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How volunteering helps students to develop soft skills

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Abstract It is widely recognised that tertiary education does not provide all of the knowledge and skills required to succeed in modern societies. Personal and interpersonal skills – so-called "soft skills" – are also needed to complement professional skills and expertise, and become an essential part of an individual's personality. One way of acquiring soft skills is volunteering with associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This paper discusses the involvement of French third-level students in voluntary activities and the skills they acquire as a result. The author presents the findings of a study involving a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Results show that many students develop skills linked to their future professional career, that they reflect on this consciously and feel enriched by the experience. The author argues that "non-professional" activities like volunteering can be actively incorporated into students' learning process, making their overall experience of higher education more active, enjoyable and relevant. Learning through action was found to be the most important factor in the acquisition of soft skills. This article aims to contribute to research on the educational dimension of volunteering, demonstrating that it benefits both personal and professional development.

Keywords Volunteering · Soft skills · Interpersonal skills · Career · Personal development

Résumé Comment le bénévolat aide les étudiants à acquérir des aptitudes générales (*soft skills*) – Il est communément admis que l'enseignement supérieur ne transmet pas toutes les connaissances et compétences nécessaires pour réussir dans les sociétés modernes. Les qualités humaines et capacités relationnelles, appelées aussi aptitudes générales ou savoir-être, sont également nécessaires pour compléter les compétences et

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l'expertise professionnelles et faire partie intégrante de la personnalité de l'individu. Un moyen d'acquérir ce savoir-être consiste à s'engager bénévolement dans des associations ou organisations non gouvernementales. Cet article analyse l'engagement des étudiants français dans des activités bénévoles et les compétences que celles-ci leur apportent. L'auteure présente les résultats d'une étude de recherche impliquant un questionnaire et des entrevues semi-structurées. Les résultats révèlent que de nombreux étudiants développent des compétences liées à leur future carrière professionnelle, qu'ils en sont conscients et se sentent enrichis par cette expérience. L'auteure propose d'intégrer activement des activités « non professionnelles » telles que le bénévolat dans le processus d'apprentissage des étudiants, pour rendre leur expérience universitaire générale plus active, plus agréable et plus pertinente. L'apprentissage par l'action s'est révélé être le facteur principal dans l'acquisition du savoir-être. L'auteure vise à contribuer à la recherche sur la dimension éducative du bénévolat, illustrant que celui-ci profite au développement tant personnel que professionnel.

Introduction

Globalised economies have amplified the demand for workers who possess flexible, adaptive and transversal skills. Labour markets increasingly favour those who are able to deal with the unexpected, work both independently and in a group, and who are sociable, responsible and capable of taking initiative. Those who possess these "soft skills" are frequently preferred over those who merely possess technical skills. This trend is also reflected in national and international policy; skills like "learning to learn", "social and civic competence" and a "sense of initiative and entrepreneurship" are considered key competences in European education systems. Indeed, according to Odile Camus (2011), the labour market is demanding more proficiency in communication skills towards improving human interrelations in work environments. As learning is linked to people's empowerment to be both socially and economically more active members of society, the "individual employability potential" becomes of primary interest (Duvekot et al. 2007). Meanwhile, the professional integration of young people and the transition from education to employment has become more difficult (Peugny 2011). In France, the unemployment rate among the youth labour force increased from 22.3 per cent to 24.2 per cent between 2008 and 2009, according to Eurostat data (quoted in Peugny 2011). By 2016, the percentage of unemployed 15–24 year-olds in France had increased to 24.6 per cent (OECD 2017). In this situation, young people need to equip themselves with the necessary skills and competences to facilitate access to the labour market.

One way of fostering social and professional integration is engagement in extracurricular and non-professional activities. European authorities emphasise the primary role of non-formal and informal education, reflected in the definition of lifelong education as.

> all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic and/or employment-related perspective (CEDEFOP 2009).

According to Ali Hamadache (1993), non-formal education is defined as all learning situations which are more or less structured and which lie on the sidelines of out-of-school institutions. One of the main aims of this learning is to train "active citizens" and "to create and use knowledge effectively and intelligently, on a continually changing basis" in knowledge societies (EC 2000, p. 7). With regard to informal education, it can be defined as "a process throughout life, by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, abilities, attitudes" through everyday experiences, at work or during leisure activities. It is generally neither organised nor systematised and sometimes unintentional (Pain 1990, p. 126).

