

VOLUNTEERING AND PROFESSIONAL SELF-ACTUALIZATION OF STUDENTS: FINDINGS FROM MIXED METHODS RESEARCHES

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Abstract

The article presents the results of the research that dealt with the connection between volunteering and professional self-actualization of students. In this article, professional self-actualization is supposed to be considered as the successful employment of students according to their profession. The study uses convergent mixed methods design. The quantitative research was held by means of questionnaires (N = 863) in 2017. The survey involved students from a large Russian region. During the quantitative study it was found that students' volunteering contributes to their professional self-actualization. Firstly, volunteering helps significantly develop such practices as communication skills and the ability to work as part of a team. Secondly, volunteering helps students get works much easier corresponding with professions they got after graduating from the higher school during studying at the university. The results of 12 in-depth interviews with students who have experience of participating in international volunteering projects abroad made it possible to confirm the acquired quantitative data and supplement them contensive.

Key words: volunteering, student, profession, professional self-actualization, third sector

JEL Code: J40, I23

Introduction

According to World Giving Index 2016, annually calculated by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), 12% of Russians volunteered their time to an organization during the last month preceding the survey (World Giving Index, 2016). According to the results of NRU HSE studies, over the past year, 14% of Russians performed unpaid volunteer work (voluntarily) or provided volunteer services to people who are not members of their family, via non-profit organizations or initiative groups. 27% of them are young people aged 18 to 30 (Mersiyanova,

2016), most of whom are students. It is usually students who are most actively involved in volunteering projects due to a number of objective reasons.

Volunteering is not only a form of civic engagement and one of the social activities of students, but it also has a significant impact on their professional development and the development of their human capital. Working as volunteers, students gain some experience, knowledge and skills that allow them to be more competitive in the labor market. On the one hand, volunteering during a degree course can be seen as one of the ways of becoming a professional social worker, a psychologist, a doctor, etc. On the other hand, in conditions of socio-economic instability, when graduates in Russia experience difficulties with employment in general and in the accordance with profession (47% of Russians think that it became more complicated for a graduate to get a job in the accordance with their profession (Student-2017 ..., 2017)) in our opinion, volunteering experience can contribute to their employment and professional self-actualization.

1 Theoretical background

Labor market that changes very fast is very demanding to graduates of universities. Higher education no longer guarantees young professionals employment. The knowledge and skills that yesterday's students got often do not correspond to the needs of employers. Young professionals become disappointed with their profession and the choice of a professional development path because of this. In this regard, the need to minimize the determined risks is becoming essential and is actualized via the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills demanded by employers. One of the ways to minimize these risks can be employment during studying in university. A bit more than 50% of Russian students work during studying at university, at the same time, they are more motivated to acquire professional experience and not money (Hauschildt et al., 2015). In this article, we suppose to consider students' employment as one of the most important stages of their professional self-actualization. From this perspective, it is very important to determine the factors that make students' employment easier.

The results of various researches show that volunteering is one of the activities that is assisted in the growth of graduates' employability in general and in the acquired profession during university studies. Many students engage in volunteering activities to improve their employment prospects by increasing their human capital (Handy et al., 2010; Forbes & Zampelli, 2014).

Astin and Sax have found that volunteering better prepared students for work due to the fact that it makes it possible for students to develop personal and professional qualities. They also found that "students who volunteer are more likely than non-volunteers to have leadership ability, social self-confidence, and skills in critical thinking and conflict resolution" (Astin & Sax, 1998). Planty, Bozick and Regnier note that volunteering helps students interact with people from diverse groups, to place themselves in unfamiliar situations and to be instrumental in the organization of projects (Planty, Bozick & Regnier, 2006). Simha, Topuzova and Albert noticed student volunteers emphasizing that they developed certain skills related to leadership while participating in volunteer activities (Simha, Topuzova & Albert, 2011). According to a study by Ribaric, Nimac and Nad, more than 70% of students noted that volunteerism positively influenced their personal development (self-discipline, willingness to try new things, confidence in their abilities) and contributed to the improvement of transferrable skills (organizational, communication skills, ability to work as part of a team and to make decisions) (Ribaric, Nimac & Nad, 2013). Thus, all that has been said above made it possible for us to formulate the two hypotheses:

H1: volunteering experience helps develop the following skills: organizational, communication skills, ability to work as part of a team and to make decisions;

H2: volunteering experience makes it easier for students to get employed while studying at the university.

2 Data and methods

To check the formulated hypotheses we organized a mass survey among students of a large Russian region (Sverdlovsk region). The sample total of students was 863 people. The study involved 3-4 year students and graduate students of 9 regional universities; 36.6% men, 63.4% women. 34.1% of those who took part in the survey study at engineering and technical departments, 22.4% at natural science departments, 25.5% at humanitarian departments, and 18.1% at socio-economic departments. The acquired quantitative data were processed in the SPSS Statistics program.

