

Volunteerism of University Students in the Czech Republic as a Path to Sustainability

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Abstract

In the context of sustainable development, volunteering among university students plays a key role in shaping the future of society. This study uses a focus group method with students to analyse how involvement in volunteering activities enhances individuals' competencies and contributes to sustainable development. The analytical section provides the reader with data on student volunteers' personal and career development, their social interactions and networking, social responsibility and sustainability, and global thinking. The authors also discuss the role of the university in student volunteering. Volunteering effectively promotes social responsibility and sustainability, fostering students to become advocates for sustainable social change and active participants in community decision-making.

Keywords: volunteerism, students, sustainability, development education, just transition, degrowth, personal development, competencies, employability.

Introduction

This article is based on a research report entitled 'Benefits and challenges of volunteering for university students in the context of their future employability', prepared by Zdeňka Dohnalová, Magdalena Tichavská and Iveta Zelenková.¹ The research aimed to support the development of the system of recognition of non-formal education at universities in the context of implementing volunteering activities. The research included 13 focus groups and involved students and graduates of a selected university.

Part of the original authoring team decided to analyse the research data secondarily, as there were recurring statements in the research participants' statements related to ecology, sustainability, and responsible and active citizenship. However, these topics were not a key focus of the original research. Sustainability was only one of the sub-themes (or only one of the interview questions); statements with these themes emerged spontaneously throughout all parts of the focus groups. This fact stimulated the research interest of the authors of this article, as issues related to the future

¹ Zdeňka Dohnalová, Magdalena Tichavská, and Iveta Zelenková, *Přínosy a výzvy dobrovolnictví studentů vysokých škol v kontextu jejich budoucí zaměstnatelnosti* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2023), 1-55.

of the Earth proved to be of particular urgency for the Generation Z research participants. In today's rapidly changing world, volunteering among university students plays a crucial role in shaping the future of society. The original research on which we draw was conducted with students and graduates of a selected university and explored the importance of student volunteering in the context of their future employment. In this paper, however, we focus on volunteering through the prism of sustainability. With the growing awareness of the need for sustainable lifestyles, understanding how students can contribute to environmental, social and economic sustainability through volunteering and adopting degrowth principles becomes crucial. Our secondary analysis of the data collected aimed to explore how volunteering shapes individual competencies and creates links between students' personal development and the sustainable goals of society. In this paper, we seek to answer the main research question: How do volunteering activities influence the personal development of university students and contribute to the sustainable goals of society?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework revolves around university student volunteerism. Volunteering is a conscious, freely chosen activity for the benefit of others, provided by citizens without charge. A volunteer consciously dedicates a portion of their time, energy, and abilities to activities that are both temporally and thematically defined.² Volunteerism can be distinguished based on the nature of the activity and the organisation of volunteers. It may encompass informal, ad hoc volunteerism involving spontaneous and unorganised assistance to neighbours or friends. On the other hand, there is organised volunteerism, conducted within a structured framework and often forming part of organised community services.³ Organised volunteering encompasses volunteer activities coordinated by specialised institutions, including volunteer centres within higher education institutions.⁴ Volunteering organised by academic institutions may or may not be closely linked to higher education studies. It constitutes a significant component of informal education and has the potential to enhance the quality of education at universities. This study focuses on volunteers – students and graduates of higher education institutions. However, within formal volunteering, including that organised by academic institutions, volunteers consist of diverse groups (various age categories, diverse educational backgrounds, etc.) actively contributing their time and skills to various social and humanitarian initiatives. This diversity brings substantial benefits not only to the volunteers themselves but also to educational institutions. These institutions actively contribute to strengthening the quality of education at universities by connecting academic learning with practical experiences and activities in society.

Smith, Stebbins, and Grotz⁵ define specific types of volunteerism. Firstly, there is informal, unorganised volunteerism characterised by spontaneous and unstructured assistance to neighbours or friends outside the formal organisational framework. Secondly, there is scholarship volunteering, involving volunteers who receive financial rewards for their volunteer activities and operate in an international context, or at the national level. Other types include volunteer tourism (participating

2 Jíří Tošner and Olga Sozanská, *Dobrovolníci a metodika práce s nimi v organizacích* (Praha: Portál, 2006), 36-38.

3 Elaine Suk Ching Liu, Constance W. L. Ching, and Joseph Wu, 'Who is a volunteer? A cultural and temporal exploration of volunteerism,' *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, no. 6 (2017): 531-532, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2017.1295715>.

