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## **Volunteering as an Educational Opportunity – Development of Key Competencies of the Unemployed Through Volunteering**

**ABSTRACT:** The study verifies the benefits of volunteering in the development of key competencies of the unemployed. Unemployment has a number of consequences for the lives of society and individuals, and research shows that volunteering can make a significant contribution to reducing or eliminating them and promoting employability and employment. The aim of our research was to verify how volunteering contributes to the development of key competencies that are closely related to employability. We monitored the change in the subjectively perceived level of key competencies of the unemployed before and after their volunteer experience through the Competency Questionnaire (Brozmanová et al., 2013). The research sample consisted of unemployed persons who were involved in voluntary activities for at least 40 hours in various organisations from 2013 to 2019. The results of the research point to the contribution of volunteering in the area of subjective perception of the level of development of key competencies of the unemployed (in all assessed key competencies). Our findings can be used to support volunteering as a tool to increase employability, but also to address the consequences of unemployment.

**KEYWORDS:** Volunteering, unemployment, key competences.

### **Introduction**

Labour market participation plays a central role in the well-being of individuals and families. In addition to economic problems, a period of

unemployment brings with it many others. It is not just about the imbalance in the labour market, but also about the consequences related to the life of the individual and society. Unemployment brings with it growing social tensions and social crisis. Other negative manifestations are: deterioration of health, increase in poverty, family and community life crises, increase in crime and other socially undesirable phenomena – social risk phenomena (Kuchař & Vaska, 2014).

Employment is more than just a source of income, as it provides several obvious but also latent socio-psychological benefits, such as providing a structure of time, a collective purpose, social contacts, identity and activities. Unemployment has the tendency to strengthen social isolation, which often means a loss of social contacts and weakened social ties for an individual (Musick & Wilson, 2008). It also brings a considerable range of both negative short-term and long-term consequences, which can be categorised into individual and social. In turn, these consequences can contribute to poverty and social inequality, financial loss, lower living standards, social exclusion, as well as the aforementioned decline in the well-being and mental and physical health of the unemployed individual and their family (Brand, 2015; Gallie, Paugam, & Jacobs, 2003; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Kuchař & Vaska 2014).

In terms of employment policy instruments, volunteering is seen as a tool that can contribute to promoting employment and the return of the unemployed to the labour market. However, in the professional literature, based on the conclusions of research, there are discussions about whether volunteering really contributes to employment or is rather a tool to eliminate the consequences of unemployment. In her study, Kameråde (2013) states that two hypotheses can be found in the literature in relation to whether volunteering leads to re-employment. The first hypothesis – *the enhancement hypothesis* – suggests that volunteering enhances employability and therefore increases the chances of re-employment. This hypothesis focuses predominantly on volunteering as a means of improving the employability skills and attitudes of an individuals, largely ignoring the factors of context, and also assumes that improved employability skills and attitudes translate directly into re-employment. This is very much the hypothesis that the government is following in using volunteering as a policy instrument. In contrast, the second hypothesis – *the replacement hypothesis* – argues that volunteering does not increase a jobseeker's chances of re-employment but does have positive consequences as it provides a range of benefits for someone who is long-term unemployed. It proposes that volunteering can become a substitute activity for paid work among people who have not been able to find work for a long time due to context factors (i.e., there is no demand for their skills or other barriers exist).

It can be stated that research studies from different countries provide evidence to support both hypotheses, and in some cases, we can even see that the benefits overlap and some of them suggest support for the first hypothesis, while others support the second. The majority of the existing studies on volunteering by the unemployed were carried out in the USA and in the European context in the United Kingdom, where volunteering for the unemployed became, similarly to Slovakia, an instrument of employment support, and we even encounter the term so-called “compulsory volunteering” for a group of unemployed. In our study, we focus on the benefits of volunteering in the development of key competencies, and we perceive their demonstration mainly in the context of the second hypothesis. However, we provide an overview of research findings supporting both assumptions.

