

5. Returning home

5.1 Evaluation

5.1.1 Evaluation, not just a couple of questions at the end ...



Evaluation is a lot more than the traditional few questions before the volunteers go home after their IVS. Although we have put evaluation in this chapter on “Returning home”, we would argue that evaluation should be an integral part of your whole IVS project and it goes hand in hand with Chapter 4.3 “Ongoing support of volunteers”.

One thing that all evaluations have in common is that they measure goals that were set before starting the project, because it goes without saying that you need to have defined where you were going if you are to measure whether you have reached this destination or not.

In IVS these goals lie in different areas: the work and related outcomes (learning skills, taking training, doing projects, being efficient), social integration (getting to know friends, having fun, getting along with colleagues), the intercultural dimension (getting to know the people, learning a language, experiencing the country) and personal issues (motivation, homesickness, conflicts). And, last but not least, the practical arrangements (food, accommodation, transport, free-time arrangements) should also be evaluated. These are areas in which regular evaluation can prove useful in improving a voluntary service project for all involved – better sooner than too late.

Evaluations can have a lot of different functions and can take very diverse forms. Here is a rough overview of the different kinds of evaluation.

5.1.2 Evaluation: why, oh why?

Evaluations want to find out whether the aims were reached, but for different purposes:

- The best-known kind of evaluation is probably “summative evaluation”. This generally comes at the end of a project (or at the end of a project phase) and tries to sum up the outcomes and the results achieved. Often it also leads to a judgment on the quality of the project, which may lead to a decision to give a certificate to the volunteer, to allocate more money to the project or to repeat the experience in the future – or not. These evaluations are not very comfortable because a lot depends on them.
- In contrast, “formative evaluations” focus on the process and not so much on the result. They aim to analyse how the project and the volunteer are doing and allow for influence on their development. Formative evaluation helps the volunteers to learn and reflect on their experience. It is held all through the IVS and it provides feedback about

the project and the people involved in it: whether it is going somewhere or where improvements could be made in the future. It allows the volunteers to let some steam off and exteriorise ideas and frustrations: “why, oh why didn’t we/did we have to ...?” However, constructive evaluation is also very motivating.

- This type of evaluation is less judgmental, and instead creates an atmosphere of openness and caring where concerns can be voiced in a safe environment. By putting compliments and problems on the table, the formative evaluation is a way of making the volunteer co-responsible for his/her learning experience.

Summative Evaluation	Formative Evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * focus on result * looking to the past * to judge * summing up * consequences * at the end 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * focus on process * looking to the future * to help * steering * development * through out

If we consider IVS as a learning experience, it is evident that formative evaluations are a necessity to help steer the development of the volunteer, but also of the other actors involved, including the project organisers, to make the project a success. That is why this chapter focuses on the ongoing formative evaluation. However, the organisation will have to make a summative evaluation as well at the end of the IVS for the funders, but also for themselves to take stock, see if the goals were reached and decide whether to repeat the experience or not.

5.1.3 How to evaluate?

There are many different formats of evaluation. Some are very formal and structured, but this information can be complemented by informal indicators.

In schools you often find very formal evaluation methods, such as exams, because they allow more objectivity. In IVS you could use the services of an external evaluator, who would come and interview people using a grid to assess whether your objectives have been reached or not. It is not surprising that these methods are mostly used for summative evaluation purposes.

In the case of formative evaluations, the most formal and structured method uses “evaluation sessions”. These entail taking some quality time at regular intervals and using some of the many exercises available (see below). Using the same method several times allows you to monitor a development that is going on. Different exercises can keep the evaluation sessions fresh and exciting. Sometimes there might not be any specific exercises, but more of an evaluation chat, in which the volunteer and the support person can bring up topics of concern. Of course exercises can be combined with opening the floor for any other feedback. These evaluation sessions offer a clear framework for the parties involved to come up with positive or negative criticism. A safe atmosphere of trust and co-operation will contribute to making the project a success.

Evaluation does not always have to be done with someone else. Self-assessment is also a valid tool for evaluation. The advantage is that volunteers can do this at any moment they choose. It allows them to actively monitor their learning process and take all their feelings, experiences and observations into account to construct their big picture. Of course the results

should be communicated regularly to the support person in the project, to share responsibility for the voluntary service together. Self-assessment can be done using a grid showing the different goals of the volunteer (or of the project), but it can also take the more free format of a diary.