The difficulties of young people in finding employment are a major concern for European policymakers (Du Bois Reymond 2003; CoE 2007), who have stated that non-formal and informal learning is becoming not only a "key activity, but also [a] key competence" (CoE 2007, p. 11) which supports personal fulfilment, social inclusion and active citizenship. So there is a need to "capitalise" on competences, skills and attitudes acquired either through formal learning in the school system or through non-formal and informal pathways in order "to be empowered and employable" (Duvekot et al. 2007, p. 9).

The voluntary sector in France

From a social perspective, non-profit organisations in France participate in the process of "building social networks" involving a voluntary commitment between people (Laville 1997, p. 66). Thanks to the involvement of millions of French people in voluntary associations, (non-profit) societies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social cooperatives, volunteering has become a powerful social phenomenon (Halba 2007). The number of associations and volunteers[1] in France has recently increased (2005–2011) (ibid.). The annual growth rate of the number of associations is approximately 4 per cent (Archambault and Tchernonog 2012).

In addition, new forms of engagement like community service,[2] are proliferating and attracting French youth. This kind of volunteer engagement is also being promoted at European policy level. Indeed, youth engagement in volunteering is one of the priorities of the EU's 2020 Strategies, in particular the EU Strategy for Youth,[3] in order to promote active participation in society, to involve youth in a "positive experience" and to improve employability through skills development (EC 2011). In 2000 in France, 1,611 student and alumni associations were created,

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[1] According to the Economic and Social Council (1993; Cheroutre 1989), a volunteer is "any person who engages freely to take non-employed action for the benefit of others, outside his [or her] professional and family time."

[2] By "community service" I mean *service civil*, a largely state-funded programme in France which aims to promote citizenship and solidarity and facilitate the social and professional integration of young people through various tasks benefiting members of local communities.

[3] The objective of "Field of action 7: Volunteering" in the EU Strategy for Youth (EC 2009) is to "support youth volunteering, by developing more voluntary opportunities for young people, making it easier to volunteer by removing obstacles, raising awareness on the value of volunteering, recognising volunteering as an important form of non-formal education and reinforcing cross-border mobility of young volunteers (EC 2009, p. 10).

representing 2.67 per cent of all associations created (Côme and Morder 2009, p. 15). The French National Observatory of Student Life (quoted in Côme and Morder 2009, p. 17) estimated that about 50 per cent of students joined an association in 2004, and that 26 per cent of them became active volunteers. The students' motivations are characterised by their attitude towards politics, their taste for social action, and the individual nature of their engagement (ibid.).

In some universities and colleges, volunteer activities are part of the curriculum. These activities are often organised like other curricular programmes; students are given a set number of hours' work to complete, followed by assessments. Referring to the North American context, Daniel Schugurensky argues that the focus of these programmes is split between learning and engagement:

> some of these programs emphasize the learning part of the equation, others emphasize the service part, and a few attempt to find a balance between the two (Schugurensky 2013).

The voluntary sector plays an important role in social life and in learning (Lengrand 1982). For Nicole Tremblay (1996), the mobilisation of "action knowledge" in associations is embedded in the dynamic of self-learning. Associations and other voluntary organisations act as learning and social spaces which promote harmonisation between action and the personal and professional life (Merle 2006). For young people, associations constitute, in the words of Régis Cortesero, a "training ground for active life, where they acquire skills that will be 'useful' in the workplace" (Cortesero 2013). In this way, volunteering can be a part of non-formal and informal learning.

Despite the importance of volunteering in French society, the relationship between learning and volunteering has not yet been deeply analysed. Moreover, in the North American countries, volunteering still plays a marginal role in research on learning (Schugurensky 2013). This article looks at the learning value of the voluntary sector for students, with particular emphasis on soft skills. It invites us to rethink the contribution of non-academic activities to the education and training of students who will eventually need to adapt to a work environment which is not guaranteed to remain stable.

After providing a theoretical framework for analysing the acquisition of skills by student volunteers in the next section, I will present the research context and methodology of a study I was involved in, followed by a discussion of the results, the limitations of the study and conclusions.