According to the enhancement hypothesis, volunteering might serve as ‘a stepping stone’ for re-entry into employment as it helps to maintain and enhance individuals’ human and social capital (e.g., Beck, 2000; Day & Devlin, 1998; Gay, 1998; Flap, 2002; Jensen, 2015; Menchik & Weisbrod, 1987; Smith, 2010).

Volunteering is linked to the acquisition or development of skills that are specific, necessary and usable in the labour market. As stated by Jensen (2015), civic society and voluntarism constitute an alternative arena in which marginalised groups, as well as the unemployed workforce in general, can maintain and develop job skills and enhance their network in a non-formal educational domain. In this domain it is possible to acquire, re-acquire or re-focus job skills and develop familiarity with or tolerance to changing job market demands. Given the right organisational and political support, voluntarism is an open space for multi-lateral exchange capable of addressing unemployment issues. In particular, voluntarism focuses on informal learning, meaning that voluntary organisations can help the unemployed back to work thanks to the use of networks – or at least help them develop their skills.

A group of authors in a study on the impact of volunteering on the employment of the unemployed in the USA (Spera, Ghnertner, Nerino & DiTommaso, 2013) provides a model that theoretically explains the mechanism by which volunteering can lead to increased employment. (See Figure 1). They then provide empirical evidence on the impact of volunteering on the employment of volunteers based on a comprehensive study.

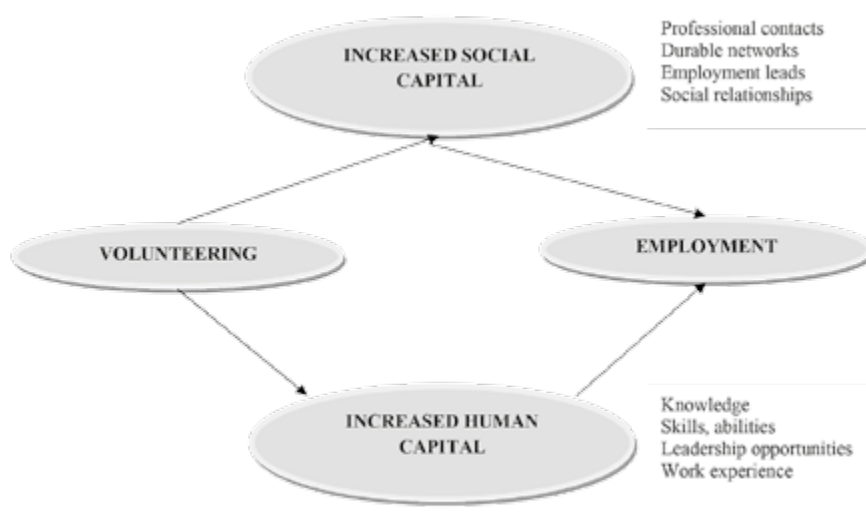


Figure 1. Social and human capital as a mechanism of volunteering as a way to employment  
 Source: Spera, Ghnertner, Nerino, DiTommaso, 2013.

Volunteering can be seen as one way of increasing the human capital of individuals, as it is an alternative way of acquiring or developing different skills, experience, knowledge and habits. It can be assumed that the experience and skills that a person acquires can subsequently help them in finding a job. The Baert & Vujić study (2017) mentions the standard theory of human capital “Human Capital Theory” (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1958), according to which the experience and skills gained in volunteering can be seen as facilitating a return to the labour market. The relationship between volunteering and human capital development has also been demonstrated by several research studies (Matsuba, Hart & Atkins, 2007; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Dekker & Halman, 2003; Wilson & Musick, 1997).