4 Adela Bradea, 'Volunteering as a Component of Non-Formal Education,' in *Education Facing Contemporary World Issues – Edu World 2022: Proceedings of the 9th International Conference Edu World 2022*, eds. Emanuel Soare and Claudiu Langa, no. 5 (2022): 572-583, <https://doi.org/10.15405/epes.23045.59>.

5 David Horton Smith, Robert A. Stebbins, and Jurgen Grotz, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations*, vol. 1-2, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 308-365. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-26317-9>.

in volunteer activities within travel and tourism), online and virtual volunteering (contributing time and skills online without physical presence), spontaneous volunteering in crisis situations (volunteers spontaneously offering assistance in extraordinary situations and disasters), and formal volunteer service programmes (referring to organised programmes offering structured volunteer services with defined goals and rules).

Moreover, volunteerism can be categorised according to the organisations in which activities are carried out, differentiating into areas such as culture and recreation, education and research, health, social services, the environment, development and housing, law, advocacy and politics, philanthropy, religion, and international sectors. Alternatively, it can be categorised according to the purpose of volunteer activities: a) service volunteering, focusing on alleviating suffering or improving the quality of life for needy groups; b) self-help volunteering, targeting shared goals among those with common interests, perspectives, or life experiences; c) grassroots volunteering, seeking to specify and support citizens' interests at the local level of socio-political organisation.⁶ In the context of university student volunteerism, it is important to mention 'pro bono' activities. These activities also focus on providing volunteer services but are mostly associated with providing professional or specialised skills and services. This activity often pertains to legal, advisory, or professional fields, where volunteers contribute their professional knowledge or skills to the public interest or to support organisations and individuals who lack the financial means for such assistance.⁷ In the Czech Republic, this includes civil advisory centres.

Student involvement in volunteer activities at universities offers diverse opportunities depending on the types of students and host organisations. Facilitated student volunteers are connected with host organisations through the university or other intermediaries, involving both regular engagement and short-term projects. Independent student volunteers organise their volunteer activities either connected to or independent of their studies. Host organisations offering specific programmes for students provide volunteer activities tailored to their university studies. Organisations integrating student volunteers expect students to fit into existing programmes. Student-led host organisations, where students lead community or student activities, are also essential. University volunteer activities may include organising volunteer activities, including orientation and open days with some universities offering accredited courses associated with volunteer projects. Volunteer centres play a key role in connecting students with projects, providing information, and facilitating the coordination of volunteer activities. Overall, these opportunities not only strengthen the personal development and experiences of students but also bring a positive impact on society, aligning with the university's third role in creating an environment for enriching student life and societal contributions.⁸

An academic student volunteer may earn credits for related courses, though it sparks debate. Volunteering's essence is selflessness and altruism, with students dedicating time and skills without expecting material rewards. The principle of volunteering is rooted in voluntary engagement and willingness to help others, rather than seeking credits or other benefits. This selflessness reinforces the significance of volunteer activities and creates an environment where a student's motivation is intrinsic, arising from internal conviction and an interest in supporting societal needs. Awarding

6 Susan M. Arai, 'Typology Of Volunteers For A Changing Sociopolitical Context: The Impact On Social Capital, Citizenship And Civil Society', *Society and Leisure* 23, no. 2 (2000): 328, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2000.10707534>.

7 Richard Abel, 'The Paradoxes of Pro Bono', *Fordham Law Review* 8, no. 5 (2010): 2443-2445. <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol78/iss5/10>.

8 Megan Paull et al., 'Matching expectations for successful university student volunteering', *Education + Training* 59, no. 2 (2017): 127-128, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-03-2016-0052>.

credits for volunteer activities could alter the dynamics of volunteering, as it may appear that external rewards motivate students. On the other hand, there are associated costs with performing volunteer work, and credit recognition could serve as a form of compensation for these expenses. A discussion on this topic could lead to finding a balanced approach that supports students in volunteer activities without compromising the original altruistic nature of volunteering.

