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Recognition of voluntary activities – focusing on what young people learn from voluntary activities and how this can be recognised.

Preface

In the beginning of the eighties sociologists observed that developing economy didn't improve the situation on the labour market. There was growing unemployment rate among young people, who after finishing school remained outside the labour markets. Great number of them didn't have sufficient education level, skills and experience to get job and start an adult life. There have been some activities taken by the European Commission in order to support young people and their transition from school to labour market.

In this paper I will focus on European Voluntary Service, programme undertaken by the European Commission in 1995 which was aimed to create a space for young people to gain educational and professional experience. Basing on my own research I will try to answer if and what polish volunteers learn from voluntary activities and how it influences their educational and professional choices. In the second part of this paper I will present polish pathways to recognition of experiences gained during non-formal education.

From education to work?

In opinion of F. Ferraroti, Italian sociologist *“youth is a social invention of industrial society and at the same time its most obvious failure (...). In traditional societies, youth as separate and specific social group simply did not exist. One would pass directly from infancy to adulthood and responsibility and full-time work. Schooling was but a passing phase (...) training was done directly on the job”*¹. Traditional transition hasn't existed any more. Education doesn't lead directly to employment. Education system is not flexible enough to lag behind fast changing technology and requirements of the modern labour markets. The university degree is not sufficient to get job and start an adult life.

Young people feel lost in this situation and have no knowledge where to improve their skills and get professional experience. They do not know what kind of experience provide work.

¹ *Youth and work. The incidence of the economic situation on the access of young people to education, culture and work*, Regional youth meetings, Report, recommendations and documents of a European regional meetings, Venice, 7-11 November 1977, p. 39

European Commission undertook some initiatives , which were focused on improving the occupational and social position of young people. Among them there are programmes like Socrates/Erasmus, which enhance the university students exchange, Leonardo Da Vinci for young workers and last but not least European Voluntary Service for young people. Those programmes create European educational space.

On basis of decision 1031/2000/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe on 13 April 2000 European Commission implemented Community action programme Youth². It was aimed at young people aged 15-25. This programme was however a continuation of already existing programmes *Youth for Europe* and *European Voluntary Service*. Decision 1031/2000/EC made the programme structure more clear and comprehensible for the users and also added three new programmes, e.g. Youth Initiatives and Support Measures.

European Voluntary Service existed before the official establishment. In 1996 the pilot action was made and 200 young people participated in voluntary activities abroad. Since then European Voluntary Service has been gaining greater importance as a source of educational and professional experience for young people and a mean of involvement of youngsters from less opportunities backgrounds. What was important is the fact that EVS lied in non-formal education area. This is so important because a great number of EVS participants are early school leavers or are outside formal education system³.

The main objective of the European Voluntary Service is to reinforce social and occupational integration of young people and help local communities by introducing good practices involving young volunteers who work for 6-12 months. During period of the voluntary service volunteers get new social and professional experiences, improve their knowledge and develop personal skills.

Voluntary activities are not only a way of using a spare time but also a source of new professional experiences. That is why is it should be recognised as a part of professional experience gained in non-formal way. Definition of volunteering changes its meaning from *help the others* to *helping others, help yourself*. Young people are more and more aware of

² Official Journal L 117, 18.05.2000

³ According to Youth Programme Inclusion strategy programme one of the key objectives is *empowerment of young people with fewer opportunities by using the different instruments of the YOUTH programme and by developing and implementing new creative approaches in this field.*, http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/priorities/inclusion_2004_en.html

this fact, so that each year the number of young people involved in Poland in voluntary activities increases. Also the number of young people who participate in European voluntary Service increase constantly. Data presented below shows engagement of people in voluntary activities in Poland. Comparing year 2001 and 2003 we see almost threefold increase of volunteers under 25 years old.

Table 1. Engagement in voluntary activities in Poland			
Age	Volunteers		
	2001	2002	2003
Under 25	8,10%	11,90%	22,50%
26-35	7,80%	9,60%	19,40%
36-46	10,40%	13,60%	18,60%
46-55	14,50%	13,60%	20,50%
Over 55	10,10%	7,10%	8,30%

Source: Polish Volunteerism and philanthropy research 2003, KLON/JAWOR 2003

Second table presents number of EVS participants in Poland.

