

*Social Action & Youth Work
Non-Formal Education Policy
Paper*

*of the European Federation of Psychology Students'
Associations (EFPSA)*

Approved at the Virtual General Assembly III, 15th of May 2021




efpsa

*European Federation of
Psychology Students' Associations*



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Preamble

This paper states the European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations (EFPSA) opinions on the issues relating to social action and youth work in the European context. This paper broadly looks at the overarching issues surrounding social action and youth work, the challenges facing young people in securing high quality, societally recognised experiences, and the potential for the volunteering and youth work sector on the European stage. This paper offers both a definition of social action and youth work, elaborations on the relevant European policy areas, and helps to elucidate a potential framework for volunteering for young people in Europe.

James Sanderson
Policy Member, 2020-2021



Foreword by the President

Social action has always been a core principle of the European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations (EFPSA). EFPSA is a not-for-profit organisation run by psychology students working on a voluntary basis, creating diverse and interesting opportunities for psychology students across Europe.

EFPSA recognises the importance of volunteer work and the impact it leaves on our society on the local, national, and regional levels. Our mission is to bring psychology students together to encourage skill development, to contribute to the improvement of psychology and also have a positive impact on society. We are succeeding in this endeavour on a European level through volunteer work.

For generations, students have been developing opportunities for themselves and others and in doing so have enacted positive change in their own communities. As President of this wonderful organisation, I am proud to invite you, the reader, to study this document and take with you the noble ideals of volunteering. As a highly diverse network of students coming from all over Europe, EFPSA is aware of the need for different approaches to volunteering, and with this paper aims to raise awareness about social action and youth work.

Vita Bogdanić
President of EFPSA, 2020-2021

Definition and Values

Social action can be defined as “people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities” (Department for Digital, Media, Culture & Sport, 2016). Social action is enacted by volunteers, with *volunteer* itself meaning “one who voluntarily offers his services in any capacity; one who of his own free will takes part in any enterprise” (Oxford University Press, 2021). Hence, social action can act as a tool by which individuals contribute to their communities and wider societies both locally, nationally and on a wider global scale. This means that ultimately, volunteers act as agents of positive change in whichever community they serve.

Youth Work itself is a wide-ranging term that ultimately focuses on supporting young people in development and societal participation (European Commission, 2014). Thus, in the traditional sense, it serves to support those young people disadvantaged in some respect, be that through problems with adhering to social norms to developing friendships at school. However, the European Commission elucidates to a more positive view of youth work in which it acts to support all young people in all aspects of their personal and social development (*ibid*). It is this view that EFPSA adopts as its own egalitarian definition of youth work.

As a force by which intercultural understanding can be fostered, this paper strongly emphasises that the intrinsic nature of social action and youth work should remain both voluntary and obligation-free; providing development and life experiences to the individual whilst deriving primarily from a positive utilitarian outlook.

Historical Context

Our 21st century notions of volunteering derive from the work during the 19th century to ameliorate the working and living conditions of the ordinary person. These early ideals of volunteerism were particularly prevalent in Victorian England and the Nordic countries, where a societal need to improve living conditions during the Industrial Revolution resulted in much philanthropy (Angell, 2015). It was not until YMCA opened to the public in 1844 that organised volunteering groups began to take shape, and Clara Barton’s pivotal role in establishing humanitarian support during the American Civil War and subsequent formation of the Red Cross acts as an exemplar of the role organised groups could have on a society (Evans, 2003). In Europe, the concept of private philanthropy coupled with the egalitarian nature of Nordic societies in an era of rapid societal changes ensured that volunteering became integral to the European *mode de vie* and this continues to the present day in many countries (European Commission, 2009).

Reflecting on the historical background, we can see that volunteering, that essence of working to support the communities one works in to improve life chances and opportunities, has very much permeated into the fabric of today's modern European society. It is important to see how volunteering developed over time, in order to both understand the meaning of the term in the modern context and to see how it can be modelled and positively changed in the future.

Volunteering in Europe

In the present, the European Union now acts as a catalyst for positive change throughout Europe. The establishment of the Erasmus student mobility scheme in 1987 marked the beginning of supranational cooperation on the exchange of students across countries, and subsequent directives from European Commission Youth Strategies have enabled a multiplex of programmes to be formed with various societal aims for Youth. Indeed, one such scheme which is directly involved with youth

engagement is the European Solidarity Corps, which allows young people across Europe to engage with volunteering, traineeships and jobs, and to run their own projects in any EU Member State (European Commission, 2020). In effect, this scheme acts as a pan-European outlet for young people to support European communities, engage with the ideal of Europe, and support their own self-development.