Volunteering by university students is a significant factor not only for the personal development of individuals but also for the overall contribution to the sustainable development of society. This form of engagement provides students with a unique opportunity to develop key skills for understanding and addressing complex issues related to sustainability.⁹ Sustainability encompasses economic, social, and environmental balance essential for long-term stability and prosperity. In the context of higher education, sustainability refers to a responsible approach to education where students are supported in developing knowledge and skills to address complex sustainability-related challenges, such as through volunteering. The goal is a development education.¹⁰

Development education aims to foster learning that contributes to personal, societal, and global development. It goes beyond knowledge transfer, focusing on shaping skills, attitudes, and values for sustainable development and improved quality of life. Key elements include sustainable development, ecological responsibility, social justice, human rights, and cross-cultural understanding. It cultivates critical thinking, economic awareness, empathy, and solidarity. Development education encourages public engagement in local and global issues, supports innovative thinking, and addresses societal challenges. Often linked to global education, it prepares individuals for active and responsible roles, promoting a global perspective and the ability to find sustainable solutions. Volunteers, in particular, gain a global understanding and develop skills to contribute to global well-being.¹¹

Volunteering contributes to the idea of fair transition and degrowth. It promotes fair transition by providing assistance and support to needy groups, regardless of their socioeconomic status.¹² Volunteers can operate at the local level, where they can identify specific community needs and contribute to the development of social justice. Furthermore, it supports the principles of degrowth. Degrowth is an economic and environmental concept that emphasises the need to limit economic growth to maintain environmental and social stability.¹³ Volunteering can align with this concept by supporting local communities, sustainable practices, and resource sharing, leading to diversification and improvement of the quality of life without uncontrolled growth.

Student volunteering significantly boosts employability by developing a diverse skill set crucial for adapting to dynamic work environments and showcasing social and ethical responsibility.¹⁴ These skills not only contribute to achieving sustainable goals but also enhance competitiveness and adaptability in the modern job market.¹⁵ Emphasising competencies 4.0, essential in the

9 Angela Ellis Paine et al., 'Volunteering and Sustainable Development Goals: The opportunity to move beyond boundaries', *Voluntary Sector Review* 11, no. 2 (2020): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204080520X1588425988018>.

10 Ann Dale and Lenore Newman, 'Sustainable development, education and literacy', *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 6, no. 4 (2005), 351-362, <https://doi.org/10.1108/14676370510623847>.

11 Annette Scheunpflug and Barbara Asbrand, 'Global education and education for sustainability', *Environmental Education Research* 12, no. 1 (2006): 34-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620500526446>.

12 Irina Velicu and Stefania Barca, 'The Just Transition and its work of inequality', *Sustainability: Science, Practice, Policy* 16, no. 1 (2020): 264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1814585>.

13 Jason Hickel et al., 'DeGrowth can work – here's how science can help', *Nature* 612 (2022): 401, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-04412-x>.

14 Jim Hillage and Emma Pollard. *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis* (London: Department for Education and Employment, 1998). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225083565_Employability_Developing_a_framework_for_policy_analysis_London_DfEE.

15 Emma Barton, Elizabeth A. Bates, and Rachel O'Donovan, 'That extra sparkle: student's experiences of volunteering and the impact

digital era, including working with new technologies, digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration,¹⁶ students become key contributors to sustainable development.¹⁷ Graduates with a broad skill spectrum and global critical thinking can play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable practices, encompassing ecological impact reduction, support for social initiatives, and engagement in sustainable business practices.

Volunteer activities can promote a sustainable lifestyle among students who become responsible citizens. Volunteering represents a concrete way for students to actively participate in the positive transformation of society in the Anthropocene, a period where human activity significantly influences the planet. By working in collaboration with universities and non-profit organisations, students create triangular partnerships with a synergistic impact on all parties involved.¹⁸

Methodology

Our study examines the multifaceted impact of volunteering on students' personal growth, career advancement, social interactions, and global mindset. We followed the transformational journey of volunteers and examined how their involvement shapes them personally and professionally – from cultivating enriching personal experiences to strengthening global perspectives. We have also uncovered the diverse dimensions of volunteering, highlighting its key role in promoting a holistic approach to education and social contribution.