Theoretical framework: social skills and soft skills

The "social" character of competences and "soft skills"

It is not easy to provide a definition of *competences* (Pastre 2011; Vergnaud 1999), because they are plural and problematic (Piot 2008). Renan Samurçay and Pierre Rabardel propose a common-sense approach, defining competences as "potential resources, implemented in order to achieve a goal or perform a task in a given

organizational system"[4] (Samurçay and Rabardel 2004, p. 164). A competence "does not declare itself but is based on an actual activity in a given context and situation which is for a person to perceive, to interpret in order to act on it effectively" (Noam Chomsky, paraphrased by Thierry Piot 2006, p. 14). To acquire and to implement competences is to mobilise internal resources (motivation, knowledge, etc.) and external resources (resources, information, relationships, teamwork, etc.) in a given context. The acquisition of competences is less a result than a process, and they are adjusted and adapted depending on the circumstances.

According to Bernard Rey (2009), competences have a fundamentally social nature. The concept of social competences refers to collective skills that emerge from cooperation. The French *Dictionary of Sociology* (Akoun and Ansart 1999) defines social competences as a set of capabilities required by the individual in order to be integrated into society. These "relational and social" competences refer mainly to the use "of language in its pragmatic function of communication" and to the relational dimension which translates as "a potential to influence others expressed in terms of skills or abilities" (Camus 2011, p. 9). Social competences denote certain ways of being of the individual (Aubret and Gilbert 1997); in other words, attitudes.[5] In the work environment, competences refer to the "behavioural norms" which "are attached to individuals' personal characteristics: motivation, responsibility, participation, engagement" (Ségal 2006, p. 111).

Soft skills are the social dimension of competences. They are defined by Clive Muir as.

> attitudes and behaviors displayed in interactions among individuals that affect the outcomes of various interpersonal encounters (Muir 2004, p. 96).

These are the skills which enable us to communicate and interact with others. According to psychologist Daniel Goleman (1996), the emotional dimension is present as long as these skills contribute to self-management and control of behaviour.

In their book on "skills of the leaders of tomorrow", Jerôme Hoarau, Julien Bouret and Fabrice Mauleon offer another definition of soft skills:

> soft skills are those that improve the performance of an individual in different and varied tasks; unlike the technical skills which are related to specific skills, they are transversal (Hoarau et al. 2014, p. 10).

Thus, the dimension of transversality and of sustainable personal development distinguishes them from *hard skills*, technical knowledge related to specific tasks.

In summary, *soft skills* are "human" skills, social and transversal, whose mastery fosters interaction with others. They allow better interaction with others but also improve one's own performance. Some authors consider these skills related to personality traits and cognitive abilities to be difficult to measure (Muir 2004; Boudrias and Morin 2011).

In the context of technological advancement, employers are becoming more demanding in terms of qualifications, and students are expected to display a broad

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[4] All citations from French sources were translated by the author of this article.

[5] Though Guy Le Boterf finds attitudes to be resources rather than competences in their combinatorial approach to competence (Le Boterf 2000, p. 62).

range of skills in order to find employment. Meenakshi Sharma (2009) shows the importance of soft skills when entering the workforce and in career development (Barth and Géniaux 2010). Hoarau et al. emphasise that soft skills are a response to a need to "better manage human relations, better understand the [work] environment and integrate the well-being of employees – the three fundamental needs of most companies in the twenty-first century" (Hoarau et al. 2014, p. 8).

This article is concerned with those activities which help students develop these kinds of skills. According to an interview Muir conducted with communications specialist Annalee Luhman, they can be developed in associations and religious institutions (Muir 2004). They are also developed through experience, either during a confrontation in personal or professional life, or as part of a training programme where the learner is placed in a situation designed to provoke specific responses (Krichewsky 2009).