Information from formal evaluation and self-assessment can be complemented by informal evaluation elements – information gathered randomly about the project, the volunteer or other actors involved. This can help to reveal the motivation of the volunteer (spontaneous overtime or absenteeism, the look on the face), the quality of their work (incoming complaints or compliments, speed of tasks accomplished), co-operation with other staff (reactions of staff to the volunteers, time spent together, friction) and so forth. These indicators can then be interpreted and discussed at a formal evaluation session, to find out what they really mean.

5.1.4 Do you want to evaluate with me?

The person doing the evaluation influences the tone of the evaluation a lot. Ideally, evaluation should be done in a supportive and constructive atmosphere, so it is best if the evaluator does not have a position that is too high for the volunteer to feel comfortable. And the evaluator should not judge, but rather work together with the volunteer on the future of the project.

If the evaluation is done individually, it can be tailor-made, addressing specific needs of the volunteer. This makes it more personal and it should be confidential. Evaluating in a group with other volunteers has the advantage of each person comparing their experience with the impressions of others. This can be reassuring and motivating. In any case, evaluation should be done in an appropriate space (no people walking through, no noise, no phones) and in a clear time frame (everybody should know how much time there is for how many subjects).

Tips for evaluations during your IVS project

- Make sure you have clearly defined your objectives in a measurable way – what are the criteria that allow you to say that you are on the right track in reaching your objectives?
- If language is a difficulty for the volunteers, use more visual methods or use a language that the volunteers are more comfortable in.
- Evaluations should be confidential, unless all involved agree to inform others.
- Therefore evaluations should also take place in a private atmosphere and not in the middle of the office where others can listen in.
- Evaluations should be repeated at regular intervals to grasp how things are developing.
- Sometimes it can be useful to put some time and distance between the evaluator and a very recent, strong experience, to evaluate it more objectively.
- Try to use neutral words in your questions (not “bad” but “needs improvement”, instead of “don’t you think it would have been better to xyz?” try “what do you think could have been better?”).
- Sometimes it is easier to use symbols or drawings than to explain feelings.
- Invite the volunteers to do self-assessment and give feedback afterwards.
- An evaluation should be a two-way discussion.
- Build up confidence and trust with your volunteers in order to get the real information out.
- Do not let little difficulties become bigger; take evaluations seriously and act on them.

5.1.5 Some methods

- Draw up learning points, and strategies to achieve them – for example a step-by-step approach (see Chapter 4.2.1 “Motivating the volunteer”).
- Draw a thermometer and at regular intervals invite the volunteers to mark on it their motivation (very low motivation below zero, high motivation at 50°).
- Ask volunteers to write a letter to themselves stating where they will be in, for example, a month’s time. You give or send this letter to them after this period.
- Make a list of red flags (negative experiences that put the volunteer off) and green flags (positive experiences that keep the volunteer going), check how often green and red flags happen; work on strategies to hoist more green flags and get rid of the red ones.
- Draw a circle with different sectors (like a darts board). Put an element you want to evaluate in each sector. Ask everybody to put a symbol in this sector, either more towards the middle if they liked it, or more towards the outside edge if they did not. Different symbols can be used for different people or for the same person at different times.
- Find a multifaceted picture with a lot of people/buildings/items; ask volunteers to identify with one of them and explain why (“I am this jumping man because I feel energetic in my project” or “I am this highway because things are going too fast for me”). A variation could be to find an object that symbolises their feeling about a topic you decide.
- ...?

If you want more models of evaluation, check T-Kit No. 10 on *Educational Evaluation in Youth Work* (available to download at <http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int>).

5.2 Follow-up



For many organisations, voluntary service is defined mainly as the period of time a volunteer spends on a specific project; everything that happens before and after that period is considered of less importance. In previous chapters we have already seen how important preparation is for a successful experience abroad. But also, after the placement abroad, there are many possibilities for follow-up that could be taken into account when designing an IVS project.

5.2.1 Coming back after being abroad

Volunteers often suffer from reverse culture shock when they come back home after a long stay abroad. They have gone through an experience that the people at home do not necessarily understand. The volunteers have developed during their voluntary service, without people at home knowing. The volunteers' behaviour may have changed and be frowned upon when back home, because they expect to get back the same person who left them some months before. The volunteer thinks that people will react in a certain way and in reality they do not.

Volunteers often complain that little attention is given to their needs after they conclude their voluntary assignments abroad and that in most cases they experience reintegration difficulties on returning to their home countries. During their stay abroad in the project they were perhaps the centre of attention and lots of new things were happening, whereas back home they are faced with their old reality again. The volunteers seem to have returned to where they left off.

