

REPORT Sub-group Older Volunteers as Learners

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A very personal comment of Prof. Raymond Thomson in our open workshop in Jönköping in 2009 which was very much welcomed by the audience: Older people (after retiring) have to “reinvent” themselves and they need to ask “what are the things I need as an older person?”. And these are the things an older learner and an older volunteer will need. These things include health and well-being / social activity / a purpose (Why should I get out of my bed every morning?). How can I make my life useful? Because if I am useful, I have self-esteem; other people give me esteem; I get to meet other people; and from that social activity comes along - then the well-being follows... All this should be based on free will and when we work with volunteers, especially with older ones, we need to take this into account.

Preamble

The basic idea behind this report is that learning based on volunteer work can be a first step on a “learning ladder”, also for “older volunteers”. These volunteers should be given special attention due to the demographic change all European societies are facing. Although the public debate seems to concentrate mainly on how to finance the pensions for future generations and how this may cause intergenerational conflict, older people themselves and experts are trying to balance the debate by stressing the positive contribution of older generations to our societies. Volunteers, also older volunteers, are not a cheap labour force: their knowledge and skills are contributing to the general welfare of our societies. Universities should be aware of their (potential) role in supporting the volunteering sector in fulfilling this task by providing (credit-bearing) learning opportunities. This involvement of universities could lead to more involvement of volunteers and – in the long run – to more recognition of the contribution of volunteer work to society. All generations in Europe have different experiences and requirements and it is therefore necessary to offer different educational pathways. It is also important to take into account that the learning biographies reflect the course of European history.

In the National Reports produced within the framework of the VALUE project, the state-of-the-art of interaction and future potential for collaboration between the volunteering sector and university lifelong learning have been explored, above all the universities’ role of providing learning opportunities for volunteers. In this report, we will start with our understanding of the theme highlighting the problem of definitions in a European context. Secondly, using case studies, we will explore examples of collaboration between the universities and the volunteering sector for older volunteers as learners in our countries. Thirdly, we briefly discuss vision and barriers and offer recommendations for future action.

1. Our understanding of the theme

There is no official definition of “older volunteer” in Europe and in our countries. In this sub-group we agreed that we define an “older volunteer” as a person at the age of 50 plus and who is involved – in one way or another – in volunteering work, which means he/she offers free time, skills and knowledge for the good of others and does it free of charge – without claim for payment.

C.A.R.D.O. as national volunteer centre in Slovakia uses, for example, the expression “volunteer over 50” according to the programmes of the European Union they are involved in.

In Slovakia there is no such term as “older learner”, only “senior student” which is used in the context of Universities of Third Age. We also do not have any recognition of the “volunteer as a learner”. We have to increase public awareness of this term and recognise volunteering as a learning process. In the new law on lifelong learning in Slovakia (1.12.09), there is no expression do describe an older learner. However there is one mention of “senior education” – which this law understands as one kind of lifelong learning.

The same problem occurs if we try to define an “older learner” – it depends on the individual institution or on some regulations for financial support at national level. But there is no agreed definition in our countries. For University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), this sub-group agreed that we simply refer to the provision a university offers for – in our case 50plus – learners.

2. Exploring collaboration between the universities and the volunteering sector for older volunteers as learners

Learning opportunities for older volunteers as learners provided by volunteer organisations

Most volunteer organisations do not offer formal learning specifically for older volunteers. If they offer courses as obligatory training for volunteer work it is usually for all volunteers. When providing the formal learning, volunteer organisations involve individual researchers/trainers/tutors, sometimes also at university level. The content of the courses offered depends on the volunteering activity the person is going to perform and the target group he or she is going to work with; e.g. how to deal with people with dementia; the intergenerational dimension; the necessity for group-building and supporting each other. However, volunteer organisations are aware that older learners might need different learning settings/learning methods and it is not always “a course” which is needed: All volunteers, including older volunteers, can learn many new skills and abilities through volunteering and formats such as reflection groups and “supervision groups” are sufficient. Organisations should also take into account that they should stimulate an intergenerational dialogue and consequently, older and younger learners should be trained together. It also creates a team spirit among volunteers and keeps a group identity. Volunteers usually do not pay for training; it is the volunteer organisation which pays the trainer and other costs.

Case Study Austria

Project “Orientation for voluntary work”: The workshop “Orientation for voluntary work” emerged within the framework of the EU project “SLIC - Sustainable Learning in the Community”. The SLIC project is coordinated by the Austrian Red Cross and the Research Institute of the Red Cross as well as the Circle of Austrian Adult Education Associations (Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke, the umbrella organisation of Austrian education associations). International cooperation partners are the Institut für Soziale Infrastruktur ISIS (evaluation, Germany), Adult Education Centre of the City of Helsinki (Finland), Budapest Cultural Centre (Hungary), Lunaria (Italy), INTEVAL Limited (UK), Policy Research Institute on Ageing and Ethnicity PRIAE (UK) and the University of Strathclyde (UK). The SLIC project, which is supported by the European Commission and the Austrian Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, aims at raising the awareness of older persons for their own skills and potentials and at showing them ways of actively shaping their life in retirement. “The aim is the empowerment of older persons in order to avoid social isolation, strengthen informal networks and facilitate a healthy transition from working life to retirement.” For this reason, methods are being developed to “involve older persons actively in society and at the same time give them an opportunity to identify their potentials and develop them further through formal and informal learning. The participants are to find out which formal and informal learning options they need to avail themselves of if they want to become involved in their local environment. Local community activities may be e.g. volunteer work at various levels, becoming active in political life, the development of one’s own projects