The typology of soft skills

If agreement exists between researchers and practitioners on the general definition of soft skills, we observe differences in the categorisation of which skills may be included in this general category. Rowena Crosbie (2005) identified eight types of soft skills: cooperation/teamwork skills; communication skills; initiative; leadership ability; planning and organising skills; personal mastery; coaching; and presentation skills. Meanwhile, Vishal Jain (2009) distinguishes seven types of soft skills: (1) communicative skills; (2) thinking skills and problem solving skills; (3) team work force; (4) lifelong learning and information management; (5) entrepreneur skills; (6) ethics, moral and professionalism; and (7) leadership skills. The Canadian researcher and international consultant Serge Harvey defines soft skills as skills oriented to human interactions that apply emotional intelligence (Ren and Du 2014). He divided them into four categories: *Personal* (efficiency, reliability, identification with the company); *Communicational* (ability to initiate a discussion, to build a social network); *Interpersonal* (sense of responsibility, team spirit, awareness of the hierarchy); and *Various* (resourcefulness, passions, etc.).

My aim here is also to understand volunteer activity as an *educational* experience through which volunteers acquire skills and competences, and to provide answers to the following questions: *What kinds of learning and skills are developed by students through volunteering?* And, as reflected in the title of this article: *How does volunteering help students to develop soft skills?*

Methodology and sampling

The study presented here was carried out in two French regions, the regions of Champagne Ardenne and Île de France, in 2013–2015. I sent out 300 questionnaires to volunteers working at 11 associations in these two regions.[6]

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[6] The study, which formed the basis of my PhD thesis (Khasanzyanova 2015), was carried out in French. For the purposes of this article, I have translated all participants' responses presented here into English.

The first round of data collection was an exploratory survey which aimed to better understand the profile of the surveyed students and their voluntary activities, and to identify the skills acquired in voluntary work. I designed a questionnaire with a wide choice of variables to take into account the large number of participants (potentially 300) and their many fields of activity. The goal of this questionnaire was to identify personal characteristics of volunteers and the skills they felt they had acquired. In a survey of this type, data collection and analysis adjust to the occurrence of unexpected data and analytical insights of the researcher (Van der Maren 2003). Having sent out 300 questionnaires, I received 155 responses.

The second round of data collection aimed to gather deeper knowledge on certain points. It reflected the students' process of constructing and acquiring skills through voluntary experiences. The context in which skills and competences are acquired is also important to understand. I conducted five semi-structured interviews to allow students to explain whether and how their experience of voluntary activities supported their academic studies and to articulate the process of constructing and acquiring skills. A qualitative analysis of the data collected through these interviews enabled me to understand the meaning that the students attributed to their activities or, as Roland Vandenberghe (2006) puts it, to "disentangle the complexity" behind volunteer activity.

The semi-structured interview questions for students were drawn from the sections and themes of the survey questionnaire; hence the questions were similar in both data collection instruments. This approach allowed me to draw out common themes in the discussion of the quantitative and qualitative data. The sampling method I used for the semi-structured interviews followed the logic that whereas the questionnaire survey was of random character and I did not know in advance which volunteers would respond, the interviews could adopt a more targeted approach. I tried to choose a representative of each of the volunteer associations included among questionnaire respondents.

In order to give a representative picture, I chose to question volunteers working in associations within the social and educational sectors who were primarily involved in organising recreational activities, tutoring sick people or people with disabilities, and organising sports activities. The majority of the respondents were working either with student associations (AFEV [Students' Association Foundation for the City], Starting Block, etc.) or associations which appeal to students, such as the Secours Populaire.[7]

I analysed the questionnaire and interview responses to generate a theory about the development of skills and competencies through voluntary activities by students. Inspired by the notions of soft skills and social competences, I analysed the qualitative data (responses to the open questions from the questionnaires and the interviews) thematically. Data were coded, then sorted and classified to match common themes and sub-themes. I then interpreted the quantitative and qualitative findings to illustrate the views and opinions of the students.

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[7] Their respective focus of engagement is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The associations in which the student volunteers worked ($n = 155$)

Type of voluntary activity	Name of the association and focus of engagement	Number of volunteers
School support	*Association Fondation Etudiante pour la Ville (AFEV)*	58
	NPO promoting volunteering, supporting volunteers in addressing inequalities in education, youth participation, and the social responsibility of universities	
	PrépaRémois	42
	coaches underprivileged secondary school students towards accessing graduate studies	
	Le Secours Populaire	9
	NGO fighting poverty and exclusion	
Sports activities	*Baseball Club de Reims*	2
	Dachan Taekwondo Club de Reims	3
	Reims Champagne Handball	3
	Reims Drink Eat (Basketball)	2
Tutoring and assisting sick and disabled people	*Starting Block* (Citizenship education, tutoring sick secondary school students etc.)	21
	Croix Rouge Française (atelier Alzheimer)	2
	[French red cross; Alzheimer workshop]	
Coaching and organising recreational activities	*123 Rap*	4
	NPO teaching English	
	Mondollin	9
	NGO promoting international solidarity and intercultural education	