According to Putnam (2000), one of the most important representatives of the theory of social capital, social capital competes with human capital and helps to develop economic growth and democratic institutions. Social capital can be both private and public goods. Its characteristic feature is that it brings externalities and affects the wider community. Through social capital, people gain access to direct resources. Several research studies (for more details, see Sixsmith, 2003) show that volunteering leads to the formation of social capital either at the collective (community) or individual level. As Portes, 1998, explains (In: Spera, Ghnertner, Nerino, DiTommaso, 2013), social networks are not a natural given and must be constructed through investment strategies

aimed at institutionalising group relationships that can be used as a reliable source of other benefits. This means that individuals whose networks do not allow them to gain employment opportunities can actively expand their opportunities by investing in the development of social capital. In the process, volunteering is one of the investment strategies they can use.

As Gay (1998) concludes in a study on the impact of volunteering on increasing employability in the UK, volunteering makes it possible to increase employability for a certain group of people in certain circumstances. He identifies these circumstances as personnel factors on the part of volunteers and on the part of organisations. He identifies three groups of unemployed volunteers within the personnel factors, while the connection of volunteering with the world of work has a different meaning for each of them. For the first type, the so-called “career builders”, volunteering is an opportunity for learning, increasing human capital and gathering experience that they can present to future employers when applying for a job. The second type of unemployed volunteers are “hopeful workers”, who are ordinary volunteers, rather pragmatic, choosing the volunteer experience according to what they would like to do in the future in a paid job. Lastly, the third type of volunteers are “early retirees”, for whom volunteering is a way to stay in touch with the world of work, volunteering, for this type of people, is a way to help the community and “give something back”. Factors on the part of organisations that can significantly support the increase of employability of unemployed volunteers include closer links with employment offices, focusing on the development of specific programmes involving unemployed volunteers and the provision of quality information on the employability factor.

Kameråde (2013), based on an analysis of the findings of 15 studies dealing with unemployment in the UK, states that the results of several studies provide little support for the enhancement hypothesis: voluntary volunteering does not significantly increase the chances of getting a job for the majority of the unemployed. However, volunteering has benefits other than the end result of getting a job – it enhances employability skills and attitudes and can act as a productive alternative to paid work for those who cannot find employment, as the replacement hypothesis suggested.

The analysis of the authors Paine, Moro & McKay (2013), similar to the findings above, suggests that volunteering has a weak impact on employment in terms of transition to employment, job retention and promotion. Volunteering can help with the transition to employment, but seemingly only if it is done at the right frequency (not too regularly, not too infrequently) and for certain people (the elderly and those responsible for family care). The analysis suggests

that volunteering can have a negative impact on the transition to employment and earnings for young people and students, and especially if they are too often involved.

Penny & Finnegan (2019) came to similar conclusions. In their article they argued that the justification of the volunteering the 'access to work' frame lacks empirical support and (at least) requires ancillary justifications. They suggested that one such justification – that volunteering provides 'access to self-respect' – has the important features of being both normatively appealing and supported by robust empirical evidence.

Participants in the Dialogue on Youth, Volunteering and Employment (Allen, 2013) confirmed several clear benefits to unemployed people of any age who volunteer. Among other benefits, it has been identified that volunteering during unemployment enables the renewal of old skills and the construction of new ones. For some, volunteering takes them back to skills they had once learned but which had atrophied over time and offers them the opportunity to renew and refine them. For others, volunteering gives them the opportunity to understand and try out new skills that might prove beneficial to them in their search for paid work.

The benefits of volunteering in the field of development of diverse skills associated with increasing employment are reported in studies such as Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Hirst, 2001; Newton, Oakley, & Pollard, 2011; Nichols & Ralston, 2011; Ockenden & Hill, 2009 et al. Musick and Wilson (2008) show that people also volunteer to structure their time, maintain social contacts, and support their self-esteem. Other studies provide evidence that volunteering helps increase levels of commitment, confidence, motivation and discipline (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Hirst, 2001; Newton et al., 2011; Nichols & Ralston, 2011).

