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## HOW DOES VOLUNTEERING IMPACT THE EMPLOYABILITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE

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## **Introduction**

This report looks at how volunteering has impacted the employability of young (18-25 year olds) people in Europe. Many young people across the continent are undertaking volunteering roles with the hope that it will lead to permanent employment afterwards.<sup>1</sup> With job opportunities becoming more competitive and scarce, volunteering is seen as a good opportunity for young people, who are new in the job market, to gain experience and bolster their CV. In this report, when referring to employability, Rothwell's definition will be used, that it is the perceived ability to attain one's desired level and type of employment in the future.<sup>2</sup>

Volunteering is seen to offer participants the chance to develop new skills, extend networks, build CVs, try new vocations and gain experience.<sup>3</sup> However, there is debate as to whether or not it actually leads to full time employment afterwards. Volunteering is routinely advocated in policy as a key mechanism for young people to gain employment.<sup>4</sup> This has led to many students and graduates undertaking voluntary roles, in the hope that it will lead to a full-time paid role at the end. Based on previous research conducted by Rothwell and Charleston, enhancement to one's CV is a large reason why younger people in Europe undertake volunteering projects.<sup>5</sup> The evidence from Rothwell and the scholarly work from Paine has offered an insight into what some of the motivations are for young people engaging as volunteers.

## **Background**

In Hirst's study, they found that nearly 54% of young volunteers believe that their volunteering experience has helped or will help them to get a job.<sup>6</sup> This clearly demonstrates that the majority of young people who undertake a volunteering role do so with the hope of finding permanent employment afterwards. It also exhibits how volunteering can lead to a fully paid role afterwards for those who partake in it.

The UK employment rate was estimated at 75.5%, 1.1 percentage points lower than before the coronavirus pandemic (December 2019 to February 2020), but 0.2 percentage points higher than

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<sup>1</sup> Gaskin, K. (2004). Young people, volunteering and civic service. *A review of the literature*. Published by Institute for Volunteering Research.

<sup>2</sup> Rothwell, A., & Charleston, B. (2013). *International volunteering: employability, leadership and more*. Education+ Training. p. 163

<sup>3</sup> Paine, A., McKay, S. and Moro, D. (2013). *Does volunteering improve employability? Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey*. [online] Birmingham.ac.uk. Available at:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-100.pdf> [Accessed 15/3/2022].

<sup>4</sup> Hoskins, B., Leonard, P., & Wilde, R. (2020). *How Effective Is Youth Volunteering as an Employment Strategy? A Mixed Methods Study of England*. *Sociology*, 54(4), p. 763.

<sup>5</sup> Rothwell, A., & Charleston, B. (2013). *International volunteering: employability, leadership and more*. Education+ Training. p. 160

<sup>6</sup> Hirst, A. (2001). *Links between volunteering and employability*. p. 6

the previous three-month period (June to August 2021).<sup>7</sup> This gives an idea as to how the pandemic has affected employment in the UK. This is important to consider when analysing the impact that volunteering has had on the employability prospects of young people in recent years, not only in the UK but across Europe.

## **Research**

The role of volunteering in addressing unemployment has been expanded further. In particular, the “New Labour” administration in the UK sought a large expansion for the role of volunteering when faced with the economic downturn in 2008.<sup>8</sup> The hope behind this was that people would benefit from volunteering as a way to develop skills and build up enough experience which would make them more employable afterwards. Many of those who have volunteered in the past say that it has benefitted their employability prospects. A large reason why volunteers feel as though the experience has benefitted their employment prospects is because not only did it “increase their confidence” but they also gained good work experience and proof of motivation for work.”<sup>9</sup> This provides an insight into some of the soft skill benefits that volunteering can offer to young people. Particularly when they are at the start of their professional journey, picking up and learning these kinds of soft skills can be invaluable for their employability prospects. Scholars have argued that volunteering activities can lead to the development of an individual’s ‘soft skills.’ Therefore this will eventually contribute to their employability.<sup>10</sup>

In the UK, as of March 2020, Asian people (15%) were less likely to have volunteered than Black people (24%) or White people (23%).<sup>11</sup> This statistic is interesting for a variety of reasons. The main one being that Black people are more likely to have volunteered than their white counterparts. Despite this, BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) people still have a lower employability rate than white people do.<sup>12</sup> This appears to indicate that volunteering has had a limited impact on their employability as an overall group.