NPO non-profit organisation; *NGO* non-governmental organisation

Socio-economic characteristics of the students

The majority of the students surveyed by way of the questionnaire were females (76%, or 118 out of 155). Males comprised 24% (or 37/155). Most of the respondents held a Baccalaureate[8] qualification. The most representative educational level was "Bac + 2 or 3"[9] (28.5%), followed by "Bac + 4 or 5"[10] (25.0%). The most common subject specialisations of the surveyed students were Psychology (32 out of 155), Health and Social Studies (12), Law (8), Economics (7), and Educational Science (4). Other fields of study also represented were Literature, Geography, Foreign Languages, Sign Language, Science and Techniques of Physical and Sports Activities (STAPS), History, and Social Economics. The participant number of technical degree students was low. However, there was also considerable representation by students of Commerce (42 out of 155); these were

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[8] Final exam at the end of secondary school in France.

[9] Second or third year of higher education (Bachelor's degree).

[10] Fourth or fifth year of higher education (Master's degree).

students of the Neoma Business School who founded an association which tutors students in secondary education.

As Table 1 shows, the most common volunteer activities were as follows: school support (109/155), followed by tutoring and assisting sick and disabled people (23/155), followed by coaching and organising recreational activities (13/155) and sports activities (10/155). On average, the amount of time invested by students in voluntary activities was between 2 and 4 h per week.

Following the questionnaire survey, I interviewed five student volunteers working in school support, tutoring and accompanying people with disabilities, tutoring and coaching, and training of sports activities. Table 2 describes these volunteers and their activities.

Results: diversity of learning during volunteer activity

Soft skills related to teaching and the transfer of knowledge

Using the responses to the open question about the skills developed by respondents in volunteer activities, I conducted a thematic analysis based on the typologies of soft skills. The question was: "What competences did you develop during your volunteer activity?" From the responses in the questionnaires, we can initially identify three types of skills acquired by student volunteers: (1) *individual ski*lls (patience, listening, open-mindedness); (2) *collective ski*lls (communication, teamwork); and (3) *managerial ski*lls (project management). These three types of skills are often related to volunteer activities such as training and coaching. Thus, the most common responses correspond to *practical skills related to teaching, coaching and transfer of knowledge.* Below are some representative sample statements made

Table 2 The characteristics of the sample interviewed

Volunteer*	Sex	Age	Academic background	Volunteer activity
Amélie	f	24	Just obtained her Master's degree in education	School support (AFEV)
			Currently training in the civil service	
Sophie	f	25	Preparing her Master's degree in education	Coaching young people with disabilities (Starting Block)
			Specialty: educational assistance	
Hélène	f	22	Just obtained her Bachelor's degree in Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sports Activities	Sports training (Handball)
			Recently obtained the qualification to teach in secondary schools	
Aline	f	19	Preparing her Bachelor's degree in Law	School support (AFEV)
Pouline	f	21	Studying at Business school	Coaching and tutoring (PrepaRémois)
			Specialty: corporate finance	

*The names have been changed to protect participants' identities

by respondents in the questionnaires. The first two batches of sample statements concern *individual skills*:

> When I am teaching, I learn to be clearer in my explanations, I put myself in the place of a child to better understand his or her needs

> Interacting with a group of young adults. Introducing a theme as concisely and as accurately as possible. It should be entertaining and interesting for learners

> Communicating. Sending a message. Learning from others and teaching others. Keeping the attention of an audience. Advising […]

Skills related to training people with learning difficulties or with disabilities were also cited. They are skills of adaptation which result in improving the benefits of accompanying or training these people.

> Managing to capture the attention of young people with concentration problems; successfully explaining complicated concepts (sets of rules) to autistic youth who have problems understanding

> Being able to adapt our behaviour to interacting with a person with disabilities […].