In our study, we focus on monitoring the benefits of volunteering for the unemployed in the development of the so-called key competencies (also referred to as cross-sectional or transversal competencies). The concept of key competencies originated in the 1970s in the field of economics where it represented a set of specific requirements for job seekers. Belz and Siegrist (2001) define key competencies as capabilities and skills that enable an individual to successfully integrate into social and working life, i.e., hold various job positions and functions, solve unpredictable problems and cope with rapid changes in work, social and personal life. The European Commission (2007) defines key competencies as a transferable and multifunctional set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that each individual needs for their personal fulfilment and development, for participation in society and successful employability. Experts

agree that key competencies should be acquired by individuals already during compulsory school education, but also in non-formal education or informal learning, and developed throughout their lives.

Several models of key competencies are currently being developed, and the unifying tool for these models should be the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union of 18 December 2006 on key competencies for lifelong learning; European reference framework, which summarises eight key competencies: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, competencies in mathematics and basic competencies in science and technology, digital competencies, learning to learn, social and civic competencies, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. The division of key competencies into individual areas is indicative, the individual competencies overlap and complement each other.

According to Belz and Siegrist (2001), key competencies help the individual to cope with reality and cope with the demands of the flexible world of work. They state that key competencies transcend the boundaries of individual specialisations, have a longer lifespan than professional knowledge and are the basis for further learning. In accordance with the above context of knowledge, we were interested in the benefits of volunteering in the development of key competencies of the unemployed, and we place our research in the context of replacement hypothesis.

## **Research methods**

The aim of the research was to verify the impact of the volunteer experience of the unemployed on their perceived level of key competencies.

### **Research sample**

The research sample consisted of unemployed persons ( $N = 65$ , AM age = 31.74; SD = 10.96; 29.2% men, 70.8% women), who worked an average of 72.25 volunteer hours. They were from all over Slovakia and had been unemployed for more than 6 months. In terms of education, there were 29 volunteers with secondary education (44.6%) and 36 with university education (55.4%). The participants worked an average of 72.25 hours in volunteering. The maximum time worked by a volunteer included in the analysis was 240 hours. The median was 60 hours. As volunteers, they had worked in various organisations (30 in total) from 2 to 12 months, namely maternity centres,

community centres, volunteer centres, organisations operating in the field of social services and work with children and youth, museums and libraries. As part of volunteering, they had performed administrative activities, provided technical support, provided leisure activities for children, senior citizens, people with disabilities, dependent clients, led interest groups and creative workshops, participated in the creation of campaigns and projects, interior and exterior modification, participated in public collections, addressed sponsors and donors, tutored children and performed many other activities for the needs of the various organisations.

## Methods

Research data regarding the assessment of the change in the subjectively perceived level of key competencies of the unemployed were obtained through the Competency Questionnaire (Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2013). The basic framework for drawing up the list of competencies included in the research instrument was the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union of 18 December 2006 on key competencies for lifelong learning, the so-called European reference framework and competencies included in the online D-skills tool for employment to verify the competencies acquired in volunteering under the VOLWEM project.

The questionnaire maps the following key competencies:

- *Communication competencies* (readiness to communicate in the mother tongue and in foreign languages) – 8 skills are assessed (ability to empathise with other people's feelings, ability to actively listen to other people, be able to express one's opinion, ability to participate in discussions, actively speak, presentation skills, written expression, ability to communicate in a foreign language, ability to effectively use audio-visual mediums).
- *Information competencies* (readiness for the use of information technologies and handling of information) – 3 skills are assessed (computer skills, Internet skills, PC skills in the preparation of promotional materials).
- *Problem-solving competencies* (readiness for creative, critical and independent problem solving) – 3 skills are assessed (ability to work in difficult and stressful situations, ability to cooperate with others in solving problems, ability to solve problems and conflicts).
- *Learning competencies* (readiness for learning) – 2 skills are assessed (ability to learn and use new knowledge, ability to acquire new skills).



