

*This text is a summary in English of the original text available in Spanish: “Voluntariado en Ámbito Universitario”. The summary has been prepared by Nabilah Binti Muhammad Adib Doyle as part of her course requirements in the School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies at the University of East Anglia (UK) in 2021.*

## **‘Volunteering at University Level: Reflections and Proposals’**

Ballesteros, V., Velasco, A., Álvarez, J., Amate, M., Franco, P. and López, E., 2020. *Voluntariado en el ámbito universitario: Reflexiones y propuestas*. Madrid: Plataforma de Voluntariado de España. Pp. 1-75.

### **Overview**

Authors Vicente Ballesteros, Avelino Velasco, Javier Álvarez, Mar Amate, Pepa Franco, and Emilio López from the Platform of Volunteering in Spain (PVE) have written this report with the intention of highlighting the importance of developing the act of volunteering in Spanish universities. The contents of this report present a continuation of PVE’s ongoing research, since 2017, into promoting different initiatives to analyse and enhance voluntary action within the university environment. It has been identified that a severe factor of the lack of volunteering in universities resides in the poor relationship between university management and relevant organisations due to a number of differences in their ways of operation. Therefore, it has become apparent and important that PVE facilitates a better collaboration between these two parties in order to successfully increase levels of volunteering within the universities. PVE has laid out some main objectives in order to collect information to better understand the situation, which serves as the results of this report. They are:

- To analyse the different experiences of volunteering in the university environment.
- To generate practical guidelines on the implementation of volunteer programs in this field that can be generalised.
- To provide meeting and collaboration spaces for the development and promotion of volunteering in the university environment.

Subsequently after collecting results, they provide suggestions on how to improve the situation between the parties to maximise potential outcomes in the future.

### **Methodology**

In order to achieve the objectives listed above, PVE implored responsible parties of both organisations and universities to participate in providing information relevant to the research. These are two out of three of the mixed working groups, perhaps leaving the student body as the third group under universities (this is unclear). The organisations are evaluated on 1) their experience in volunteering in university environments, 2) the different sizes and area of work involved, and 3) their geographic diversity. Similarly, the universities are evaluated on 1) their active and proactive volunteer promotion management, 2) the difference in student enrolment capacity, and 3) their geographic diversity – bearing in mind that there will be two focused interview sessions within the university; the second to account for the student body.

These 3 characteristics of each group are needed to maintain the quality and quantity needed to analyse the situation. This research method took place by PVE between 27 and 31 May using SWOT analysis, discussion groups, and problem-solving tasks. However, the year is unclear. It was supported by analogical and digital tools.

## **Findings**

The report is broken down into two parts. The first consists of an analysis of the different areas of reflection from the points of views of the participants in the study, and the second reveals multiple guidelines for action. The analyses of the research method are documented in general terms across the country, not addressing single volunteer organisations, universities, or students. The authors find that there is some general volunteer structure within the universities but, the level of development between them is very uneven. The main findings circle around the lack of collaboration and mutual understanding between Volunteer Organisations and University management that ultimately affects the communication of voluntary action with students. Below are some significant key areas of reflection and relevant proposals.

### **Part 1: Analysis/ Reflection**

#### **1. Liquid society**

The analysis lifts off with the concept of a Liquid Society that we live in, theorised by Z. Bauman[1], where things and relationships (whether labour, social, couple or consumer) are ephemeral, meaning they last for a very short amount of time because we tend to move from one thing to another fairly quickly, including relationships. Participants say that volunteers from universities do show this ephemeral act, where many students are excited to get involved at the initial stages but after a while the momentum drops off - most probably because they were born in a fast-paced world and are at the stage of “trying things”, ultimately affecting their decisions and making them inconsistent. Not only that, but the causes of solidarity can also be said as ephemeral, due to the vast diversity and changing market of causes, losing the very essence of solidarity.

Point of visualisation from the report: Eurostat measured that the level of Spanish citizen participation in volunteering was 19.3%, which is 10.7% lower than the average level.

#### **2. Activism > Volunteering**

A recent study[2] has highlighted that students tend to get more involved with activism such as protests and campaigns instead of volunteering because the issues relate more closely to them and do not require a lot of commitment, unlike volunteering, where there needs to be consistency in helping. For example, the 15M movement in Madrid. In addition, they have recorded that Volunteering can be seen as a highly demanding social activity, so students choose social participation activities that are less demanding. Moreover, students tend to do things that could enhance their CV such as internships, and sometimes see volunteering as an outlet to do that.