Table 2. Number of European Voluntary Service participants in Poland			
ACTION 2 EVS	Total 2000	Total 2001	Total 2002
Applications submitted	51	211	378
Financed projects	49	159	285
Number of volunteers	49	159	285

Source: Polish National Agency of the Youth Programme internal rapport, 2002

Data presented above show that in Poland there is a growing engagement of young people in voluntary activities, both in home and foreign volunteer's programs.

This data inspired me to conduct research related to European Voluntary Service.

Empirical research

The aim of the research was to assess educational and occupational benefits gained by young people involved in EVS. In particular, the specific objectives of the research project were to understand:

- What is the motivation of young people to participate in European Voluntary Service,
- If young participants are aware of benefits they can obtain during the service,
- If participants engage themselves into the service to get particular skills and knowledge or if it is only the will of “foreign adventure”,
- If, according to EVS volunteers, participation in EVS improves job opportunities.

My empirical research is focused on young people, who participated in long-term European Voluntary Service in 2000-2002. In first part of the research I focused on motivation of young people to participate in EVS and what people learn during periods of their voluntary service. The second part is attempt to answer if the experience gained during voluntary service can be recognised in Poland and what should be done in order to increase the recognition of these experiences.

Research was conducted in the beginning of 2004

Methodology

The methodology includes questionnaire sent via post and email to Polish EVS volunteers who completed their service in years 2000-2002. I decided to send questionnaire both to volunteers who provide an email and postal address only. Volunteers were chosen from the database of volunteers from the Polish National Agency of the Youth Programme. I chose a group of 241 volunteers who fulfilled assumption of the research 150 with e-mail address and 91 with postal address only. On 16th January 2004 I send questionnaires to volunteers. After two weeks I received 68 filled questionnaires, which gave 30 % return rate. The return rate was relatively high, however some information was to be completed in process of communication with the respondents (e. g. some missing dates, unclear answers⁴).

Data presented below show only partial outcome of my research.

Demographic structure of respondents – sex, age, level of education

Majority of participants of European Voluntary Service are females in all countries of the Programme. The equality policy is introduced however to increase number of male

⁴ Mail questionnaire is applied very seldom and it is treated as “poor substitute” for face-to-face interview. They are said to bring low percentage of returns (in random samples approximately 10-20%); SZTABIŃSKI, F. Ankieta Pocztaowa i wywiad kwestionariuszowy, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa, 1997, p. 242

participants. Some National Agencies of Youth Programme introduced points system when assessing application. It might encourage sending and hosting organisation in accepting also male volunteer on project, which were mainly for females. Among polish participants of the EVS 83,3% are women and 14,7% are men. The average age of respondents is 25 years. Average age of European volunteers is much lower - 20-21 years old.

Table 4. Age of the respondents	
years	%
29	2,90%
28	8,80%
27	11,70%
26	14,70%
25	32,30%
24	14,70%
23	2,90%
22	8,80%
21	2,90%
<i>Source: Own research</i>	

Youngsters from old EU⁵ take up their service usually after they had finished high school. Polish youngsters mostly decide to become voluntary service (EVS) when they are matriculated university students . The reason of this difference lies in fact, that in the majority of the countries students simply have to sign up for the universities (e.g. France, Italy). In Poland majority higher education institution require entrance examines. One-year break makes then almost impossible to pass exams. However recent research done on polish participants of the European Voluntary Service⁶ shows that age of volunteers in Poland decrease and more people of age 20-21 decide to become volunteers.

Table 5. Level of education of respondents	
High school students	2,90%

⁵ European Union before enlargement

⁶ Evaluation research is being carried by the Polish Evaluation Society

Recently graduated high school students	14,70%
University students	64,70%
University graduated	17,70%

Source: Own research

Previous experience in voluntary work

The one of the main question when we take in consideration is if EVS participants have ever participated in voluntary activities before. What is so significant about polish volunteers is the fact that most of them (45,9%) have never been volunteers before.

44,1% of EVS volunteers however participated in any kind of volunteer work. 86,6% of them worked with children, 20% volunteers were engaged in development of NGOs, 13,3% worked for NGOs, which manage volunteers in different actions, 13,3% helped in NGO office.