Social Action & Youth Work Enacts Positive Change in a Changing Europe

It is without doubt that social action and youth work contributes immensely to our European societies, the overall European economy, and individuals own mental health (Jenkinson et al., 2013). As a force for enacting positive change, young people are demonstrably at the driving seat of a social action revolution, helping to improve the communities in which they study, work and live across Europe. According to Eurostat, those who volunteer report having higher levels of active citizenship than those who do not – which helps contribute to social cohesion and positive societies (EuroStat, 2017).

Benefits for Individuals

On the individual level, social action and youth work have a multitude of benefits to the young person in building social capital. The major facet of social action for young people is that it provides an opportunity to gain work experiences, skills and qualifications, enhances civic responsibility and fosters stronger mental health (Batista & Cruz-Ledón, 2008). Indeed, not only do volunteers cultivate a stronger support network which helps act to buffer against stress inducers, but also the social nature of volunteering fosters greater societal integration and is self-validating for young people (Wilson & Musick, 1999). Thus, social action and youth work has a profound impact on the development of young people and helps promote healthy relationships which create well-rounded individuals.

Extending that theme, research has shown the profound effects that social action can have at the individual level. Anderson et al (2014) demonstrated that in the elderly population, volunteering is associated with reduced levels of depression, better overall health outcomes with fewer functional limitations and lower mortality rates. In a Changing Europe which faces ever greater societal and financial pressures as a result of an ageing demographic, providing citizens with the means by which health can be improved is imperative. Arguably, this begins with fostering a voluntaristic attitude in young people. It has been suggested that volunteering in youth acts as a predictor of health outcomes in old age, which implies that the older demographic would place less pressure on financially stretched services if volunteering became more entrenched in youth. aging

Benefits to Society

The benefits to society are immense and social action contributes significantly to increasing social cohesion and reducing the socioeconomic gap between regions and classes. In the UK alone, social action contributes over £23.9 billion (2016 figures; c.£32.2 billion) to the economy, with the true value estimated to be much higher when accounting for informal volunteering (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Hence, social action across Europe as a whole has a significant impact on the economic success of each individual country. This means that social action should be encouraged and supported through initiatives to increase youth participation

In order to achieve that encouragement and promote social action and youth work amongst young people, volunteer organisations must tangibly demonstrate a business case for the benefits of the young person's efforts and the personal, professional and societal results that would come about by them volunteering. Whilst an emotive case can be made, young people must know the impact of their actions if they are to be invested in any volunteering effort. This can be achieved in a number of ways. If charitable organisations are able to develop a clearly articulated business plan which outlines the roles of volunteers and the benefits of volunteering, with plans for genuine development, this will go a long way to increase the attractiveness of the opportunity. For example, Birmingham Women and Children's NHS Foundation Trust successfully integrated young people into the heart of decision making and volunteering, which ultimately developed real-life opportunities for young people designed by young people. This was an exemplar for further development in other organisations (Department for Health & Social Care, NHS England, & NHS Improvement, 2018)

Values of Volunteering

Each person has a diverse reason to volunteer and provide their energies to social action. This ensures that it is difficult to categorise easily the values that those engaged with social action hold. For many, social action is about providing back to the communities in which they live, whilst for others it's about contributing to their own lifelong learning and self-improvement. Overall, there are clearly a variety of reasons why young people volunteer, and the values they place on the volunteering experience and that they themselves hold.

Ultimately though, volunteering is an intrinsic act of societal good which contributes to societal cohesion and personal welfare. Whilst it has been demonstrated that social action aids academic development, civic responsibility awareness, and quotidian development factors (Bocsi, Fenyés, & Markos, 2017), a large worldwide empirical study highlighted the altruistic nature of volunteering demonstrated young people primarily engaged with social action as a means of engaging with a global common good (Grönlund, Holmes, Kang, Cnaan, Handy ... & Zrinščak, 2011). Clearly then, whilst social action undoubtedly enables career development, the driving force of engagement is unreservedly driven by altruistic attitudes. Despite the heterogeneous demographic, young people generally appear to want to help society and contribute to the betterment of their local communities.