The third batch of statements concerns skills which can be *individual* or *collective*. They are *personal and social skills*, which include communication and interacting with others more effectively, listening, being responsible, being open-minded and patient, etc.:

> Being able to listen, being open to the other person, being more open-minded; […] learning to take responsibility

> Being open to others, building self-confidence and abilities

> Coaching, teaching, listening skills, resourcefulness, organisation, responsibility, love of work in teams, language skills […] A lot of skills!

> Being better able to explain my ideas and concepts. Having more patience and empathy. Didactic qualities, being heard

> Interacting with a group of young adults

> Being able to communicate with people who initially do not seem very open

The third type, *managerial skills,* were also cited by many students. The skills most frequently mentioned were material and human management skills which relate, first, to projects, and, second, to management of a team of people. They include the skills involved in conceiving and budgeting for a project. Working with the media, networking, and development of partnerships were also cited, as were coordination, leadership, consulting and delegation:

> Project management; management and team coordination; realisation of budgets, conducting meetings, tools for teamwork, planning and centralising information

Development of partnerships; planning; teamwork; work organisation; coordination; leadership

Dealing with organisational problems, relationships (with young people, but also with discontented parents)

Some skills acquired through voluntary work might also be expressed by the term "values". These include solidarity, warmth and rigour. Respondents claimed they had learned to question themselves, understand the issues, to engage in non-profit organisations. These skills correspond to attitudes related to personal development.

Soft skills are acquired through practice

After evaluating the information I had been able to extract from the questionnaires, the analyses of the interviews allowed me to deepen my understanding of how soft skills are acquired, especially in the context of associations. Overall, the student volunteers reported having gained valuable knowledge and skills through volunteer practice. The most frequently discussed skills were those arising from the need to adapt their activity to the learner's level. In this context, the volunteers also talked about re-evaluating personal skills, respect, patience, and more clearly explaining gestures and techniques specific to the sport or to tutoring:

We adapted our practices with respect to what we saw most often at weekends to create something, to adapt, and to finally regulate the level a little higher (Hélène)

[…] The project management is important […] we have a project, we manage it throughout the year, and it empowers a lot of […] We work in a team; we acquire the real competence through teamwork. We're three tutors, so we learned, communicated and organised our work together. For example, when somebody is absent, we have to re-organise our work and it demands a lot of communication, […] This is not obvious to everyone; it is something that is learned (Pouline)

The volunteers working in school support spoke of developing values of solidarity, sharing experiences and cultivating exchange between themselves and the learners:

Because we share a wealth of experience, we share mine as well as his, we meet his family, and his little brothers are great. When I arrived, they were […] so happy […] you learn a lot of things discovering another social environment. It's really an exchange on both sides, a mutual exchange (Aline)

I had an opportunity to interact with a child whom I would never have met other than through this association, these children do not meet students […] So I could meet and interact with other people. I have learned alone, […] when I say "alone", that means by practice, not by the training organised by the association but by doing the volunteering and interacting with other people (Amelie)

I learned things because I met other people (disabled persons), so I take things differently. Every experience is good because every experience teaches us different things, so does meeting new people, new ways of being […] With the coordinator we had a great relationship […] And then, sometimes, when we had doubts, she reassured us […] (Sophie)

Volunteers engaged in school support and tutoring were especially conscious of having developed a sense of responsibility towards children, youth or their families. They thus developed the values of solidarity, sharing and exchange through their volunteer activity.

Discussion

The analysis of the questionnaires and interviews showed the diversity of learning and skills acquired mainly through volunteering; in other words, skills gained "in the field". My research revealed that the most common skills acquired are linked to teaching and transfer of knowledge, as well as *soft skills* which are related to the values of the respective associations in which the volunteers worked. Resuming the typology identified by Harvey (Ren and Du 2014), we can identify the presence of four types of soft skills generated by volunteering. These are *personal* skills (effectiveness, listening, adaptability, etc.), *communication* skills (knowing how to explain, communication with members and beneficiaries of the associations, etc.), *interpersonal* skills (sense of responsibility, teamwork, organisational skills, etc.), and the skills designated "*various*", which often result in forms of expression values (solidarity, passion, understanding, etc.).