Motivation to go on EVS

When we take into consideration the motivation to go for EVS we have to ask also why volunteer chose certain subject of the project. The subject refers to interests and the expectation of the volunteers towards project content. The next table presents what is important for volunteers when they choose projects of the EVS. It can give also answers what they expect to learn during EVS. For the majority of young people taking up the service the most important things are: relation to their interests (47%), country(47%) which usually is connected with the will of learning the language (47%) and the possibility of acquiring new skills and knowledge.

The least important reason is connection of the project with previous volunteer and work experience.

Table 6. What was important for you when choosing project subject?		
1	It had to correspond to my interests	47%
2	It had to be placed in certain country	47%
3	It had to give me a chance to get new skills and knowledge	47%

4	It had to give me a chance to learn language	47%
5	It had to give an chance to use my knowledge and skills from school, university	23,50%
6	There were places available	20,50%
7	It had to correspondent with my education	17,60%
8	I wanted to know new area	14,70%
9	The subject had to concerned certain area	11,70%
10	Project should be with other foreign volunteers	11,70%
11	Other	8,80%
	- I don't know - 2	
	-I knew the hosting organisation before - 3	
	- Someone told me it was interesting - 1	
12	It had to corresponded with my previous work experience	5,80%
13	It had to correspondent with my previous volunteer experience	5,80%

Source: Own research

I asked volunteers to write 5 reasons of their decision to participate in EVS. They had to write them in order from the most important reason (1) to the least important (5) one.

First of all volunteers wanted get to know new culture and people. 14% of all indications were made on this reason. The second most chosen reason was to learn or improve foreign language (12,8%).

I was also interested if volunteer choose EVS because they think it will improve their chances to get better job in the future. 4,8% of volunteers stated that EVS gives occupational experience and in consequence helps to get better job in the future (4,8%). From the analysis of the data I can state that most volunteers choose participation in EVS, because they want to improve their understanding of other culture – its history, politics, education, mentality, customs. They are so called “international key qualifications”⁷.

⁷ KRISTENSEN, S., *Learning by leaving-Towards a pedagogy for transnational mobility in the context of vocational education and training (VET)*, European Centre for the Development of Vocational training, Youth Website Mobility Section_SKR

Table 7. Motivation to go on EVS							
Why did you decide to participate in EVS?		Ranking (number of choices)					% of all indicates
		1	2	3	4	5	
1	I wanted to know other people, new culture	6	16	8	14	2	14
2	I wanted to learn language	8	6	12	10	6	12,8
3	I wanted to get new skills and knowledge	2	8	4	12	8	10,3
4	I wanted to help other people	4	10	8	2	6	9,1
5	It was an adventure	6	0	10	4	8	8,5
6	I wanted to make a break in my school to think what I want to do in the future	6	6	2	0	8	6,7
7	Because I wanted to be independent	2	2	6	6	0	4,8
8	EVS gives chance to get occupational experience	6	2	2	0	6	4,8
9	EVS experience helps to get better job in the future helps to	8	0	4	2	2	4,8
10	I wanted more experience in this area	2	4	2	2	2	3,6
11	I wanted to know better myself	2	0	4	4	2	3,6
12	I was unemployed	4	0	0	0	4	2,4
13	EVS project was adequate to my education area	2	0	0	2	4	2,4
14	One of my friend was EVS volunteer	2	2	0	0	2	1,8
15	Employers prefer person with volunteer experiences	0	0	2	0	4	1,8
16	I wanted to check if the subject interest me	0	0	4	0	2	1,8
17	I wanted to go abroad before I continue my education	6	0	0	0	0	1,8
18	Other - I knew before hosting organisation - I couldn't have found interesting job in Poland	4	0	2	0	0	1,8
19	EVS gives chance to developed knowledge and skills gained in school, at the university	0	0	0	4	0	1,8
20	I have just finished school, university and I didn't know what to do in my life	0	0	0	2	2	1,2

Source: Own research

It seems that young people are aware that participation in EVS increase the job opportunities, however they decide to take the service because they want to experience living in different culture, with youngsters from all over the Europe. Only 1,2% chose EVS because they didn't have any concept what to do after finishing school.