We were looking for an answer to the question: How do volunteering activities influence the personal development of university students and contribute to the sustainable goals of society? In the original research,¹⁹ of which the data was subjected to secondary analysis, we took a qualitative approach and conducted 13 focus groups with university students and alumni with different volunteering experiences. A total of 91 participants participated in the focus groups, each lasting an average of two hours. Focus groups were held between August and December 2023 in one of the cities in the Czech Republic, where the selected university is located.

The main criteria for inclusion in the focus groups were being a student or alumni of a selected university and having experience with volunteering. In the first phase, we utilised direct outreach to the coordinators of the volunteer centre, complemented by recruiting through social media and the university's information system in the second phase, where students voluntarily enrolled in the study. The aim was to include male and female participants, representation from students and alumni from all university faculties, representation volunteers with experience through the university volunteer centre, and those volunteering through other organisations. We ensured diversity in terms of the nature and duration of volunteering activities and included students with volunteering experience in various fields.

on satisfaction and employability in higher education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43, no. 4 (2019): 461-462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/039877X.2017.1365827>.

16 Liona Prifti et al., 'A Competency Model for "Industrie 4.0" Employees,' in *Proceedings der 13. Internationalen Tagung Wirtschaftsinformatik (WI 2017)*, ed. J. M. Leimeister and W. Brenner (St. Gallen, 2017), 49-50. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/wi2017/track01/paper/4/>.

17 Julia Peric, 'Student Volunteering: A New Path to Personal Growth and Sustainable Community Development,' presented at the European University for Voluntary Service (EUV), 1st-3rd September 2011, Basel, Switzerland, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Julia-Peric/publication/310599340_Student_volunteering_a_new_path_to_personal_growth_and_sustainable_community_development_Case_of_Volunteering_Program_of_the_Graduate_Program_in_Entrepreneurship_at_the_JJ_Strossmayer_University_in_Os/links/5832c86c08aef19cb81acb6a/Student-volunteering-a-new-path-to-personal-growth-and-sustainable-community-development-Case-of-Volunteering-Program-of-the-Graduate-Program-in-Entrepreneurship-at-the-JJ-Strossmayer-University-in-Os.pdf.

18 Rowena H. Scott, and Eddie J. Van Etten, 'University Student Volunteering Alignment with Sustainability Principles,' in *Proceedings of the 13th International Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS) Conference (Sydney, Australia: Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS), 2017)*, 3-4, <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2013/254/>.

19 Dohnalová, Tichavská, Zelenková, *Přínosy a výzvy dobrovolnictví studentů vysokých škol v kontextu jejich budoucí zaměstnatelnosti*, 11-14.

The resulting research sample was representative, consisting of 73 women and 18 men, aligning proportionally with the gender distribution of registered volunteers within the university's volunteer centre. The sample included 15 graduates and 76 students from all faculties of the selected university, with specific faculty names omitted for anonymity. Of the participants, 65% were from humanities, social, and educational sciences, 15% from law, economics, and technical fields, and 20% from medical and natural sciences – mirroring the faculty distribution of registered volunteers. In the quotes from the interviews, we deliberately do not mention the speaker's specific faculty or field of study because some faculties were minority represented. Research participants could – among other participants – be easily identified.

The focus group programme encompassed three main topics: 1) motivation for volunteering; 2) benefits of volunteering, particularly concerning future employability; and 3) challenges of volunteering, including coping mechanisms and recommendations for higher education institutions. In line with the philosophy of qualitative research, we are interested in the subjective perspectives of the participants and their experiences.

During the secondary analysis, we focused primarily on the second topic, examining how volunteer activities impact students' personal development. This included identifying competencies gained or developed through volunteering and examining how volunteering shaped their values, attitudes, and traits. Subsequently, we explored how, through enhancing personal development, volunteer activities contribute to achieving society's sustainable goals.

Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis, a useful method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data without being restricted by theory.²⁰ The initial analysis involved repeated readings of transcripts and noting initial thoughts on themes. Data were coded at a semantic level without delving into deeper interpretations of hidden meanings or motivations. The coding aimed to provide an overview of the data's coded content, refining and naming themes to represent the encoded data within each topic best, ensuring no overlap. Coded excerpts from transcripts are used here to support and illustrate the results.