### 3. Students focus on Academic performance

There is high pressure for students in Spanish universities to achieve good results because it determines their access to scholarships, exchanges, or choice of group in each course, which forces them to be highly self-demanding if they want to have access to these advantages. It is for this time-consuming preoccupation that they do not immerse themselves in any social participation. For example, they need good results to go on their Erasmus year abroad. PVE makes a comparison here with Universities in Bologna, where they have changed the entire organisation of the academic year from October to June to make way for social activities.

### 4. Communication

Not only are there problems of communication between universities and the volunteering organisations, but there are also the same problems between the university itself and the student body regarding voluntary action. This is a significant point of reflection because the university staff and management are liable for communicating all matters of topics to students. Two problems that arose from the research are:

- a) The heavy reliance of universities on email. All news, topics, timetables and student/teacher communication happen in one place. The issue here is that students do not look at every single email being sent to them, instead they focus on those that are of interest and relevance, such as their professors, peers and important emails about scholarships, funds, etc.
- b) The shortfall of teacher/professor promotion of volunteering. Due to the high expectation of students to achieve well, the teachers work equally as hard to make sure they do. PVE notices that it is very difficult to count on the teaching staff because it robs them of time to devote to things that are considered for the teaching career, meaning there is no time to elaborate on volunteering activities.

### 5. Adaptability

Both Volunteer Organisations and Universities have their own organisational cultures, meaning they work in different ways and find it hard to adapt to working with each other.

- a) The solidity of the volunteer organisations is good, but they could do with some flexibility in lightening the procedures and speeding up decisions so as not to be as rigid as they usually are, which makes it difficult for any volunteer they are recruiting (not just from universities).
- b) Recognition of Volunteers. There is not enough attention or resources given to the volunteers in the management cycle; volunteering rarely occupies the prominent role it deserves in light of the importance given to it. There are shortcomings in the relationship between the organisation and the volunteers. Volunteers are essential in keeping with the whole existence of volunteering, for the development of the activity of the organisations.

## **Part 2: Proposals**

The authors of this investigation respond to all areas of reflection that have been collected from the participants by way of proposing guidelines to bring all parties – volunteer organisations, universities, the student body and of course PVE themselves – together. They are as below:

1. Volunteer organisations should be able to sort out their difficulties and try to adapt to the calendar of university activities, the hours in which the students are available and take into consideration possible change in these hours as a result of other circumstances that the students are preoccupied with such as exams and work. They should also approach the university environment and student body in a more appealing way; by building a solid and adequate social image of volunteering, to clarify and amplify the concept.
2. Universities should stick to the mandate of the promotion of volunteering by incorporating it within training and education, to highlight the social impact values and benefits, as well as to introduce more attractive volunteering programmes. To do this, staff should:
  - a) Be more proactive in recruiting student volunteers.
  - b) Be more knowledgeable on the topic of volunteering and enhance formalisations of relationships with the organisations and the student body (such as the signing of agreements between parties)
  - c) Be more open to adapting to rhythms and circumstances when planning volunteer action.
  - d) Be aware of the aptitudes and attitudes that could develop volunteering
  - e) Be more involved and explain to students how important volunteering is to cultivate relationships that could save lives.
3. Students should be involved in volunteering as a formula for social participation in solidarity, as a relational process of mutual benefit that contributes to social change and personal development. Through volunteering, they can achieve and experience extended learning, different social environments, and multiple tangible benefits within their rights as a volunteer such as recognition from the volunteer organisation for the social value of their contribution and competencies, aptitudes, and skills as a result of their exercise (Law 45/2015). However, the authors note here that although volunteering does provide benefits to those who perform it, they should be understood as secondary, whereby the central motivation for volunteering is the reason for it.
4. Finally, volunteering is a privilege for education. It adds value to the teaching of the university, more so the experiences of the volunteers. So, there must be some sort of transversality between the university and the values of an advanced and democratic society, such as those that guide the actions of volunteer organizations. As volunteering is a form of participating in solidarity, it should be embedded in the universities' ideologies/vision and activities, giving off a transversal character to the whole community.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the intentions, and objectives of the authors of this report have been met through effective methodology in collecting results from the three groups of participants: the volunteer organisations, university management and the student body. Their presentation of findings is structured and narrows in on factors that contribute to the low varying levels of volunteering across universities in Spain. It is evident from here that there must be a solid system put in place by the organisations and universities to overcome these obstacles in order to enhance and facilitate volunteering action in universities. Therefore, the authors have proposed multiple points of improvement intended to bring the parties closer together for better collaboration in successfully developing said voluntary action – all for the pure intention of helping those in need. They strongly suggest a deep commitment to these activities for it to be successful in the long run. Volunteering can be a perfect symbiosis between organisations and the university, as it brings benefits for both and, moreover, for the students. PVE suggests that students who get involved in social activities, such as volunteering, are paving the way to generate a more committed and supportive educational community, and therefore, a more inclusive and solidary society.