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<sup>7</sup> Watson, B. (2022) *Employment in the UK - Office for National Statistics*. [online] Ons.gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/january2022> [Accessed 15/3/2022].

<sup>8</sup> Penny, R., & Finnegan, A. (2019). *Employability or self-respect? Justifying the use of volunteering to address unemployment*. Voluntary Sector Review, 10(2), p. 153

<sup>9</sup> Hirst, A. (2001). *Links between volunteering and employability*. p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Penny, R., & Finnegan, A. (2019). *Employability or self-respect? Justifying the use of volunteering to address unemployment*. Voluntary Sector Review, 10(2), p. 154

<sup>11</sup> Gov.uk. (2020) *Volunteering*. [online] Ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/civic-participation/volunteering/latest#main-facts-and-figures> [Accessed 17/3/2022].

<sup>12</sup> Gov.uk. (2021) *Employment*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment/latest> [Accessed 13/3/2022].

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## **Ethnic Disparities**

Data from the NCVO UK Civil Society Almanac has shown that the voluntary sector in the UK is hugely diverse and that most organisations are very small and completely volunteer run and led. Some of those organisations serve very specific communities and sub-sectors, e.g. the Sikh community, people with visual impairments, Bangladeshi young people in Tower Hamlets, older Afro-Caribbean people with Dementia; while others are broader, e.g. National Trust and Citizens Advice.<sup>13</sup>

56% of people from the combined Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic group in the UK were employed – the lowest rate out of all ethnic groups according to Government data from 2019.<sup>14</sup> This is a clear demonstration that it is not just young Black and Asian people who struggle with employment. This is an issue that is widespread across the ethnic minorities in Europe. According to ONS data, in 2019 66% of BAME people aged 16-66 years old in the UK were employed. This is compared to 78% of their white counterparts.<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates how the employability opportunities for young people in the UK are not equal. It is also a good illustration of how discrimination has clear real-world repercussions on the employment probability of young ethnic minorities.<sup>16</sup>

Ethnic minorities in the UK are less likely to find stable, full-time employment than their white British counterparts, even when born and educated in the United Kingdom regardless of whether they have participated in volunteering activities.<sup>17</sup> This offers an idea as to some of the other variables that impact the employability of young people in the UK. As a part of their research, Zwysen adds that, while we know that ethnic discrimination in hiring is pervasive and enduring, it is not clear how much of the labour market disadvantage experienced by young ethnic minorities can be attributed to employer discrimination.<sup>18</sup> Again this is an important point raised by Zwysen, as it suggests that the levels of employment of young ethnic minorities is not always a result of employer discrimination. Based on the findings in the UK, it seems likely to us that ethnic minorities – in light of the discrimination they face – rely more heavily on their social networks (friends, family,

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<sup>13</sup> Donahue, K. and McGarvey, A. (2020) *Time Well Spent: Diversity and volunteering*. [online] NCVO. Available at: <https://beta.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-publications/time-well-spent-diversity-and-volunteering/> [Accessed 15/3/2022].

<sup>14</sup> Gov.uk. (2021) *Employment*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment/latest> [Accessed 13/3/2022].

<sup>15</sup> Gov.uk. (2021) *Employment*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment/latest> [Accessed 13/3/2022].

<sup>16</sup> Zwysen, W. (2021) *Ethnic minorities are less likely to find good work than their white British counterparts, even when born and educated in the UK* | *British Politics and Policy at LSE*. [online] Blogs.lse.ac.uk. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/ethnic-penalties-and-hiring-discrimination/> [Accessed 11/3/2022].