- *Social and personal competencies* (readiness for relationships with other people, self-development and personality self-development) – 12 skills are assessed (ability to work with other people in a team, ability to take responsibility for assigned tasks, self-esteem and self-confidence, respecting other people's opinions, ability to cope with stress, ability to set one's own personal goals, ability to control oneself, awareness of one's own qualities and shortcomings, ability to make decisions, ability to lead other people, ability to control one's own emotions, adaptability and flexibility).
- *Work and business competencies* (readiness for employability, implementation of ideas, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, creativity, risk-taking, building and developing a professional career) – 12 skills are assessed (organisational skills, design skills, documentation skills, ability to orientate oneself in a new work environment, creativity, initiative, skills in presentation and promotion of activities, ability to work according to plan, ability to work independently, ability to lead a meeting, ability to work with experts, ability to organise one's time).
- *Civic and cultural competencies* (readiness to participate in civic life and to promote cultural values) – 6 skills are assessed (understand issues of discrimination and prejudice, understand different values and beliefs, protection of cultural traditions, provide help to people in critical situations, ecological thinking, respect the diversity of other cultures).

Respondents assessed a total of 48 skills within 7 key competencies. Each skill was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 meant "very little developed skill, ability" and 5 "very well-developed skill, ability"). The individual skills were described in more detail in order to avoid misinterpretations. Reliability in terms of internal consistency was assessed in the pre-testing and post-testing using the Cronbach alpha and reached satisfactory values in both questionnaires, ranging from 0.85 to 0.94.

The volunteers completed the questionnaire in pencil – paper form; voluntarily before and after the volunteer experience. We collected data in the years 2013 to 2019. The time period between pre-testing and post-testing was from 2 to 12 months.

Statistical data analysis was performed using the SPSS 19.0 program.

## Results

At the beginning of our research findings, we offer descriptive indicators related to the assessment of the level of individual competencies by the unemployed who had participated in volunteering, obtained by the

Competency Questionnaire. In Table 1 we present not only input and output data, but also the so-called difference score which represents a quantitative difference (increase or decrease) in the perception of progress in the key competencies of the unemployed after their involvement in volunteering. We use the increase or decrease of the assessed quantity of the competencies of the unemployed for comparison between groups of unemployed volunteers according to the set demographic indicators.

Table 1. Descriptive indicators of data obtained by the competency questionnaire in our research group of the unemployed and statistical significance of differences before and after completing the volunteer experience (N = 65)

		AM	SD	Med	Skew	Kurt	Z	p-hod	CLES
Communication competencies	Before	3.17	1.08	3	-0.19	-0.74	-5.679a	0.000	-0.70
	After	3.59	1.06	4	-0.26	-0.69			
	Difference score	3.25	4.03	2	0.20	1.99			
Information competencies	Before	3.61	1.06	4	-0.70	0.28	-4.062a	0.000	-0.47
	After	3.94	1.04	4	-1.05	0.87			
	Difference score	1.17	2.33	0	0.08	4.28			
Problem-solving competencies	Before	3.27	0.90	3	0.09	-0.29	-5.270a	0.000	-0.65
	After	3.78	0.83	4	-0.06	-0.62			
	Difference score	1.46	1.86	1	0.937	1.50			
Learning competencies	Before	3.70	0.87	4	-0.46	-0.08	-3.644a	0.000	-0.42
	After	4.09	0.82	4	-0.55	-0.48			
	Difference score	0.72	1.48	0	0.26	1.76			
Social and personal competencies	Before	3.46	0.96	3	0.34	-0.40	-5.962a	0.000	-0.74
	After	3.89	0.84	4	0.68	-0.71			
	Difference score	5.17	5.50	4	0.92	1.01			
Work and business competencies	Before	3.27	1.07	3	0.11	-0.18	-5.628a	0.000	-0.65
	After	3.69	1.00	4	-0.21	-0.59			
	Difference score	4.86	5.86	3	0.66	-0.13			
Civic and cultural competencies	Before	3.62	0.95	4	0.10	-0.69	-3.352a	0.001	0.42
	After	3.84	0.95	4	-1.26	3.49			
	Difference score	0.92	5.19	1	-2.80	14.49			

Legend: AM – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation, Med – median. Min – minimum, Max – maximum, Skew – data skewness, Kurt – data sharpness, Z – Z score Wilcoxon test, p-hod – p – value, CLES – material significance.