The presence of volunteering experience was evaluated with the question: "Have you been involved in volunteering in the last three years?" The respondents who gave the first, the second or the third answer from the four suggested options belonged to the category of volunteers: (1) yes, I work as a volunteer very often (almost once a month), (2) yes, from time to time I participate in volunteering projects (3-5 times a year), (3) yes, I participated accidentally 1-2 times, (4) no, I have never volunteered. Respondents with volunteering

experience were asked to assess their volunteering activity impact on the development of such transferrable skills, as organizational, communication skills, ability to work as part of a team and to make decisions on a three-point scale, where 1 point means "almost no effect ", 2 points -" moderately affects ", 3 points -" affects to a large extent. "

Students' employment was recorded with the answer to the question: "Do you work currently?" The respondents who chose the first or the second option from the three variants were considered employed: (1) I have a constant job; (2) I have a part-time job; (3) I don't have a job. The connection between the students' work and their profession was recorded with the question: "In case you work, to what extent your work is related to the profession you are acquiring at the university?" The respondents who chose the first and the second options from the following variants were considered to be students working in the accordance with their profession: (1) is related (I apply the skills, knowledge), (2) is partially related, (3) is completely unrelated.

For information statistical analysis there were used the following approaches: frequency, correlation, crosstabulation. In this article, the correlation analysis results are analyzed with the relationships between the variables have asymptotic significance (2-sided) <0.05 and the value of the Cramer coefficient > 0.250 .

The results of the implemented qualitative research made it possible to add to the data of the mass survey contensive. In-depth interviews were held with 12 young people (3 young men and 9 young ladies aged 20 to 24 years) having experience in international volunteering projects abroad (2015). The qualitative research data made it possible to characterize the results of young people's volunteering experience in the context of developing their professional skills and increasing the chances of employment.

3 Results

3.1 Influence of volunteering on professional skills

During the survey data analysis, the following results were acquired. 46.6% of the students surveyed have never volunteered, 53.4% have volunteering experience (33% men, 67% women). According to the results of a similar study in Croatia, only 43% of students have volunteering experience (Ribaric, Nimac & Nad, 2013). Despite the fact that the presence of volunteering practices among students in the region is slightly higher, only 6.7% of young people are constantly working as volunteers (once a month), 17.4% do it from time to time (3-

5 times a year), while 29.3% took part in volunteering accidentally 1 or 2 times. What is the volunteering influence degree on developing the professional students' skills?

As can be seen from Tab. 1, according to respondents, volunteering to some extent affects the development of all professional skills we are considering. Although, it has the highest impact on the developing of communication skills and ability to work as part of a team (2.77 and 2.75 points on a three-point scale, respectively). According to the results of a study held in Croatia, volunteering mostly helps develop the ability to work as part of a team.

Tab. 1: Professional skills volunteering impact indicators

Empirical Indicators	Average score
The impact degree of volunteering on the communication skills development	2,77
The impact degree of volunteering on the ability to work as part of a team skills development	2,75
The impact degree of volunteering on the organizational skills development	2,34
The impact degree of volunteering on the ability to make decisions skills development	2,17

Source: author's calculation

Volunteering does not affect a lot the development of such students' professional skills as organizational skills and ability to make decisions. This is primarily due to the fact that students are involved in volunteering within the institutional structures of the university, where the organization and coordination of their activities are carried out by specialists, and the volunteering itself is often strictly regulated and does not imply freedom in decision-making.

According to researchers, however, volunteering regularity significantly influences the growth of professional attributes and academic engagement (Smith et al., 2010). Handy et al. found that the frequency of time spent volunteering had a direct impact on the experience gained from the activity and the perception of benefits obtained (Handy et al., 2010). This is also evidenced by the results of our study. Among those who constantly work as a volunteer (about once a month), the average score for assessing the volunteering impact on the development of communication skills and ability to work as part of a team is slightly higher than the average among the all other volunteers surveyed and is 2.88 and 2.84, respectively.

3.2 Influence of volunteering on employment according to the profession

Professional self-actualization of universities' graduates suggests their successful employment. According to the results of the Vishnevsky and Didkovskaya study in the Sverdlovsk region, young people consider that the most urgent problems for their employment are the absence of work experience (Vishnevsky & Didkovskaya, 2016). Volunteering participation can compensate for lack of necessary work experience. According to Ribaric, Nimac and Nad, students during their studies can significantly enhance their competitiveness and employment chances on the labor market by participating in volunteerism (Ribaric, Nimac & Nad, 2013). Does volunteering make the employment of Sverdlovsk region students according to their profession easier?