Results

In this paper section, we present the categories we identified in the secondary data analysis.

These categories are as follows: personal development, career development, social interaction and networking, social responsibility and sustainability, global thinking, and the university's role in student volunteering.

So, what are the sustainability benefits of volunteering for university students? We formulated our main research question: How do volunteering activities influence the personal development of university students and contribute to the sustainability goals of society?

Personal development

Our research has shown that volunteering contributes to students' personal development. It allows them to better understand themselves, broaden their perspectives, gain new perspectives, and develop social and environmental awareness.

20 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Some emphasised that they had been put in unexpected situations, which had a positive impact on their abilities and worldview: 'It was very formative for me, I think, both growing up and now, that you have the opportunity to work on things that you wouldn't have gotten to if you weren't willing to do those things for free, so like I've always had a really big shift, and I've got like because of these things that I'm actually willing to do, I've got like the opportunity to talk to really interesting people or find interesting opportunities, and it's shifted me like value-wise, so I think as a person in general.'

Volunteers who engage in activities outside their main field of study stress that volunteering offers them a temporary break from their normal work or study routine and contributes to their overall personal development: 'So, I have to say that I've always seen volunteering or those activities outside of school as something that I want to be rewarding and something that sort of maybe doesn't intersect with what I'm studying at all.'

Moving to a different work environment and field often brings new perspectives and enrichment. Changing the environment and nature of volunteer work is seen as a positive challenge that can bring new experiences and open up new areas of interest. Volunteers open themselves up to new experiences which leads to personal development, improved problem-solving skills, and adaptation to new situations: 'Just the amount of people I've met, the different backgrounds, and their stories have been so enriching in that I've gotten, I'm very much out of that college bubble where just everyone around me is like a college student or just a graduate, and you just get such an insight into that slightly different world then.'

The research mentioned several times that volunteering opened new horizons for the participant in different areas (partnership, friendship, career, etc.): 'Like the first good thing that I did in those non-governmental organisations, which like opened up a whole new world that I was like out of touch with before, (...) all of a sudden (...) this world of human rights and democracy came up, and that defined me for the next 10 years like just working. (...) so actually, my whole career opened up because of going into that volunteering and actually living it a lot. I have an activist husband and activist friends. That it was like fundamentally completely for me again.' In this interview snippet, the participant recounts how their initial involvement in non-governmental organisations introduced them to the world of human rights and democracy. This experience significantly shaped her career over the next decade, leading to a fundamental shift in their focus and values. 'The impact extended to her personal life, with the participant developing an activist network, including an activist husband and friends. The narrative underscores the profound and lasting influence of volunteering on both professional and personal dimensions.

Participants in our research reported that without their involvement in volunteer activities, they would not have had any other opportunity in their lives to meet the beneficiaries of their help - often from marginalised groups: 'It is just that I get, for example, contact with groups that interest me that I don't have access to otherwise. Who don't get along or are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. That's what I was interested in. What they live like, what they're like, or the Ukrainian kids that are here now, for example. So, it's more like enriching me with some insights.' Another participant added a similar opinion: 'I totally agree with that, that it actually breaks through a kind of social bubble, and you get into completely different circles and groups.'

It is worth mentioning that the field of volunteering is not only related to health, social, and pedagogical issues but also volunteers active in the cultural, sporting, or spiritual fields took part in our research. In these areas, too, the selected participants of our research broadened their horizons and made new social contacts. All of the participants in our research had experience volunteering

in the Czech Republic, and some of them also shared their experiences abroad (e.g., in North America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand).

Volunteering, according to some research participants, is a way of understanding different perspectives, traditions, and values, which can foster mutual understanding and tolerance: ‘It changed my worldview, and it was really like a totally striking experience that I started to appreciate, I don’t know, the warmth, some food that I have, and just having somewhere to go to the toilet and ... this was really one of the things for me that changed just a little bit those values, what to appreciate more.’

Social motivation also includes a desire to actively participate in the community and contribute to its well-being. This form of motivation is associated with an internal drive to participate in collective efforts that can lead to positive change. Motivated by a desire to get involved, volunteers may engage in various projects, organise events, or participate in local issues: ‘Because I started out caring about the neighbourhood and trying to develop myself and the neighbourhood in elementary school in Parliament, I’ve kind of continued to do that.’

