

Welcome to the 9<sup>th</sup> 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 #9**

### **What's this thing volunteering?**

#### ***Volunteer stories – Soft skills and expanded horizons in Krakow, Poland***

“One volunteer who came here from Ukraine was having big discussions with her family before she left over whether she should come or not,” Marco explains. “Because she had to quit her job to come and her parents were asking – 'what's this thing volunteering?’”

The offices of STRIM in Krakow are smaller than I was expecting for an organisation that is so active in Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities. I am talking with Marco Tromboli, a Volunteer Co-ordinator at STRIM, about how these projects are perceived by different groups in society.

“We are sending less and less volunteers in Poland generally. Maybe because it is easier to go abroad and there are other options. Also the vision of volunteering within Erasmus+ is not so professional to young people, where they have the formal education option within Erasmus+ available.”

Every year for the past 7 years STRIM have co-ordinated a diverse group of volunteers - between 20 and 30 at a time - to come to volunteer in Krakow on 9-month placements. Most of the volunteers do their placements in kindergartens across the city, but some volunteer at other educational institutions, such as primary schools.

Karim came to STRIM when he was 26 to volunteer on one of these projects in 2015. “The picture of my life is quite multicultural we can say. First, I was born in Morocco - in Casablanca in 1989. When I was 15 years-old we moved to Spain”, he explains. “I finished my High School a bit later than expected. Then I went to University and studied Social Work in Murcia.”

One of the big legacies, he tells me, of his Volunteering Activity project in Krakow is the network of friends and connections he developed. “As an anecdote, a lot of people not related to my project, they ask me, 'hey Karim, you have a lot of friends here, how did you do that?' I know I am open and so on and it's easy for me to have friends, but here it was very easy because of STRIM and how they organise. I always give the same example: on the first day you meet 25 volunteers. Each volunteer has a mentor, so we are talking about 50 people

already. Each 4 volunteers have an assistant, so 5 more – 55. STRIM staff, some friends of the friends from the mentors. So at the first party we are talking about 70 people there.”

The EVS Competences (2014) research found that approximately 1 in 4 of young people stay on in the place they did their Volunteering Activity. For Karim, and his generation of volunteers at STRIM, the number is higher. “From these 25 volunteers, 11 of us stayed in Krakow and all of us have jobs.” Amine has now been in Krakow for 2 years after his project ended.

I ask him what were the biggest skills he gained from his Volunteering Activity. “All these soft skills I think they really help a lot if you continue with employment. It really helps a lot”, he says. “It sounds very simple, but not everyone can have it. Not a lot of people practice it in university, because in university you are mostly with people that have the same background as you. But when you travel and you are really dealing everyday with different people, lots of things that you don't understand, that you don't like.”

He continues to talk about some of the other volunteers he knew and their progression into jobs in call centres in Krakow, “Call centres are basically soft skills – how you talk with people. All of them in the interview, for sure, they had to say 'I am working in a kindergarten', 'I am working in the primary school'. So, for sure the Volunteering Activities experience helped them.”

Karim works as a Corporate Social Responsibility manager for a multinational IT company. “Here we have a lot of corporations – they are hiring a lot of people. The way they see people, it's not about what they need but it's about what you have and how they can adapt what you have. They see people and they say, 'ok you have this, we take it and we will polish it and you will do the job'. So, I think the Volunteering Activity experience was kind of crucial.”

One of the biggest changes Karim describes is how his career horizons have expanded. “When I was in Spain before my Volunteering Activity, if you would have asked me: 'hey Karim, you have the right to work anywhere you want in the world what would you apply for?' I think the last thing I would apply for are the corporations – not because I don't want to but because I don't know that they exist. Through the fact of coming here I know that these opportunities exist here and in other cities. So for me it's totally different. Whenever I want to change country, maybe the first thing that I would look for is to get a job in a corporation – maybe here, maybe Berlin, maybe Australia, maybe New Zealand, maybe UK or the States. I see this job perspective that I couldn't see before.”

Perhaps Karim's is a vision of volunteering that needs to be shared more widely.

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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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