But going back home should not be the end of it all – it could be the start of new things, when planned properly. Hopefully, the volunteers went through a lot of interesting experiences when abroad, but this learning could be taken further. The support person of the hosting organisation may be vital to monitor and optimise the learning process of the volunteer during the project, but it is up to sending organisations to provide their volunteers with follow-up opportunities. Sending organisations can guide and support volunteers in doing something with what they gained during their voluntary service.

In fact, follow-up opportunities should be planned as much as possible right from the start of IVS. Sending organisations are in a particularly good position to do so since they are also responsible for preparing the volunteer before departure. They can work with the volunteer on a plan of action to match the interests and wishes of the volunteer and sending organisation. Follow-up in the end is nothing more than making sure that IVS has maximal impact.

5.2.2 Follow-up meetings

One way of addressing follow-up is to organise one or more meetings with your volunteers, either in groups or individually; in the case of long-term volunteering, you would ideally have both types of meeting. A follow-up meeting with your volunteers can be used for:

- evaluating the IVS in general;
- comparing expectations or objectives with actual outcomes;
- identifying the main negative and positive outcomes;
- helping the volunteer to deal constructively with negative experiences abroad;
- helping the volunteer with particularly difficult reintegration problems (reverse culture shock);
- providing the volunteer with opportunities to share his or her experience with other volunteers who went through a similar experience;
- informing the volunteer about other volunteering possibilities or commitments within the same or other organisations.

5.2.3 Educational and professional opportunities

With some target groups, or in some sending organisations, the aim of sending a volunteer on IVS is to develop skills (language, social, practical skills) outside the regular schooling or training opportunities for their future pathway. In such cases, it is important to keep this educational perspective in mind right through their voluntary service, but especially when going back to the home country, to a next stage in their life project. After IVS they will be able to decide better on what they wish to do with their lives, and whether what they did abroad will

be of use to future activities. For example, doing voluntary service with the disabled might trigger a professional career in this sector, or the volunteer might have developed an interest in the language of the host country. The sending organisation is a vital player in facilitating the development of such new educational or professional perspectives as much as possible upon the young person's return.

5.2.4 Social security

Another issue that may need special attention is social security. Most European countries do not have laws defining the status of volunteers, so volunteering abroad often has an effect on social security payments like unemployment benefits, housing support or minimum income. Most long-term volunteers lose their social benefits once they leave the country. But sometimes, on their return, volunteers even stop being eligible for other benefits or student allowances. National authorities can be very bureaucratic and reluctant to accept any claims made by volunteers, so sending organisations must often intervene as mediators between the two of them to explain what the voluntary scheme was about. Preparing in advance for these eventualities is by far the best way of avoiding them once the volunteer is back.

5.2.5 Follow-up for sending and hosting organisations

Follow-up should not be seen as benefiting only the volunteer. Sending organisations can see their participation in IVS as a learning experience too and one that can benefit them in many tangible ways. For a sending organisation, after evaluating their experience, follow-up could mean, for instance:

- the continuation, or interruption, of a specific partnership;
- the search for new partners in the same or different areas of work;
- the integration of new working methods in response to suggestions made by the volunteer or observation of best practice in the host organisation.

Sending organisations can also see returning volunteers as important resources to help them with their work, for instance:

- The sending organisation may invite the volunteer to join them and introduce what he or she learned abroad in their current activities.
- The volunteer may start helping them with the recruitment and preparation of new volunteers by sharing his or her experience with them.

Host organisations can also follow up IVS by reinforcing or revising their partnership strategies and by using the volunteer to further develop their activities. After evaluating the voluntary service project, the host organisations may also decide to introduce new working methods and activities, following suggestions by the volunteer or simply by realising that things could be better if done differently. Quite often having a fresh look at your organisation by a foreign volunteer allows you to improve your activities by making you more aware of how things are actually done and how they could be changed.

5.3 Recognition and certification



IVS is not only a great experience and a way of supporting communities in need. At the same time – like it or not – voluntary service also benefits volunteers. Some sending organisations even send volunteers with the main purpose of providing them with a learning experience, gaining skills and increasing their employability. Even though we argued that there should be a balance between the personal development of the volunteer and the altruistic contribution to society (see Chapter 1.4 “Reasons for international voluntary service”), it would still be a missed opportunity not to recognise the benefits of voluntary service for volunteers.