Career development

Volunteering is proving to be a key way to develop a variety of skills that are not only relevant in different areas of life but also essential for career progression and success. The skills acquired range from soft skills such as teamwork, organisational skills, communication, active listening, and presentation skills to cultural competence and the ability to work effectively with different people. In addition, volunteers will learn transferable professional skills such as basic first aid, outdoor survival skills, basic computer skills, and an understanding of basic legal principles.

This hands-on experience not only reinforces these skills, but shapes volunteers into capable individuals equipped with a versatile repertoire of skills, which greatly enhances their future employability. Many volunteers recognise the value of this experience and strategically include it on their CVs, demonstrating not only their competence but also their commitment, dedication, and ethical values – qualities that are increasingly valued in today’s professional environment. This proactive approach allows candidates to tell compelling stories and give concrete examples during interviews.

The overwhelmingly positive response from employers underlines the impact of volunteering on candidates’ employability. Employers often rate this engagement favourably and consider it a key factor in selecting candidates for jobs: ‘Every time I come to an interview, the person just has the CV printed there. I always see that they’re putting something on there, and they usually have volunteering underlined, for example, or they have something on there.’

Moreover, volunteering offers pertinent professional exposure and cultivates specialised skills aligned with the field of study, such as pedagogy, medicine, psychology, and more. This diverse skill set equips volunteers with hands-on experience, enhancing their comprehension of specific sectors and facilitating growth in areas they find personally enriching and significant. Engaging in volunteer work provides opportunities to interact with professionals, receive constructive feedback, and foster self-knowledge and self-reflection: ‘I’m still wondering, like self-reflection actually, in the style of, yeah, there’s always some feedback coming in and stuff, if you kind of like work and just decide on the basis of that how to go on, what to go into, what not to go into.’ This multifaceted engagement contributes not only to skill acquisition but also to the holistic development of individuals in their chosen professional domains.

Social interaction and networking

Volunteering proves highly efficacious for cultivating social bonds and broadening personal and professional networks. Those involved in volunteer activities emphasise that this type of commitment not only leads to new acquaintances but also fosters enduring friendships grounded in a shared commitment to altruism.

One of the key elements of social interaction in a volunteer setting is the opportunity to meet people from different age groups and life experiences: ‘Whenever you’re in a company and you have just, you know, a plethora of different people, there’s always someone special.’

This allows volunteer participants to gain a varied perspective on the world and build relationships with individuals who bring diverse perspectives and values: ‘I’m just realising now that I still mention that maybe when I’m talking to those, whether it’s with those people or with the staff, that and like that educates me so much like that.’

The variety of interpersonal relationships fosters openness, tolerance, and a heightened understanding of diverse life situations. Furthermore, active participation in volunteer work is instrumental in broadening professional networks. Participants not only establish connections amongst themselves but also forge relationships with individuals associated with organisations that endorse volunteer activities. Such networking can substantially impact career advancement and job prospects: ‘It just so happened that where I was volunteering, then maybe they called me up and said they had a vacancy for a tutor, and just like, I would have it as a paid position, so I wouldn’t have to volunteer there anymore.’

The contacts made can serve as valuable sources of information, support in professional growth, and create opportunities for further volunteering or work projects: ‘The contacts that one gets through that, which, whether they then either focus on the topic that the person is also focusing on, or they just create like a network of people that they can contact in some way when they need something, or when they are then maybe looking for that job or something like that.’

Volunteering transcends altruism: it involves establishing connections with individuals engaged in analogous subjects, sharing akin interests and values. These newly cultivated networks subsequently offer support and expert guidance.

Social responsibility and sustainability

Volunteering plays a key role in promoting social responsibility and sustainability by encouraging civic participation and building strong community links. Involving students in volunteering activities acts as a catalyst for their transformation into advocates for sustainable social change: ‘Volunteers do things that either nobody wants to do, or there are few people who can do them, so whether it’s caring for the elderly and so on, there’s a definite benefit to society, and also when someone volunteers, they develop themselves and are more valuable to society.’