<sup>17</sup> Zwysen, W. (2021) *Ethnic minorities are less likely to find good work than their white British counterparts, even when born and educated in the UK* | *British Politics and Policy at LSE*. [online] Blogs.lse.ac.uk. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/ethnic-penalties-and-hiring-discrimination/> [Accessed 11/3/2022].

<sup>18</sup> Zwysen, W. (2021) *Ethnic minorities are less likely to find good work than their white British counterparts, even when born and educated in the UK* | *British Politics and Policy at LSE*. [online] Blogs.lse.ac.uk. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/ethnic-penalties-and-hiring-discrimination/> [Accessed 11/3/2022].

and co-ethnics) to find jobs than the white British do.<sup>19</sup> This may be a reason black people are more likely to undertake a volunteering role for employability reasons compared to white people.<sup>20</sup>

The experiences of those who take part in long term volunteering activities tend to vary. Volunteering is not inclusive of all people and communities both in terms of levels of participation and the volunteer's experience of being involved.<sup>21</sup> This may be an explanation as to why BAME volunteers are more likely to agree the organisation they mainly volunteered for could be 'much better organised' than their white counterparts (49% vs 34%).<sup>22</sup> This is an intriguing revelation. One of the reasons why BAME volunteers feel this way could be linked back to their low employability rate after they have volunteered. This group were also less likely to agree that they received enough recognition (73% vs 84%) and were less likely to feel they 'belong' in their main organisation (77% vs 85%). This in turn can impact their employment opportunities after they have concluded their volunteering.<sup>23</sup>

## Youth Employability

A raft of initiatives aimed at enhancing employability through volunteering was introduced by successive UK governments after the 2008 recession, to encourage all young people 'to consider volunteering as a way of improving their employment prospects while looking for work.'<sup>24</sup> Not only this, but for entry into certain careers, performing a spell of unpaid work has become an absolute necessity, rather than merely desirable.<sup>25</sup> Therefore it is not a surprise that more young people and students are beginning to undertake more volunteering roles.

In the UK, levels of volunteering are higher among employed people (particularly part-timers and the self-employed) than among unemployed people; they are lower among young people (16-24 year olds) than among most other age groups.<sup>26</sup> One of the reasons for this may be that those who

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<sup>19</sup> Zwysen, W. (2021) *Ethnic minorities are less likely to find good work than their white British counterparts, even when born and educated in the UK* | *British Politics and Policy at LSE*. [online] Blogs.lse.ac.uk. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/ethnic-penalties-and-hiring-discrimination/> [Accessed 11/3/2022].

<sup>20</sup> Gov.uk. (2020) *Volunteering*. [online] Ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/civic-participation/volunteering/latest#main-facts-and-figures> [Accessed 17/3/2022].

<sup>21</sup> Donahue, K. and McGarvey, A. (2020) *Time Well Spent: Diversity and volunteering*. [online] NCVO. Available at: <https://beta.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-publications/time-well-spent-diversity-and-volunteering/> [Accessed 15/3/2022].

<sup>22</sup> Donahue, K. and McGarvey, A. (2020) *Time Well Spent: Diversity and volunteering*. [online] NCVO. Available at: <https://beta.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-publications/time-well-spent-diversity-and-volunteering/> [Accessed 15/3/2022]

<sup>23</sup> Donahue, K. and McGarvey, A. (2020) *Time Well Spent: Diversity and volunteering*. [online] NCVO. Available at: <https://beta.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-publications/time-well-spent-diversity-and-volunteering/> [Accessed 15/3/2022]

<sup>24</sup> Hoskins, B., Leonard, P., & Wilde, R. (2020). *How Effective Is Youth Volunteering as an Employment Strategy? A Mixed Methods Study of England*. *Sociology*, 54(4), p. 764

<sup>25</sup> Hoskins, B., Leonard, P., & Wilde, R. (2020). *How Effective Is Youth Volunteering as an Employment Strategy? A Mixed Methods Study of England*. *Sociology*, 54(4), p. 765

<sup>26</sup> Paine, A. E., McKay, S., & Moro, D. (2013). *Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond*. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 4(3), pp. 355-376.

are already employed can spend their spare time doing more unpaid activities. Whereas those who are unemployed may devote that same time towards finding permanent or part time employment. Volunteering by 'helping out in the community in the last 12 months', when the young people were 19–20, is found to have no relationship with being in paid work at 22–23.<sup>27</sup> This could be seen as another reason as to why those who are unemployed in that age bracket, are more unlikely to take part in volunteering.