Some of the competences that volunteers gain are:

- life experience, social competence and maturity, which have an impact on their future personal and professional development;
- a complex of so-called soft skills, such as the abilities to communicate and co-operate with people, and to create contacts and partnership at personal and professional levels;
- communication skills in the sense that volunteers abroad often learn to use various means of communication (Internet, e-mail, phone, etc.);
- knowledge of how to work in a team, make decisions, and be flexible and autonomous;
- professional knowledge and practical skills in certain areas of work like administration, social care/services, intercultural communication, accountancy and environment;
- specific language abilities from being in a language environment other than the native one;
- intercultural skills, understanding another culture, trying not to judge/interpret behaviour wrongly, tolerance of ambiguity, learning to see things from different perspectives.

5.3.1 Reflecting and documenting learning

Youth workers are probably convinced that young volunteers gain certain competences from IVS. But it is not only the youth worker who should know about the progress a young person has made while on a voluntary project. It is also important that the young people themselves reflect on their experience and the competences gained. The mentors or youth workers involved in the project can raise the young persons’ awareness of their learning through the use of a variety of methods:

- dialogue: regular discussions about what the young people have learned;

- a learning diary (or images, drawings, songs): young people record daily what they learn;
- competence thinking: a youth worker introduces key competences and the volunteers measure themselves regularly on one or more of these competences;
- peer reflection: several volunteers discuss (on an equal footing) their experiences and the competences gained.

If this reflection is done throughout the project, volunteers become more aware of their learning process. It is then easier at the end to sum up what the voluntary experience brought to them. The volunteers can document their learning in a variety of ways: in a portfolio, in a certificate, in their CV.

5.3.2 Recognition of IVS

The aim of documenting a volunteer's learning is to get recognition for the experience. But "recognition" is a word that can have many different meanings:

- Self-recognition: the young persons have become aware of their own learning and are able to use these learning outcomes in other fields.
- Social recognition: social players acknowledge the value of the young person's IVS – the competences acquired, the work done within the activities and the organisations involved.
- Formal recognition: the "validation" of learning outcomes and processes by certificates and diplomas that formally recognise the achievements of an individual.
- Political recognition: the recognition of voluntary service (and the actors involved) in legislation, in political strategies and in funding.

Depending on the type of recognition, you can build different elements into your IVS. Self-recognition has been largely described under the heading "Reflecting and documenting learning". The youth worker in the project can work with the volunteers to make them more conscious of all the things they have learned.

If the learning also has to be recognised by other players, then the documentation of acquired competences is more important. The format or tool used to show the impact of the voluntary service should be adapted to the receiver. For example:

- If young people want to use their experience in job applications, the certificate or letter of recommendation should be adapted to what an employer is looking for: a quick overview of an applicant's competences and experiences, some referees and so on.
- If the organisation is looking for political recognition, it will have to show the impact the voluntary projects have on society and how it contributes to social provision or prevention of unwanted situations.
- If voluntary activity is to be formally recognised, a thorough description of the learning, the methods used, the outcomes, the support structure and other details should be submitted to an educational authority for validation, so that the certificate given at the end of IVS will be formally recognised.

5.3.3 Youthpass – More than a certificate

Within the Youth in Action programme, all participants are entitled to a Youthpass. This is a certificate that describes what the young people or youth workers have learned during their European Voluntary Service, in a youth exchange or on a training course. It uses the European key competences to visualise what young people have gained through international activities.

But Youthpass is more than a piece of paper at the end of the project. Youth workers are invited to set up a whole reflection process during the project, to make participants and volunteers aware of their learning. The young people create their Youthpass certificate together with a support person. This way the learning outcomes, and the Youthpass certificate based on the international experience, are far richer.

As such, the Youthpass process supports young people's reflection on non-formal learning and personal development; it contributes to active European citizenship and increases young people's employability on the labour market. Youth organisations making active use of the Youthpass process contribute to the social recognition of youth work.

5.3.4 Getting the most out of a certificate

An easy and common way of documenting skills gained in voluntary service is a certificate – a written statement certifying that the volunteer has participated in IVS in the hosting organisation over a certain period of time. More and more, as in the Youthpass certificate, it is possible to add information about the competences gained during IVS.

But a certificate is only a piece of paper, unless you think about it strategically. To give certificates more weight, you could do the following:

- Detail the tasks and responsibilities of the volunteer during their voluntary service.
- Write a letter of recommendation to go with the certificate.
- Add the contact addresses of some referees to the certificate.
- Show what skills the volunteer gained in voluntary service and how you can prove this.
- Create a portfolio of the outcomes of the volunteer's tasks (pictures, articles or posters of the events that the volunteer organised).
- Try to link up with educational institutes or authorities that could certify the learning that happened during the IVS.
- The visual aspect of the certificate is also important – make it look serious and provide it with the necessary stamps and signatures.
- Consider having the certificate in a widely known language (or even bilingual), keeping future readers of it in mind.