In addition to providing practical help, volunteering also provides a platform for discussion and awareness of current social issues. Students who engage in volunteer projects not only help make decisions about specific actions but also become active members of the community who are aware of the needs of their surroundings and willing to contribute to the positive transformation of their neighbourhood: ‘For me, sustainability has always been a lot like on that social level, and from that point of view, I’ve always tried to develop the society around me in some way and to look for solutions to different things, and I think that by developing, by doing it out of goodwill, it can contribute a lot to making the system more sustainable.’

Participation and decision-making are thus intrinsically linked to volunteering. Participants in volunteer activities are actively involved in decision-making in the projects they are part of. Through a democratic process, they decide on the priorities and goals of their volunteer efforts. This participation not only fosters a sense of ownership but also shapes volunteer activities to be as relevant as possible to the needs of the community. Overall, volunteering creates a space not only for community empowerment and sustainability but also for active participation and decision-making; making individuals not only witnesses but also creators of positive social change. At the same time, some perceive that volunteering is a bigger part of the world than it seems: ‘And yet actually nowadays, if you just look at the news or whatever, everything is so pessimistic, and it depends on which parts of the world, but just that people maybe like look at themselves and they don’t want to help themselves like that and stuff like that. But at the same time, there are actually a lot of volunteers, but you don’t know because if they don’t have a volunteer card, you can’t tell if it’s like a paid position or just standing there, or where it came from, so I guess it opened up like a perspective that there are actually a lot of volunteers and that maybe the world is not as bad as it looks at first glance.’

Global thinking

Volunteering is instrumental in cultivating a global mindset, serving as a potent catalyst for societal change. Participants often emphasise its transformative power, highlighting how volunteering influences opinions and contributes to positive social shifts. This experience not only alters participants’ worldviews but also impacts their value systems and perceptions of the world, fostering open-mindedness: ‘I don’t know like it opened my eyes, and it opened my eyes that I am more like so open, that an awful lot of people I find in the Czech Republic have such like closed minds maybe to certain just minorities and even the majority let’s say.’

Crucial to this transformation is the promotion of intercultural understanding and diversity within volunteer projects. Exposure to different cultures enhances understanding and appreciation for diversity. Volunteering exposes students to global challenges, prompting critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This hands-on experience broadens horizons, encouraging reflection on personal actions’ potential global impact.

Volunteering serves as a vehicle for developing critical thinking skills, challenging participants to reflect on their actions’ broader societal context: ‘That it just gave me a lot of critical thinking as well.’ This acquired ability to critically examine information becomes an invaluable tool applicable in personal and professional life. Beyond an act of solidarity, volunteering emerges as a strategic approach to open new perspectives and cultivate global thinking.

The university’s role in student volunteering

According to the research participants, universities should strive to raise awareness of volunteering and its benefits as part of their third role, setting an example themselves through a proactive approach, for example, in the community. At the same time, they should work to increase the societal recognition of volunteering. Volunteering can be perceived as a way to cultivate not only the learners but the whole society: ‘(...) the university should awaken in those people that it’s not just like when a person comes in as an empty vessel, I pour something into it, then he gets out and he’s going to do something, so somehow cultivate it in those people somehow like in a clever subliminal way, ideally with his education (...).’ The statement points to universities as centres

of education, whose aim is not 'only' to prepare students for their future careers, which is in line with the concept of lifelong learning.

Discussion

Volunteering serves as a catalyst for personal development, exposing learners to diverse experiences and unforeseen challenges. This exposure cultivates resilience, adaptability, and a broader worldview, positively impacting self-awareness, values, and social responsibility. However, it is crucial to acknowledge potential risks associated with volunteering, especially among university students. Strain on mental and physical health, the delicate balance between volunteer commitments and academic/personal life, and the risk of burnout are significant considerations. Notably, volunteering may not be universally suitable, given varying attitudes, skills, and life situations.

The study emphasises volunteering as a substantial contributor to career development, offering a spectrum of skills, from soft to professional, enhancing employability. Hands-on experiences strategically included on a CV or resume positively influences employers. Nevertheless, caution is warranted against overemphasising volunteering, risking burnout, or neglecting other dimensions of personal and professional growth. Moreover, not all volunteer experiences may align seamlessly with career goals.

