# Learning from volunteering    **7**

**Recognition and validation of volunteer experiences**

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Volunteers make a significant contribution to our society by giving their time, knowledge and experience. They not only give and share what they already possess, they also enhance their competences and gain new ones. In this way volunteering has not only value for society, it also has value for the volunteer's personal and professional development and career. In VPL-terms: volunteering is a nice mixture of non-formal and informal learning.

Edos Foundation is developing ways to make volunteers and volunteer organisations aware of this added value, and how to get it validated. In several European projects we have developed easy-to-use tools and methods for the individual volunteer and for the volunteer organisation. For this we can rely on our more than thirty years of experience in working with volunteers. As contribution to the VPL Biennale I share some highlights of our work, as inspiration for all, and hopefully to prevent some of you from re-inventing the wheel.

## 1. European policy

Volunteering can contribute to people's personal development as a step to a paid job. By volunteering, people can develop general/transversal skills and competences (e.g. working in teams, conflict resolution), specific job skills (depending on the kind of voluntary work), and so called employee skills. The fact that voluntary work can play this role is widely acknowledged on EU-level, as written in several policy documents[1].

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1    Amongst others: The role of voluntary activities in social policy, Council of the European Union (October 2011); Volunteering: passport to a job?, Committee on culture and education of the European Parliament (June 2012); Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (December 2012); Towards a European area of skills and qualifications, European Commission (June 2014); Validation of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning, European Economic and Social Committee (September 2015).

There is evidence that volunteering enhances people's competences: a research study of the City of London[2] on learning and development of 546 volunteers working in schools and colleges shows that volunteers develop skills and competences across a broad range of business-relevant areas, e.g.:

- Communication skills.
- Ability to help others.
- Adaptability and ability to be effective in different surroundings and with different tasks, responsibilities and people.
- Influencing and negotiating skills, including persuading others, resolving conflicts and negotiating agreed solutions.

Research of the University of Bath (UK), carried out in 2012 by request of the European Youth Forum, shows that employers are aware of the value of volunteers' skills and competences for people's employability. But at the same time the employers state that volunteers are bad in selling the product, in explaining what they have learned by volunteering. One of the recommendations of the employers is to provide more guidance to volunteers to help them translate their volunteer skills and competences to the labour market and their professional life.

All EU member states are encouraged to have a validation arrangement ready by 2018. For volunteers in all kinds of settings in all EU member states, validation of learning outcomes can create added value for their voluntary work. This will create the opportunity for volunteering organisations to make volunteering more attractive and attract new categories of volunteers.

## 2. Volunteer organisations

Why is it useful for organisations working with volunteers to have a validation strategy?
It seems clear that volunteering provides a rich learning environment, where motivated people of all ages contribute to society in a way and context that they have freely chosen. However, the results of the public consultation Towards a European area of skills and qualifications (European Commission, 2014) show (among other things) that there is lack of guidance for those who want to benefit from these non-formal and informal learning processes through having their learning outcomes recognised and validated. Also the link between these processes and the European Qualifications Framework is considered as weak, which might mean that in the near future these learning outcomes will have less value on the labour market than their potential suggests.

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2    www.cityoflondon.gov.uk.

During the last ten years a large collection of tools and methods has been developed to support volunteers in getting recognition for the learning outcomes in voluntary work: volunteer portfolio, awareness tools, (self)assessment tools, validation methods, competence frameworks. These developments have taken place on European and national level. However, in our work, contacts, and meetings with volunteering organisations, we see that not many organisations have developed a policy and strategy on recognition, implementing recognition in their policy to attract, train, support, and retain volunteers. Apparently, it is not enough (as an example) to offer the volunteer a portfolio.

Translated to the world of volunteering, this means that:
- There should be more attention on guiding and coaching volunteers in their personal and professional development (instead of simply developing more tools and methods for recognition and validation of their learning outcomes).
- The starting point of the validation process should be the individual needs and interests of the volunteer.
- We should build bridges between the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning processes on one side and the European Qualifications Framework on the other side.

For volunteering organisations, this will create the opportunity to make volunteering more attractive, and attract new categories of volunteers. Even though it implies more input and investment on the part of the organisations, all the indications suggest that it will be worthwhile.

In the Vapovo project[3] we developed a way to help organisations find the right tool for their organisation. By connecting the right tools and methods to the work and objectives of the organisation, each organisation can develop its own validation policy. The Vapovo training course contains the following subjects:
- What is validation? What is non-formal learning? Introduction of terms, background information about European policies, best practices from several EU member states.
- A little taste of validation: What are my competences? How can I describe these competences? Why would I like to have these competences validated?
- Validation on the level of the organisation: what can the organisation do to support the validation of learning outcomes of volunteers? What are the advantages, disadvantages and risks? Examples of validation policies and models.

The training course was developed and tested in cooperation with different volunteer organisations. The training course is flexible, so form and content can be

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3   Vapovo = VAlidation POlicy for Volunteer Organisations. This project is funded under Erasmus+ program (2014-2016).

adapted to the needs of the organisation. The target group is policy makers and/or board members of volunteer organisations[4].