Skills required by projects and learned through participation

In further research I asked volunteers if their projects required any specific skills or knowledge. 67,6% of the respondents said that their project didn't required any skills. 32,4% stated that they were asked pervious experience. They enumerate various skills and what is important also features of character openness, tolerance, courage. 36,4% of hosting projects required fluent knowledge of language.

1	Fluent knowledge of language	36,4
2	Features of character: tolerance, openness, courage	36,4
3	Previous experience in work with children/youth	36,4
4	Computer processing	27,3
5	Sense of art.	9,1
6	Knowledge of subject area	9,1
7	Organisational skills	9,1
8	Driving licence	9,1

Source: Own research

Majority of volunteers asked if they got new skills and knowledge during their projects, responded yes - 76,5%. The most obvious outcome of participation in European Voluntary Service is knowledge of language - 46,1% indications. Second one is "interpersonal skills" - 30% indications. 23% of the volunteers said also that they got some organisational skills during their projects. Very important outcome was also the ability of living in different culture – 19,2%.

11,5% volunteers indicate as outcome of their EVS experience broadening of their horizon and getting some values like tolerance, openness and respect. Volunteers indicate as an important skill also better understanding of certain subjects like youth, handicapped problems, ecological issues.

Table 9. Skills and knowledge gained during EVS		
1	Language	46,1%
2	Interpersonal skills	30%
3	Organisational skills	23%
4	Better understanding of certain subjects: youth, handicapped problems, ecological issues	23%
5	Ability to live in different culture	19,2%
6	Technical skills	15,3%
7	Better knowledge about youth programmes	15,3%
8	Some values: openness, tolerance, respect	11,5%
9	Artistic skills	7,7%
10	Ability to work with "disadvantage" youth	7,7%
11	Cooking skills	7,7%
12	Sport skills	3,8%

Source: Own research

Overall evaluation of EVS influence

Participation in EVS influence personal development of the volunteers the most. However we can assume that personal development influences educational and occupational choices. Volunteer are more open for new experiences, sometimes they decide to study subjects they would have never decided before or they become convinced that occupational choices they made were right. Over 50% of the volunteers stated that EVS has an influence on educational choices and over 60% stated that participation in service also influenced their occupational choice.

32% of the volunteers state that EVS experience has no influence on increasing the employability. However over 50% of volunteers answered that participation in EVS has influence on getting a job.

Table 10. Influence on different areas of life					
Influence on:	Significant influence	Big influence	Average influence	Small influence	No influence
Educational choice	23,50%	29%	12%	0%	35%
Occupational choice	23,50%	44%	12%	0%	21%
Getting job	26,40%	24%	12%	5,90%	32%
Personal development	70,50%	21%	2,90%	2,90%	2,90%

Source: Own research

Recapitulation

Aim of my research was to find answer on some core issues referring to influence of EVS on volunteers and their educational and professional choices. I can state that polish volunteers are aware of benefits they can get by participating in EVS however this consciousness come after the EVS, rarely before departure. Most of volunteers want to get some new intercultural experience, learn or improve language. They don't associate EVS with professional experience. After the service is completed volunteers discover that it has a great influence on their personality and in consequence in their choices concerning adult life.

EVS is an important experience in voluntary curriculum, however in Poland it is not recognizable enough by the employers. In the second part of this paper I will try to highlight some core issues concerning recognition and validation of experiences gained during non-formal education.

Recognition of voluntary experience

Research conducted on polish volunteers shows that a lot of polish EVS participants expect that experience gained during the service will help them not only do develop their knowledge, skills and personality, but also will be tramp card and will enrich their curricula comparing with those who don't take up the voluntary service.

European Union and governments of the EU countries make efforts to increase recognition of experiences gained during volunteering activities. Basing on my research I can affirm that voluntary activities are still not recognised by polish employers who still treat it as an interesting break in curriculum vitae, but they don't know how it could be useful in work.

The main problem of recognition of voluntary experience is that volunteering itself is not recognised in certain countries where programmes for volunteers exists from some time only and the phenomenon of volunteering has a short story. In post-soviet countries, e.g. Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary volunteering has still very bad connotation, because it refers to the communist ideology where *“each citizen should be involved in community improvement and should do something beneficial for society”*⁸. In consequence in the beginning of nineties when the fall of the iron curtain took place, even if the flood of new non-governmental organisation appeared, not many people were keen on volunteering for the foundation and associations. KLON/JAWOR’s statistics⁹ mentioned in the beginning of this research indicates that even in 2001 not many people were involved in voluntary activities, e.g. only 8,1% in 2001 of people under 25 years of age. In Poland, according to some researches, the word “volunteer” is not recognised by many people.