or the foundation of informal learning groups.” To develop methods which are to contribute to older persons’ actively shaping their lives, SLIC proceeded as follows: Firstly, information on existing materials on education, skills and involvement of older persons was collected. This was done by gathering data on measures carried out by educational and vocational guidance institutions, on retirement preparation courses and skills balance sheets. The next step was to assess the needs of older persons in respect to their expectations on skills profiles and certificates for learning. Following this stage of the project, a concept for a two-day skills workshop with older persons was developed, and this concept was, or still is, implemented in practice. The purpose of the skills workshops was to prepare a manual which will help various organisations to carry out the workshop on their own. In the long run, the goal is to enable older persons to offer skills workshops for people in their age group themselves. On the surface, the target group of the workshop “Orientation for voluntary work” is people over 50 years of age who want to do voluntary work in the areas where the Red Cross is active. The two-day workshop is deliberately not organised on two consecutive days to give participants time for reflection. It takes place between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. The first day starts with taking stock of life, family and work experiences up to the present which eventually lead to a skills balance sheet identifying personal strong points. Therefore, the motto of the first day is “What can I do?” The motto of the second day is “Where do I want to go?” This is dealt with in a personal Action Plan showing where the participants can use their personal skills best and what they need to do to get there.

Learning opportunities for older volunteers as learners provided by universities

In our countries, in general, universities offer lifelong learning: regular degree programmes, professional development programmes and learning opportunities for the general public (non-credit-bearing) which includes retired seniors. Older learners are not a homogeneous group and older volunteers are in general not specifically targeted by universities. However, older volunteers can of course benefit from their learning at university level for their volunteering work; e.g. the University of Third Age in Bratislava offers courses in gerontology, psychology, social work, Yoga, health and medicine and the regeneration of psychological and physiological state of seniors. The University of Graz, for example, offers the programme “Vita activa – Bridging generations through learning” for adults of all age groups, especially older learners who are not only interested in learning about current topics of and latest developments in scientific/academic research but also looking into new possibilities of societal engagement such as volunteering. The programmes 2009/10 and 2010/11 included lectures and workshops where the subject of volunteering as a potential and valuable activity also in later life was explicitly addressed.

Case study Slovakia

The Universities of the Third Age in Slovakia provide education for seniors. This kind of education is currently provided by 13 universities of the third age in 11 towns in Slovakia. Anybody who is over 50 and has graduated from a secondary level education (comparable with the “A” levels in the UK) can become a student of such a university. There are no entrance exams and students are accepted in the order in which they enrolled in that particular university. Students can study in various departments. After finishing a three-year study, they are awarded a „certificate of a special interest study at the University of the Third Age“. Students of this type of university gain personal experience and have the opportunity to stay active as a senior citizen; however, they have no opportunity to test their knowledge in practice.

“University of Third Age Žilina”, Slovakia

In 2007 some representatives of the teachers asked the students of the University of the Third Age in Žilina to be involved in volunteer activities such as art workshops. In 2010 they developed the third year of the course called “Finance Education”. (Until then, it was just a 2-year course). In the last semester of this year, the student would study the topic “time bank” (basic rules and principles, definition of sources and activities in community, advantages and

disadvantages of a time bank, creating one's own time bank). Here volunteers work in other activities, such as creating and administration of websites and a magazine for seniors. The long-term goal is to inspire older learners to volunteer and use their knowledge gained at university in practice. On the other hand, they want prepare the community as well as the university in order to involve older citizens in volunteer activities. In September 2010 the University of the Third Age in Žilina organised a workshop for students from 4 countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) with 2 topics: 1. My motivation for studying when I was young and motivation to study now; 2. What could I do and what do I want to do as a volunteer? A short documentary about the wishes of older learners as potential volunteers was prepared. The goal of the workshop was to show good practice examples of older learners as volunteers in other countries, and invited experts from the volunteering sector and the university sector made presentations on volunteering and social work. Following this workshop, the University of the Third Age in Žilina would like to start a cooperation with municipal and public organisations in Žilina. The University will "prepare" older learners for volunteering in the community.

Association of Universities of Third Age, Slovakia

There is an organisation in Slovakia known as the "Association of Third Age Universities", which unites the universities of the third age. This association provides a platform for the mutual sharing of information on funding and the methodical and pedagogical preparation of programmes for students. It is a co-funding system divided between the student, government and municipalities. Due their financial problems, the U3A will sometimes have to find other co-financing, such as EU programmes. In 2010, an association in cooperation with the University in Ulm, Germany, created a project under the Grundtvig Senior Volunteer Exchanges. In this project, several older learners from Slovakia will work as volunteers at the University of ULM (and vice-versa) for 3 weeks. They will work as assistants in language and cultural courses, clubs and several other courses for students in both countries. In 2010 C.A.R.D.O. also started the first discussion with the Association and two Universities of Third Age about the possibility of creating space for seminars and workshops on non-profit sector/management. It is a long term process which as yet has no results.