To illustrate the power of this organisational policy on validation we refer to a few good practises:

- *France Bénévolat* developed Passeport Bénévole[5]. The volunteer passport is a link between the volunteer and voluntary and community organisations. It provides evidence of the volunteer's skills and experiences in different forms of volunteering and in all types of voluntary organisations. The passport will follow the volunteer throughout his/her volunteering career to demonstrate how s/he is developing during his/her experience.
- *Victoria's Volunteering Portal*[6]; this Australian website from the government of Victoria offers a lot of information about volunteering and about the way to develop policy on this. It has different approaches for several specific target groups depending their needs.
- *Volunteer Ireland* offers a step by step approach to develop the volunteer policy for your organisation[7]

## 3. The individual volunteer

When a volunteer asks for a reference or certification of their competencies, the organisation can choose from a wide scale of documents to provide this. The specific one an organisation uses, should be part of their volunteer policy. If there is no such policy, or for some other reason there is no document available, the volunteer himself can make this choice.

In the Volcar project[8] we developed a framework to support volunteers in this process. The volunteer organisation and the volunteer create an agreement outlining the volunteer responsibilities and roles and the guidance that they will be provided with. Together they also record the competences and skills which are important for the role. The use and offer of this framework can make an organisation more attractive to potential volunteers. The explicit attention paid to the development of volunteers also gives social impact to the concerning organisations.

To benefit the most from the process, a volunteer can choose to participate in a corresponding training course. At the end of this training course the participant can:

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4    http://edosfoundation.com/index.php/finished-projects/vapovo.
5    http://www.passeport-benevole.org.
6    https://www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/manage-your-volunteers/policies-and-procedures.
7    http://www.volunteer.ie/who-we-help/organisations/managing-volunteers/
8    Volcar = VOLunteer CAReer Guide This project is funded under Erasmus+ program (2015-2017).

- Evaluate, establish and document his skills, competences and qualifications in a systematic and well-organised manner.
- Identify important personal strengths and core competences.
- Draw conclusions for the further career from his learning progressions.
- Recognise perspectives for his career and plan realistic steps for the further personal and professional development.
- Sustainably implement the management of the personal competences with support of the portfolio tools and under personal responsibility.

During the training course the volunteer will:
- Establish, assess and evidence competences and other benefits from various areas of activities (training, paid and unpaid work, family), with a special focus on volunteering, verify learning processes, draw conclusions.
- Analyse / evaluate the implementation of the personal targets.

The training course consist of two connecting parts:
- Online training to start to think about how competences gained and develop through volunteering relate to careers and career aspirations of the volunteers.
- Face to face training to learn how to identify competences gained through volunteering and present that as evidence when searching for career development and progression.

This training course is offered as a tailor-made in-company training as well as part of an open program[9].

Inspiring examples of this process by and for volunteers can be found at:
- Jong Aktief (Young Active)[10] aims to give youngsters the time, space and opportunity to become self-reliant. They use the Europass Volunteer Certificate to award the results of the efforts a volunteer has made.
- Valorise-toi! (Empower Yourself!)[11] A self-assessment tool of acquired skills in the framework of volunteering in 'Scouts et Guides de France' It gives value to the skills a youngster or volunteer has acquired in Scouting.

## 4. The role of employers[12]

The entrance of youngsters to the labour market could increase a lot when employers would be more aware and willing to give value to the learning outcomes of volunteering. Research by the Life Long Learning Platform shows that employers

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9    http://edosfoundation.com/index.php/current-projects/volcar
10   http://www.stichtingjongactief.nl
11   https://www.sgdf.fr
12   Source: GR-EAT project http://www.eucis-lll.eu/projects/gr-eat/

usually value the fact that an applicant was active as a volunteer in the final decision to hire a job applicant. This optimistic result is supported by the fact that half of the respondents are flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers by providing flexible hours and authorise absence leave.

Another result of the survey is that the existing tools to support the validation process are mainly unknown. It is crucial to broaden the understanding of these tools for employers, and raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering for their businesses or organisations. Regarding volunteers, it is crucial to help them increase their employability skills and understanding about employers' expectations.

Not all employers give the right value to volunteer experience, and not all organisations and volunteers are aware of the possible impact of validation and recognition. This shows the importance of more and continuous attention for these topics amongst all target groups.

The Erasmus Impact Study[13] that (international) volunteering contributes to a shorter period of unemployment and easier access to the labour market. This is mostly based on the fact of volunteering in general and less on the concrete competences a volunteer gained through this experience.

## 5. European Recognition, Validation and Volunteering Network

Edos Foundation initiates training courses, workshops, projects and other educational activities to stimulate and facilitate the personal and professional development of adults and youngsters who are professionally or voluntary active in the field of adult education, youth work and welfare work.

We are trying to establish a network of Erasmus+ projects that are dealing with recognition, validation and/or volunteering. Our aim is to profit from each other by sharing experiences, knowledge and outcomes of these projects. Hopefully it will prevent us from re-inventing the wheel. In the near future we hope to facilitate a conference with all members of this, so far, informal network.

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13  European Union, 2014.