Volunteering emerges as a powerful force in cultivating social bonds and expanding personal and professional networks, fostering openness, tolerance, and a nuanced worldview. Networking opportunities can lead to valuable connections and support in various aspects of life. Yet, there is a cautionary note about individuals engaging solely for networking purposes, potentially diluting the altruistic essence of volunteering. Overreliance on networks for career advancement may lead to unfulfilled expectations.

The research underscores volunteering as a cornerstone for promoting social responsibility and sustainability, empowering individuals to contribute to positive social change. The democratic decision-making approach within volunteer projects aligns initiatives with community needs. Nevertheless, risks such as 'voluntourism' or superficial engagement may arise, where personal growth might overshadow genuine community impact, leading to conflicts within volunteer groups.

Volunteering plays a pivotal role in fostering a global mindset, exposing participants to diverse cultures and global challenges, enhancing critical thinking skills. However, a potential risk lies in volunteers adopting a 'saviour complex' or oversimplifying global issues. Ensuring that volunteering leads to informed perspectives, rather than reinforcing stereotypes, becomes a critical challenge.

The study emphasises the essential role of universities in fostering awareness and recognition of volunteering. Universities setting an example through proactive community engagement aligns with the concept of lifelong learning. However, potential drawbacks, such as undue pressure on students to volunteer, may lead to superficial or insincere participation. Challenges in measuring and standardising the impact of volunteering on academic and personal growth also need consideration.

In conclusion, while volunteering offers multifaceted benefits, it is essential to navigate potential pitfalls. Universities can play a pivotal role in striking a balance, encouraging thoughtful and meaningful engagement. Recognising the nuanced interplay of pros and cons ensures that volunteering remains a powerful tool for holistic student development, social impact, and global awareness.

The research paper by R. H. Scott and E. van Etten explores the alignment of sustainability principles with tertiary sciences students' environmental volunteering. This aligns with our acknowledgment

of volunteering as vital for promoting social responsibility and sustainability. Both studies recognise the potential drawbacks, such as voluntourism or superficial engagement, and the need for careful evaluation of the impact of volunteering on academic and personal growth. While our study emphasises the role of universities in fostering awareness and recognition of volunteering, their research paper specifically addresses the need for evaluating environmental volunteering as part of an integrated programme of Work-Integrated Learning. This aligns with our emphasis on universities playing a pivotal role in encouraging thoughtful and meaningful engagement, while also acknowledging the potential drawbacks, such as undue pressure on students and challenges in measuring impact.

Julia Peric's²¹ study specifically focuses on the Volunteering Programme of the Graduate Programme in Entrepreneurship. The study emphasises the role of socially conscious students in effecting positive change in their environment through active participation in community development. This aligns with our acknowledgment of volunteering as a tool for fostering social responsibility and sustainability. Both studies underscore the importance of universities in cultivating a sense of responsibility and promoting societal interests through value systems.

Conclusion

Volunteering catalyses social responsibility and sustainability, engaging students in community decision-making and positive social change. This experience broadens global perspectives and develops cross-cultural understanding and critical thinking skills. In essence, volunteering proves to be a transformational journey that shapes individuals and society at various levels.

Research reveals that volunteering contributes significantly to students' personal development and promotes their adaptability, problem-solving skills, and broader worldview. It transcends academic boundaries and provides enriching insights into relationships, friendships, and career paths. Meeting beneficiaries from marginalised groups breaks down social barriers and fosters a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives.

The multifaceted benefits of volunteering include health, social, cultural, sporting, environmental, and spiritual activities, contributing to personal growth and opening new horizons across geographical boundaries.

Volunteering is an effective means of promoting social responsibility and sustainability, making students advocates for sustainable social change and active participants in community decision-making.

In the professional field, volunteering provides students with a versatile set of skills and enhances their employability. It serves as an opportunity to make formal and informal contacts, fostering lasting friendships and professional links beyond the immediate volunteering environment.

Our research highlights the key role of universities in promoting and recognising the value of volunteering. It highlights the need for universities to actively raise awareness and set an example as traditional centres of wisdom operating beyond traditional career preparation.

Our study highlights the profound impact of volunteering by university students, showing it not only as an activity but as a pathway that shapes socially responsible and globally aware active people.

21 Julia Peric, *Student volunteering*, citation: 3-14.

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