Policy Initiatives of the European Commission

European Solidarity Corps (ESC)

The European Solidarity Corps builds on the success of the European Voluntary Service to provide an international, recognised experience for young Europeans in voluntary activities or paid work traineeships. Established in 2016 by EC President Jean-Claude Juncker, the ESC provides non-formal education opportunities to young people to not only engage with activities that broaden one's own horizons but simultaneously tackles the issue of rising youth unemployment in certain Member States by engaging with labour market projects (Bonus, 2020).

Over the first year since inception, 27,316 partook in solidarity activities across Europe, with 113.4€ million provided to over 2,300 organisations. The three pillars; volunteering, traineeships, and individual-led projects, promote social inclusion and provide new opportunities to a global future workforce. This work is recognised in all Member States through Europass and YouthPass and contributes to Recognition of Learning Outcomes (European Commission, 2020)

However, the scheme has had limited success since its inception. Despite pledges enshrined within *Strategic Partnership: Europe for All* to foster greater opportunities for the most marginalised communities regardless of social milieu, there remains high levels of inaccessibility. New onboarding organisations have ineffectual expertise to navigate the bureaucratic complexities needed to gain accreditation and have inherent structural problems as a result of insufficient municipal or commercial funding (Bonus, 2020). This culminates in inaccessibility to schemes for those most likely to have fewer opportunities available to self-improve through social action.

However, for those able to participate, the process to join is simple and expeditious. The young person merely goes to the 'European Solidarity Corps' section on the European Union website, sign up for an 'EU Login' and from there they can create a profile and browse accredited opportunities, access training courses and view certificates from prior achievements. In terms of efficacy, it is a simple and effective system that allows young people to view and apply for any advertised opportunity across Europe.

Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges & Volunteering Activities

The Erasmus+ Programme is a multiplex of differing yet interconnected schemes which all help to increase mobility, cultural awareness and social action engagement in young people. In particular, the Erasmus+ Youth Exchange Scheme is not limited to those engaged with Higher Education (often in the modern languages' domain), rather is accessible to all at all levels. This means that young people can travel to different countries to meet new people and work on collective ventures over short timeframes. In addition, Virtual Experiences and Training Opportunities exist for young people to engage with European opportunities despite travel, time or other inhibitors.

Furthermore, Erasmus+ encompasses a volunteering element for young people who wish to broaden their horizons and receive high quality, meaningful work on a non-profit basis. Key to this scheme is not only the EVS Charter, which reassures all that organisations meet the high standards for accreditation, but also the EU-wide recognised YouthPass, which provides formal recognition of non-formal learning for employers, universities and personal development (European Commission, 2014).

Policy Initiatives of European Countries

United Kingdom

National Citizens Service

The National Citizens Service is a voluntary youth programme which aims to improve social and personal development skills in young people in England and Northern Ireland. Established by the Coalition Government in 2011 as a pillar of the *Big Society* political ideology (free market capitalism with social solidarity based on voluntarism), it increases accessibility by providing those aged 16-17 years old with opportunities during spring, summer and autumn holidays.

The scheme is based on three stages which overall provide skills for lifelong learning. Young people start the scheme by attending a residential visit to an outdoor education centre in the countryside to learn team building skills. The second stage consists of an independent residential, enabling young people to learn skills for life. The final stage involves planning

and delivering a unique social action project in the local community, and upon successful completion, every young person receives a graduation certificate signed by the Prime Minister of the day.

A report commissioned by the Cabinet Office and conducted by Ipsos Mori to establish the magnitude of success and value for money of the scheme found both ‘statistically significant positive impacts in all four of the outcome areas’ and high levels of participant satisfaction (Cameron, Stannard, Leckey, Hale & Di Antonio, 2017). Numbers completing the scheme grew year-on-year, nine in ten commented they found the experience worthwhile and most participants experienced a sense of pride in their accomplishments over the duration. Measures of success (namely communication, teamwork and leadership skills) all saw significant increases, with young people becoming more confident individuals as a result of participation. Crucially, the programme delivers value for money to taxpayers, with the Autumn programme delivering benefits of £1.17 to £2.30 per £1 of expenditure. There is a subsidised participation cost of £50 (and zero cost to disadvantaged young people) to enable proper use of taxpayer funds.

