, before her Volunteering Activity, did she have a sense of what she wanted to do as a career? “Yes and no... I tried myself in a couple of professions, but none of them was the right one. But when I went on EVS I was like ‘this is what I should do’. You meet so many different people, like every person is different and you can help them any way you can, for me this was really awesome.”

One key element that she highlights was the flexibility offered to her in her volunteering work plan. This gave her the possibility to follow opportunities that weren't part of the original plan, such as the chance to help facilitate a training course at a local youth centre. She explains, “the light just went on - ‘this is what I should be doing’... All my life I wanted to work with people in some capacity, but I couldn’t figure it out and this Volunteering Activity opened that door that this is what I could be doing.”

For Mojca, there is a clear connection between Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities and employability. As well as gaining a decisive direction for her career, new connections and

skills, the unique experience of a Volunteering Activity has helped her ability to manage in different situations. “Like I said before, I really needed to push myself out of that comfort zone. So when I get a job and the boss wants me to do something that is out of my comfort zone, first I’ll be more comfortable. I know how to organise and plan, and even delegate something. So I think that’s a huge learning curve about the simplest things in life that school cannot teach that I took all from Erasmus+”. She continues, “in school it is just 1+1 is 2 and that is how it is. The end. And here there are so many different ways of learning and helping each other. That was really awesome.”

Moice describes her Volunteering Activity with MCT and Teatro Metaphora as “the Golden Ticket”. During her mid-term evaluation she became aware that the support she received in her project wasn't typical of the other volunteers' experiences in other organisations. So what was the support that Moice so appreciated?

Firstly, she talks about how the pre-departure training organised by the National Agency gave her a clear sense of the emotional ups and downs of a Volunteering Activity. As well as the flexible work plan, she valued greatly the close attention and care given to her by the staff of Teatro Metaphora and the staff from MCT keeping in touch with her when she was away. In her organisation in Madeira all the staff and volunteers worked in one office space in a friendly and non-judgemental atmosphere where she felt she could share anything. Finally, she describes how she received important encouragement from the other international volunteers, from the locals in Madeira and from her mentor, who went above and beyond their responsibility to be, in her words, “the doorway to the other culture”.

Mojca is now a mentor herself to one of the young people from Madeira who has come to Slovenia on a Volunteering Activity with MC Trbovlje. She is also doing promotion work in schools so that young people growing up in her area will know – as she didn't – about Erasmus+ opportunities. “If I have an experience that can help another person it’s the least that I could do is share it so that they could take something from it.” Her passion to pursue her new path is clear. “When I saw the Training of Trainers course I said ‘I am going’. It wasn’t a question of could I or couldn’t I, it was: ‘no, I’m doing this’. And just 2 days ago I applied for a youth worker job, so fingers crossed for this. And if not, then the next one. Either way I’m determined to work in this field.”

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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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