It is important to note that, in many cases, the activities pursued by these volunteers were related to their desired future profession, as in the cases of Sophie (tutoring young people with disabilities), who was preparing to work as a social worker and Hélène (sports coaching), who had just passed the exam to become a teacher of physical education and sports. Volunteer activity appears to be a way to gain useful experience in a professional field. The interview excerpts reflect the utilitarian perception and "professionalising" value of working with associations. Thus, for example, the student volunteers showed strong concern for their future careers. They experienced volunteer activity as an opportunity to gain experience in the intended professional field and to expand their knowledge. Many volunteers claimed to have improved their self-esteem, their ability to listen and their patience through their work with associations. The social dimension of their skills acquisition is important because their learning is based on interactions in community contexts.

The study shows that volunteering allows students to acquire various skills, including transversal skills, more effectively than through academic study, as these skills are developed through practice. It focused on specific types of associations related to coaching, education and mentoring. It does not claim to represent learning achieved by volunteers in all associations. The results relate mainly to a certain volunteer group (third-level students) at the stage of "pre-professionalisation" (Simonet-Cusset 2004), but they do not claim to account for the entire volunteer

world. Moreover, the sample was selected based on convenience for the researcher, in other words the sample I had at hand. The population of the study mainly concerns students of humanities and social sciences. This is also reflected in the types of associations chosen, which focused on social, cultural and sports activities.

This study allowed me to understand the characteristics and types of learning among volunteers, by interpreting data collected through a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. The conclusions I arrived at are based on representations of participants, impressions and opinions of the students I interviewed. To determine the process and effect of change over a period of time would require a longitudinal research design.

Conclusion

This article focuses on the way volunteer activities contribute to widening the "professional" experience of students and considers the extent to which volunteering can represent an "added value" for students. According to Schugurensky (2013), the question of learning undertaken in the framework of association activities has not yet been studied thoroughly. Moreover, very few studies focus on youth and their associative life (Côme and Morder 2009). This article aims to contribute to the research on the educational dimension of volunteering. The research shows that students acquire skills through volunteer activity, and that they find it useful in professional life. Volunteering can be a way of strengthening the "human capital" (Camus 2011) of young people without work experience and help them enter the job market.

The study was not designed to determine the sustainability of skills for employment. The question of how the skills and competences acquired through volunteering are valued in the labour market is another poorly studied subject. Nevertheless, as Bénédicte Halba (2007) mentions, volunteering has become more relevant as a "building block" in a flexible work situation and "many national agencies for employment have insisted on the positive impact of volunteering on unemployed people" (Halba 2007, p. 181).

However, these results can contribute to research seeking to promote non-academic skills in order to increase employability of youth. Promoting and developing the skills acquired outside formal education is an issue of national and European policies. However, unlike the situation in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the work conducted in France indicates that the influence of the associative experience on the probability of getting a job interview is slight (Cortesero 2013). While in France these skills appear to be not easily identifiable, Anglo-Saxon approaches tend to highlight the importance of associative experience and extracurricular activities.

The challenge of adequately recognising voluntary work was highlighted during the European Year of Volunteering in 2011. This recognition is based on an increase of competence frameworks which often include reflection and self-assessment of volunteer practices. Sometimes the volunteer experience is recognised by universities, especially through the award of credits under the European Credit Transfer

and Accumulation System (ECTS).[11] According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational training (CEDEFOP 2009), it will validate "intangible" acquisitions (self-confidence, self-esteem, etc.) which can result in employment or allow access to formal education. The validation and recognition of these soft skills has become an issue in the context of continuing education and lifelong education which caused "a change of look and legitimacy with regard to experience" (Presse and Wittorski 2013, p. 13). Many countries are reflecting on how to make use of volunteer experience for the labour market, aiming for a system which will motivate individuals to learn and to "build bridges between volunteering and education" (EC 2011, p. 11). Thus, the promotion of access to learning and transfer of learning is of major interest to the knowledge society. Consequently, the issue of the recognition of skills acquired in associations and NGOs is likely to become even more relevant, with increased efforts to valorise and validate non-academic activities in the educational system with well-defined certification rules.

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[11] The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), first introduced in Europe in 1989, is designed to make it easier for students to move between different countries. Students can transfer their ECTS credits from one university to another so they are added up to contribute to their degree.

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