

Gabriella Civico

Recognition and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal learning achieved through volunteering

Volunteering is widely acknowledged as an outstanding source of learning and an important contributor to personal and professional development. CEV considers it crucial to recognise volunteering as a source of non-formal and informal learning but also believes however that a balance must be kept in order not to move the focus of volunteering from the benefit to others to the benefit of the individual in the form of qualifications or recognition of skills. In this regard CEV is working in collaboration with the EU institutions and member state authorities in the development of tools and processes that will allow for better recognition of learning achieved whilst volunteering.

In EYV 2011 several EU institutions and other stakeholders highlighted that tools and systems for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning achieved through volunteering could provide an added value and incentive for volunteers. The European Parliament in particular called on 'the EU Member States to facilitate volunteering through the provision of formal, informal and non-formal training to enhance volunteers' skills and empower them in their work, their dedication being primarily altruistic and disinterested'.

Volunteering is understood to be a driving force behind social cohesion and personal development and the EMPL formation of the European Council encouraged the 'promotion of the role of volunteering as a form of non-formal and informal learning contributing to obtaining new skills and competences and improved employability in each and every age and social group.'

The European Commission stated that 'Volunteering is a creator of human and social capital, it is a pathway to integration and employment and a key factor for improving social cohesion. Volunteering translates the fundamental values of justice, solidarity, inclusion and citizenship upon which Europe is founded into action. Volunteers help shape European society, and volunteers who work outside of their home countries are actively helping to build a Citizens' Europe. Volunteering activities are implicitly linked with many European Union policy areas – such as lifelong learning, rural development and sport – where they add a valuable dimension to European Union programmes. Volunteering is an element of social innovation that can mobilise people's creativity to develop solutions and make better use of

scarce resources. At the individual level, volunteering can be a means for citizens to acquire social skills, to play a useful role and to connect or re-connect with society. At the societal level, it can be a tool for the empowerment of people, especially for disadvantaged groups in society.'

The driving force of volunteering as powerful force for change can be illustrated by this quote from a volunteer "At first, I joined Unga KRIS and started volunteering to have fun and meet new people but I also saw it as a way to grow as a person and to start living a more normal life... now... I also expect to grow even more as a person, to take on responsibilities and face my fears in different social situation." Daniel - Unga KRIS Project Sweden.

In 2011 the Commission announced that it was preparing a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning including the recognition of competences acquired through volunteering. The EC also referred to the future 'European Skills Passport' as a way to give individuals the possibility of keeping a record of the skills and competences they acquire through volunteering. The European Parliament additionally focussed on the importance of a tool such as the proposed 'Europass Experience' document to allow volunteers to describe and record skills developed during volunteer work that may not lead to certification, and encouraged the Commission, in the light of the Council's Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, to launch that document as soon as possible. Unfortunately this proposal has been 'shelved' by the EC pending an overall more extensive review of the Europass concept as a whole. CEV, together with the EP has been a strong advocate for facilitating that the skills acquired by people through volunteering should be included in the European Skills Passport and Europass, so that formal and non-formal learning are treated in the same way.

Since 2011 there have been some notable examples of increases in the possibilities for service learning in formal education institutions and a follow up conference was held on the subject resulting in the publication "Education and Volunteering in Developing Active Citizens". A well-intended proposal to introduce "compulsory volunteering" in Hungarian schools was abandoned and stakeholders in Slovakia are currently looking into the possible added value of introducing service learning in state schools.

Volunteering is also being given increased recognition through several awards and special events with a volunteer focus such as volunteer days, weeks and festivals that have been introduced or expanded as a result of EYV 2011. Notably, in The Netherlands, the new national volunteering awards ("Meer dan handen awards") are as a direct consequence of EYV 2011. The CEV initiative of the European Volunteering Capital is also a direct outcome of EYV 2011 and seeks to take the legacy to the local level in Europe. The competition recognises municipalities that are excelling in developing an enabling volunteering infrastructure, and encourages those that are not to do better, giving the policy framework. PAVE, to guide them. The "Discover e-volunteering" awards organised by Good Network

Foundation have also been developed as a result of EYV 2011. Senior Force Day was an important outcome of EY 2012, representing a continuation of the volunteering theme in subsequent European years and a concrete example of the EYV 2011 legacy.

The focus on volunteering in the media promoting and exposing the power of volunteering does not seem to have increased significantly since EYV 2011 although some issues have proved to be a catalyst for this. An example is the WWI 100 year anniversary commemorations where the role of volunteers in remembering and commemorating the victims of war and recalling the importance of sustained peace in Europe has been highlighted. The recent developments in Europe in relation to the immediate needs of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers travelling to or through Europe have also placed the spotlight on the key role played by volunteers. Volunteers and their organisations have been, and continue to be, critical in alleviating suffering and bringing much needed material, social and psychological support to individuals and families and this has been widely reported by the media. Volunteering also continues to play a key role in active ageing & life-long learning and was highlighted as an important component of EY 2012 (European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity).

Concerns are expressed however by various stakeholders that volunteering can result in job replacement, exacerbating rather than alleviating, Europe's unemployment challenges. WAGGGS & WOSM conducted a study and published the "Skills for Life" report that showcases the Scouting / Guiding example of a non-formal learning approach manifesting as a driving force and positive influence in improving people's life opportunities in all aspects, not limited to employability. Volunteering, and other civic engagement initiatives that are focussed on young people, especially NEETs, have been growing since EYV 2011. It is not clear however if this is a response to EYV 2011, or a consequence of the economic crisis and austerity measures.

The EC has also funded various initiatives focussing on developing tools for the recognition of non-formal learning through volunteering, especially through the youth and life-long-learning programmes (Erasmus Plus). CEV notes however that this multiple funding of different approaches and methods has contributed to an increasingly fragmented approach to the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning across Europe with many different tools available, contrasting to the expressed wish during EYV 2011 to develop a streamlined approach.

The EC "Recommendation on Recognition and Validation of Formal and Non-formal Learning" has led to the development of a "Roadmap", an "Inventory on Validation Systems in Europe" and the "European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning". CEV has been invited to join the EQF Advisory group initially under the coordination of DG EAC but currently DG EMPL in order to contribute to the development and the implementation of the Roadmap putting the Recommendation into concrete action and

implementation in the Member States.. The EESC have developed an “Opinion on the Recognition of Skills and Qualifications Acquired through Non-formal and Informal Learning” as a response to these developments that CEV also contributed to.

CEV continues to work with all stakeholders especially in the context of the new Skills Agenda to ensure that suitable processes are in place for volunteers to have their learning recognised and accredited if they so desire, and also the volunteering providers and facilitators are capable to properly assist them in this endeavour. CEV is mindful of the over-emphasis in several countries on the role of vocational training as a context for non-formal and informal learning and a consequential lack of attention to the role of volunteering organisations in this regard with respect to the learning opportunities that they provide to volunteers of all ages and roles in non-formal and informal contexts and settings.

‘RECOGNITION’ is the first of CEV’s 5Rs to Help Bring Opportunities for Participation in Europe (HOPE) emphasising that *‘The learning achieved by volunteers needs to be properly recognised and accredited when desired. The roadmap for the implementation of the recommendation on the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning should be fully implemented.’* This is a central component of reaching the maximum potential of Volunteering as a Choice for Change and gaining the true value of all those Helping Hands!

Author

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