Step Up to Serve

Step Up to Serve was a time-limited, youth-centred charity established by the Coalition Government in 2013, which had a 7-year mandate to double levels of youth social activism (Prime Ministers Office, Deputy Prime Minister's Office, Cabinet Office, Rt Hon David Cameron, & Rt Hon Nick Clegg, 2013). This charity acted as a champion for the potential of young people, encouraging over 1.7 million more young people to help shape their own communities. With prominent support from the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and HRH The Prince of Wales, Step Up to Serve shrunk the socioeconomic gap in youth volunteering participation, improved opportunities and availability of opportunities, and helped contribute around £700 million to the UK economy (Lamb, Taylor-Collins, & Silverglate, 2019).

The central mission of Step Up to Serve was to promote opportunities to lead, inspire and contribute to the largest possible group of young people. From working with NHS England to influence healthcare provision for young people by joining the NHS Youth Forum, to the publishing of an award-winning conservation book written by a young person, Step Up to Serve has acted as a champion of the power of youth and given opportunities to thousands of young people (Whiting, Roberts, Petty, Meager, & Evans, 2018). As a key component of Step Up to Serve, the flagship #iwill Campaign awarded fifty young people the accolade of #iwill Ambassador every year, which formally recognised outstanding positive community social action. Nominated by members of their community, young people were judged by a selection panel which selected the most societally spirited young people to be invited to be #iwill Ambassadors, with the most outstanding being awarded a Point of Life Award from the Prime Minister of the day.

France

The Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports created the Civic Service (Service Civique) in 2010, which plays a central role in promoting civic engagement in young people aged 16–25 without regard for their level of qualifications. With a monthly allowance of 580€

per month for 24 hours per week of voluntary work over a 6–12-month period, this scheme allows young people to develop skills for life, gain formal recognition of their community-spirited endeavours, all whilst earning money, and the scheme is compatible with simultaneous education or part-time work (Service Civique, 2021).

To date, over 200,000 young people have engaged with Service Civique, with the Priority Youth Plan 2020 aiming to have 100,000 young people involved with a high quality project in 2020 (European Commission, 2021). It has extensive awareness among the demographic, and high ratings of positivity (Ifop, 2017). The lower tiers of the programme ultimately aim to be mandatory in nature, serving to reassert the values of the French Republic and create awareness of societal challenges. It is ambitious in scope, offering opportunities in International Development, Emergency Crisis Response, and History and Citizenship to name but a few.

Sweden

The socialist nature of the Swedish state is congruous to the traditions of active citizenship demonstrated within Swedish society and is directly linked to the ‘democratic and political mobilisation within Sweden’ (European Commission, 2019). Despite a lack of a national youth volunteering programme, youth volunteering is prevalent and undertaken through the National Volunteering Agency (Volontärbyrå) and local volunteer centres, which allow young people to offer their skills and time to tasks that are achievable for them without the formal commitments to any one organisation. Indeed, being obligation-free could serve to explain why Sweden demonstrated the third-highest level of formal/ informal societal participation in Europe in 2015.

This decentralised approach ensures that volunteering is not associated with prolonged periods of time spent with any one particular organisation, nor is volunteering something which is seen to deserve praise as can be anecdotally seen in other European countries. The most common area engaged in volunteering are sports associations (European Commission, 2018).

Slovenia

In Slovenia, there are 2,150 organisations that offer social action opportunities, with volunteers completing around 11.5 million hours of volunteering annually. Each year, a board of experts selects the most societally spirited young people in order to present them with government-backed volunteering awards (Republika Slovenija Government, 2021). The majority of volunteering work undertaken within Slovenian culture is with local fire fighting organisations.

It is possible to search and apply for volunteering opportunities on different websites, of which ‘*Slovenska filantropija*’ (Slovenian Philanthropy) and ‘*prostovoljstvo.org*’ (volunteering.org) dominate. Slovenian Philanthropy is a humanitarian organisation and offers volunteering opportunities. The work available is broad in scope, with opportunities in sectors ranging from healthcare to migration. Prostovoljstvo.org is not an organisation in itself, but rather a website that combines different opportunities for individuals who want to volunteer with opportunities for organisations to participate in staff volunteering events. It is possible to

search by professional fields of particular interest with geographic filters. Prostovoljstvo.org also organizes different events such as Volunteering Week, which celebrates the achievements and contributions of volunteers across the country, Congress on Volunteering, and Dan Za Spremembo (Prostovoljstvo, 2021).

Recommendations

This policy paper has outlined some of the background to social action and youth work, as well as the implementations of various National and European initiatives which aimed to foster greater engagement with the two. The European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations (EFPSA) highly values the positive impact young people can have in shaping the globalised world in which we all play a part and advocates the continued *voluntary* nature of social action and youth work involvement. Imposing statutory quotas for any social action initiative detracts from the intrinsic nature of the voluntary experience and thus reduces the essence of volunteering to the deontological level.