Student volunteering at UK universities has never been so popular, or at least been so visible.<sup>28</sup> The UK government has driven up initiatives to encourage young people to these volunteering roles, with the promise that it will benefit their employment opportunities afterwards. Several studies have found that volunteers believe that participating increases their employment prospects. More than half the volunteers in one study felt that volunteering impacted positively on their chances of finding a job.<sup>29</sup> This would appear to demonstrate that volunteering clearly has an impact on the employability of young people. At one level the promotion of volunteering and employability is unproblematic; it appears almost self-evident that students will gain an advantage in the labour market through their involvement in activities outside of their studies, with the added benefit of 'doing good'.<sup>30</sup>

Undertaking an overseas volunteering expedition with the sole aim of contrived CV building is likely to lead to failure, due to the extremely tough conditions under which individuals can find themselves, and the duration and intensity of the experience. For employers, the research suggests that individuals who signal a volunteering expedition on their CV are unlikely to have done so for any disingenuous reason such as "padding", rather will have genuinely gained from the experience in the sense of development and growth, and will bring a much stronger skill-set to the world of work than their peers who may have undertaken a more low-engagement or less intense volunteering activity.<sup>31</sup> This perhaps offers an explanation as to why the levels of employment post-volunteering vary. The location of where the person has volunteered is clearly an important factor in whether that person finds employment afterwards. The intensity of volunteering abroad, and the other variable that this young person may face when living abroad can clearly be detrimental to their employment prospects.

The increased role for volunteering is evident in such contemporary UK policies as the National Citizen Service (NCS), which aims to develop young people's skills and employability through

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<sup>27</sup> Hoskins, B., Leonard, P., & Wilde, R. (2020). *How Effective Is Youth Volunteering as an Employment Strategy? A Mixed Methods Study of England*. *Sociology*, 54(4), p. 769

<sup>28</sup> Holdsworth, C., & Brewis, G. (2014). *Volunteering, choice and control: a case study of higher education student volunteering*. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(2), p. 205

<sup>29</sup> Paine, A. E., McKay, S., & Moro, D. (2013). *Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond*. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 4(3), pp. 355-376.

<sup>30</sup> Holdsworth, C., & Brewis, G. (2014). *Volunteering, choice and control: a case study of higher education student volunteering*. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(2), p. 206

<sup>31</sup> Rothwell, A., & Charleston, B. (2013). *International volunteering: employability, leadership and more*. *Education+ Training*. p. 172

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structured volunteering placements.<sup>32</sup> Whilst the primary aim here is to develop the core skills and knowledge of young people, these are the kinds of initiatives that are aimed at increasing the employability prospects of younger people. These projects are specially targeted at those who have undertaken volunteering activities prior to seeking employment.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there has been a raft of UK and other government initiatives to encourage young people to undertake more volunteering roles. However, these volunteering activities have proved to have had a limiting effect on the employability opportunities of young people in Europe. The levels of volunteering amongst 16-24 year olds are still relatively high, and have been increasing over the past few years, however this has not correlated with a growth in the employability rate. Whilst it is difficult to find specific data on whether volunteering has directly impacted the employability prospects of young people, those who did take part still remain hopeful that it will. This still remains a major driving force in why young people aged 16-24 undertake volunteering activities.

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<sup>32</sup> Penny, R., & Finnegan, A. (2019). *Employability or self-respect? Justifying the use of volunteering to address unemployment*. Voluntary Sector Review, 10(2), p. 152