We should take into consideration that the voluntary sector in Central and Eastern Europe has a long lasting story. Before the 1989 breakout the civil society has proved its ability to organise itself under extremely difficult circumstances in Eastern and Central Europe. The study prepared by Ewa Leś¹⁰ about the voluntary sector in post-communist East-Central Europe shows that even though there was no legal framework for NGOs activities, this sector was remarkably developed, however words like “volunteering”, “non governmental” organisation didn’t exist that time.

Since the beginning of nineties a great work was done to overcome negative connotation of the voluntary activities. People not forced any more to work for the common benefit, are given free will to participate in activities of NGO sector, in different areas and they participate more willingly. The way to increase recognition of the volunteer sector is to inform people what are the voluntary activities, where they can be done. Newspapers and magazines have very important role to play as they are the most spread source of information, also for young people.

One of the aims should be also increasing the recognition of voluntary programmes among young people who are “actors” of the voluntary scene. Still a lot of young people, a specially from the less privileged backgrounds don’t know that they can volunteer, that there are some programmes which helped them to get experiences. There should be more open

⁸ Legal status of volunteers in Europe, research study, CEV & AVSO, 2002-2003,
<http://www.avso.org/en/activities/CEV&AVSO.htm>

⁹ www.badania.ngo.pl

¹⁰ LEŚ, E., The voluntary sector in post-communist East Central Europe, Civicus, Washington D.C., 1994

information access, by means of different institution of public life, NGO, government institutions. There should be a greater engagement of the state in promotion of the voluntary activities. Poland hasn't got youth policy for many years. In 2003 Polish Youth Strategy for the years 2003-2012¹¹ was adopted by the Ministry of National Education and Sport. The second strategic objective is creating chances for the development of own activity of the young generation. It can be realised also by development of youth voluntary service, either on national and international level. In 2003 The Ministry and the National Agency of the Youth Programme started popularising international forms of the youth voluntary service, e. g. Youth Programme. In 2004 there was a database youth voluntary service created. In this structure works Eurodesk Polska, and the next step will be in 2004-2005 building national system of youth information compatible with Eurodesk. These actions should increase access of young people to information and in consequence also recognition of the experiences gotten during period of voluntary service.

Furthermore there is no good system of certification of skills gained during the service. NGOs didn't have to certified engaged volunteers before 2003 . To change this situation Legal Act on Public Benefit and volunteering in Poland was issued in April 2003 (came into force 29 June 2003). This act provides a framework for the activity of the third sector and the volunteers. NGO are obliged to issue written volunteer agreement when the period of voluntary work exceeds 30 days. In addition they have to provide safe and hygienic work conditions, cover travel expenses incurred by volunteer in connection with the service, cover training costs. These solutions are still not obeyed by organisations, because many organisation find them beaurocratic and time consuming.

Polish government adopted also Programme "Fist Job" which was created for young graduated people. Voluntary Service was included in this programme as a valuable source of work experience and to counteract to social exclusion.

A lot was done to increase recognition of voluntary services in Poland. However still there are some solutions missing. Voluntary activities still haven't been treated as a period of employment for the purposes of receiving state welfare payments. There is no distinction between short-term and long-term voluntary activities. Solutions in these areas would encourage employers to treat voluntary experiences as equal to work experiences. As I wrote in the beginning of this research employers often don't understand what does it mean to work

¹¹ www.menis.gov.pl

as a volunteer and that volunteers are often engage in activities which require a very good knowledge of certain areas.

Recognition and validation of experiences gained during non-formal education, i.e. European Voluntary Service is still not appreciated enough in Poland. However Polish National Agency of the Youth Programme and some NGO umbrella organisation work to promote and enhance the recognition of this area of learning. On 8th December there will be first polish conference on non-formal learning which will gather politics, stakeholders, youth workers, youth leaders and all people who are interested in non-formal education recognition.

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