Can the learning that arises from the experience of volunteering be used to access and participate in University Continuing Education or Lifelong Learning? In general, the answer is no, there is no link. The volunteering sector would appreciate it if the volunteering experience could be used to access university continuing education. Experience in the group showed that only reference letters or volunteer certificates from volunteer organisations are included in application portfolios. Accreditation could, however, help to raise the motivation to become involved in volunteering: Generally speaking, but especially for Slovakia and the Central European Countries, volunteering organisations still (or again) face the challenge of involving older volunteers in volunteering or generally attracting volunteers of any age.

Case Study Germany

In Germany, several universities offer **service learning** – the combination of academic courses and volunteer work – as integral part of their regular degree programmes. The good-practice example of Leuphana University, Lüneburg, is described in the German national report.

However, universities usually do not offer specific training addressed to volunteers in general or older volunteers in particular, although there are many **University Life Long Learning (ULLL) programmes for older learners**. One such programme is the Kontaktstudium für ältere Erwachsene (KSE) at the University of Hamburg which offers access to regular university courses as well as specific courses exclusively for older students. In order to create a new university programme tailored to the needs and abilities of older volunteer learners, the Centre for University Continuing Education and Life Long Learning (AWW) of the University of Hamburg conducted a survey among the participants of the KSE as well as

the general public of Hamburg by placing a questionnaire inside the KSE semester brochure (circulation: 8000). The questionnaire comprised questions about course format and duration, relevant topics to be covered, skills to be taught and other general requirements. About 15% of the KSE participants sent their feedback and were subsequently interviewed. Those who were interested in volunteering or had indeed already worked as volunteers for years saw a major need for teaching soft skills (communication, presentation, team-work techniques, new media), but also asked for more specific topics like fund raising, legal framework and networking. Some people requested an overview of possible fields of volunteer work and of existing volunteer organisations/networks.

In parallel to the questionnaire, the AWW contacted local businesses and volunteer organisations and asked them what kind of UCE volunteer training they would find useful from their perspectives. They found that most volunteer organisations already provided courses for their helpers and had previously not considered the university as a possible means of support in that respect. Local businesses were interested in providing volunteering information and training to their older staff, but in most cases hadn't yet taken action. However, there is one focus of activities that has developed as a Hamburg speciality, the so-called mentoring programme, where older professionals advise and support young students and young professionals in their careers (especially people with a migration background).

As a result of the above-mentioned activities, the University of Hamburg will offer a first lecture series on volunteering in the winter term 2011/12 in cooperation with teachers from several university departments (education, social sciences, humanities). The lecture series will offer a wide range of volunteering-related topics and will be free of charge for students as well as the general public. It is hoped that these lectures will establish contacts between (older) volunteers, volunteer organisations and the university and that after another evaluation, the AWW will introduce a regular training programme for older volunteers in the summer term 2012.

3. Vision, barriers and recommendations for actions

Vision

The vision is that both sectors are aware of the other sector, recognise and appreciate each other's work and that institutions of both sectors develop stronger institutional links to each other. They should develop joint programmes based on the needs of older volunteers to open up new learning pathways. It is also necessary that universities have or should have well developed links to the volunteer organisations in the local area that provide opportunities for volunteer work for older students.

Barriers

We observe

- in our countries, e.g. Slovakia, there is still a need to raise awareness about volunteering, its value and recognition, and the specific learning opportunities
- a lack of political will in spite of necessity in the community (demographic development) to develop stronger links between the volunteering sector and the universities
- a lack of capacity (time, personnel, resources,...)
- a lack of knowledge of the other side
- a lack of basic data and statistics – lack of research, studies, surveys etc. in this area but also in volunteering and (university) lifelong learning in general
- that accreditation is not yet really driven by demand; it depends on the question: Is a person active in the labour market or not?

Recommendations for action

We see a big potential for innovative cross-sectoral collaboration in the field of older learners:

- joint developmental work to develop learning opportunities for adult volunteers as well as for coordinators of volunteers and volunteer organisations
- to develop volunteering as a learning experience

What would be expected from each other?

Volunteering organisations: We expect the universities...

- to be aware of the fact that they have students/participants in LLL who can use their new knowledge for the good of others, for the community/society
- to offer some basic training courses for volunteers; an overview of the non-profit sector should be given and possibilities for volunteering (independent of provider) should be presented
- to offer courses on non-profit organisation and management and volunteering, also in regular programmes. Lecturers should invite people from the non-profit sector to some workshops
- to offer intergenerational learning settings – older and younger volunteers learn together and work together in volunteering.

Universities: We would need the Volunteering Organisations...

- to concretely formulate what they expect universities (and other educational institutions) to do
- to approach us with concrete projects or plans of cooperation; in many cases universities do not know they could be helpful

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