After reviewing the literature and engaging with external stakeholders, EFPSA maintains that the route to increasing levels of social action and positive societal engagement in young Europeans is through increasing accessibility, quality, and recognition of volunteering. Thus, we present our recommendations as to how this can be realised below:

Volunteering by Digitalisation

Engaging with social action affords a multitude of benefits to young people, be that through improved mental health to having a wider support network of friends and mentors. Yet, the most disadvantaged communities are unable to engage with the opportunities which enhance life chances, through a paucity of money, transport access or familial support.

The Year of Covid-19 has demonstrated to the world that unfathomable opportunities are available via personal computers wherever a person is in the world. EFPSA posits that the route to reaching both those most at risk of being marginalised from opportunities and those without opportunities that suit their own interests is through an expansion of online volunteering platforms. EFPSA itself demonstrates that online volunteering can be meaningful and successful, and we believe offering more opportunities for young people to contribute from home would boost wellbeing and employability. The United Nations offers UN Volunteers, matching UN entities with suitable volunteers from around the world through an online platform, as does the European Union through the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.

However, these online opportunities are poorly advertised and thus do not reach those that would benefit most from them. With virtual volunteering most popular with the young and unemployed, the opportunity is ripe to exploit this for the benefit of all (Lachance, 2020). Hence, we recommend national volunteering agencies should take on the role of promoting these schemes to their domestic audiences as outlets for young people to get involved from home, without cost. By doing so, they would contribute to the widening of opportunities and potentially encourage more local (i.e. national) organisations to offer similar online experiences for those keen to engage and get involved.

Formal European Recognition of Social Action Achievements

It is without doubt that young people want their experiences to matter and to be recognised in the societies they live in. Yet, not only do the social action achievements of young people often go unnoticed, but they are often not recognised on par with formal education as being economically and socially valuable. A common formal and informal educational approach has the potential to drive economic growth and social cohesion, and equip young people for the challenges Europe is, and will, face over the coming decade and beyond.

Hence, EFPSA calls for greater recognition of non-formal experiences within Europe, with portability across countries. This means that any young person should have the right to their volunteering work to be respected and recognised across their own country and the continent.

This should be achieved in three ways.

1. YouthPass and the European Certificate Supplement (ECS) should be expanded, and better promoted through national volunteering agencies. YouthPass and the ECS are currently only available for projects funded by EU Youth Programmes, yet they are ideally situated to expand to non-EU funded organisations and experiences. If this scheme was managed locally by national agencies and expanded to include all charitable organisations regardless of funding source, EC oversight would protect the integrity of the scheme whilst widening access to formal recognition of achievements.
2. The success of the UK Government backed *#iwill* campaign and Slovenia's *Prostovoljstvo* should be investigated and similar schemes should be established. This would offer the most tenacious, societally spirited young people the platform and national recognition they deserve and help inspire a new wave of social action in those disenchanted from opportunity.
3. Charitable organisations should not wait for such national schemes to be implemented. Rather, they should immediately create in-house schemes which recognise the efforts of volunteers. Whilst this does not give the same level of recognition as a national or European scheme would, it would contribute to good mental health in volunteers and create the framework necessary for a future national scheme.

Higher Quality Experiences

It is without doubt that social action is an intrinsic commitment that speaks to the ideals and personal interests of the individual. However, in an increasingly globalised and competitive world, many young people engage with causes they care about whilst desiring a high-quality experience that will help their own personal and professional ambitions.

EFPSA ran and promoted a pan-European questionnaire targeted at young people regarding social action and youth work. Our findings suggested that whilst a majority of young people wish to help improve society, a majority also desire greater information about finding high-quality placements and want to be involved with higher quality volunteering opportunities.


Thus, EFPSA has developed criteria for what constitutes good volunteering called *What Puts the 'A' in Social Action*. This elucidates to both young people and charitable organisations the expectations both should have of any volunteering opportunity. We believe that enhancing opportunities through greater organisational support and commitment would revitalise all volunteering experiences and result in better outcomes for both charities and young people. Therefore, we encourage more charities

and non-profit organisations to adopt formal, in-house criteria for volunteering to ensure the work of volunteers is respected, genuine and meaningful, in a similar manner to the Birmingham NHS Foundation, the NCS and similar exemplar organisations.

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