The descriptive analysis of employment, depending on the experience of volunteering, showed that more often than on average, those students who volunteer regularly or from time to time – 68% and 54% against 42% in the whole sample (Tab. 2) are employed.

Tab. 2: The connection between volunteering and employment during study

	Do you work currently?	
	Yes, %	No, %
Overall	42	58
Have you been involved in volunteering in the last three years?		
Yes, I constantly work as volunteer (once a month)	68	32
I participate in volunteering projects from time to time (3-5 times a year)	54	46
I participated accidentally 1-2 times	42	58
I have never volunteered	34	66

Source: author's calculation

Students who have volunteering work experience get employed much easier, even while studying at a university. Two of the three employed students have experience of volunteering. According to a study in Croatia, the volunteerism impact on the employment of students is also positive. Volunteering participation helps establish contacts that can be useful in further employment, acquiring the skills that employers need, and improving readiness for paid employment (Ribaric, Nimac & Nad, 2013).

Volunteering contributes not only to the employment of students, but to their employment according to the profession they acquire in the university, which is extremely important for their professional self-actualization. Almost half of the working students, who have volunteering work experience, have jobs more or less related to the professional education they earn. As far as students who do not have the experience of volunteering practices are concerned, this connection was noted only by 37.4% of respondents. At the same time, students

who are regularly involved in volunteering (40% versus 19%) work more often according to their profession (use the received skills and knowledge) (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3: Interrelation of volunteering experience and students' employment with the accordance to their profession during studying in the university

	In case you work, to what extent your job is related to your profession?		
	Related, %	Partly related, %	Does not related at all, %
Overall	19	25	56
Have you been involved in volunteering in the last three years?			
Yes, I constantly work as volunteer (once a month)	40	18	42
I participate in volunteering projects from time to time (3-5 times a year)	22	22	56
I participated accidentally 1-2 times	16	36	48
I have never volunteered	14	23	63

Source: author's calculation

Foreign researchers come to similar conclusions. According to Ribaric, Nimac and Nad, 38% of students believe that their chances of finding a job in the chosen profession have improved after working as a volunteer (Ribaric, Nimac & Nad, 2013).

3.3 International volunteering projects participation influence on students' professional skills and their employment during studying: the results of qualitative research

According to the results of qualitative research, participation in international volunteering projects abroad certainly contributes to the development of communication skills, which confirms the results of the quantitative study. Respondents who participated in interviewing are confident that a common language can be found with any person.

«I've realized that it is possible to find general topics for any conversation. During the training I've built ties with everyone. Now I can easily come up to any person with a question. In an hour we may sit in a bar together and communicate» (male; 22 years old).

However, in the respondents' opinion, first of all, participation in such kind of volunteering projects contributes significantly to the development of leadership skills. According to the respondents, they began to think outside the suggested framework, the fear of solving non-standard problems disappeared; they became more adaptable to unusual situations.

For many respondents, participating in an international volunteering project was a practical case where they were tested for their skills to change human relationships, to influence someone's beliefs and estimates (Pevnaya, 2016). Acquired skills, of course, contribute to students' successful employment as soon as at the stage of training, which is one of the most important conditions for their professional self-actualization.

«Now I work in an international audit company. I easily passed the selection procedure. What they appreciate in employees is leadership skills, ability to find a way out of any situation» (female; 23 years old).

Conclusion

Professional self-actualization is one of the most important values of any person's life. Today, in the conditions of intensively changing socio-economic and political circumstances, it is especially important to act non-linearly, in different directions at one of the key stages of professional development – the stage of studying at the university. From our point of view, volunteering can be considered as one of the ways to insure the risks of the wrong choice of a profession and, accordingly, the risks of professional unclaimedness, unrealisation.

The hypotheses we created were partially confirmed. In accordance with the results of quantitative and qualitative research, participation in volunteering during studying at the university contributes to:

1. At a serious degree to the development of the following skills: communication skills and ability to work as part of a team. Although such skills as leadership skills, organizational skills, ability to make decisions etc., can be developed under certain circumstances and due to a special nature of volunteering, this is a subject for a further research.

2. Students' employment with accordance to their profession at the stage of studying in the university, which largely determines the success of their professional self-actualization.

It is also necessary to emphasize that the regularity of volunteering largely determines the degree of professional skills development, and, consequently, the chances of students' employment according to the profession during studying.

Acknowledgment

The research is supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities (Project № 16–03–00016). We would like to express our gratitude to UrFU's Institute of Public Administration and Entrepreneurship for assistance in holding this research.

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