The data of our set did not show a normal distribution in all cases (based on the assessment of the skewness and sharpness of the scanned data), so we used nonparametric procedures (Wilcoxon and Mann-Whitney test) in the statistical analysis.

Using the Wilcoxon test, we attempted to discover the existence of differences between the subjectively perceived level of competencies of

the unemployed before and after their volunteer experience. Based on the statistical analysis, we can state that there is a statistically significant difference between the subjectively perceived level of competencies of the unemployed before and after their volunteer experience; these are differences with medium (information, learning, civic and cultural competencies) or large material importance (communication, problem-solving, social and personnel and work and business competencies). All differences were noted in favour of the subjectively perceived level of competencies after the volunteer experience.

In the next step, we examine whether there is a difference between unemployed volunteers in their perceived development of their own competencies according to gender, age, the level of their education and the hours of volunteering. In the case of gender and age, we did not find statistically significant differences. However, in the case of education and the number of volunteer hours we did. We present the results of these findings in the following tables.

Our research sample consisted of secondary (SŠ) and university (VŠ) educated unemployed. We found that there are differences in perceived progress in key competencies for the benefit of respondents with secondary education. Specifically, these are learning and work and business competencies. In both cases, these are materially medium differences (CLES in both cases was 0.34). Detailed results of the statistical analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The difference between the respondents according to the level of their education (Nsš = 29, Nvš = 36) in the perceived level of their key competencies

		Median	U	p-hod	CLES
Communication competencies	SŠ	3.1	498.5	0.755	-
	VŠ	3.3			
Information competencies	SŠ	1.0	511	0.877	-
	VŠ	1.3			
Problem-solving competencies	SŠ	1.4	521.5	0.995	-
	VŠ	1.5			
Learning competencies	SŠ	1.2	345.5	0.013	0.34
	VŠ	0.3			
Social and personal competencies	SŠ	5.9	405.5	0.123	-
	VŠ	4.6			
Work and business competencies	SŠ	6.1	343	0.018	0.34
	VŠ	3.8			
Civic and cultural competencies	SŠ	1.2	511.5	0.887	-
	VŠ	0.7			

Legend: CLES – material significance of differences.

We were also interested in whether there was a relationship between the number of volunteer hours worked by the unemployed and the perceived development of key competencies. (We considered the difference score given by the difference between the input and output test data to be the perceived development of competencies). We determined these relationships using the Spearman correlation coefficient. We identified a significant relationship only in the perceived development in communication competencies. The data are in Table 3.

Table 3. Relationship between the number of hours worked by volunteers and the perceived development of their competencies (N = 65)

		Hours worked
Communication competencies	R	0.464***
	p-hod	0.000
Information competencies	R	0.137
	p-hod	0.275
Problem-solving competencies	R	0.180
	p-hod	0.150
Learning competencies	R	0.142
	p-hod	0.258
Social and personal competencies	R	0.219
	p-hod	0.080
Work and business competencies	R	0.198
	p-hod	0.115
Civic and cultural competencies	R	0.076
	p-hod	0.547

The next step was to determine whether there is a difference in the perceived development of key competencies between groups of volunteers according to the number of volunteer hours they worked. We considered the difference scores described above to be the perceived development of competencies. Since the number of hours worked was individual, we divided our research set into 3 levels – up to 80, up to 160 and up to 240 volunteer hours worked. Although the statistical significance of the differences (via the Kruskal Wallis test) was confirmed only in communication competencies, descriptive indicators of the average values of individual groups are also noteworthy. They point to the fact that those unemployed volunteers who had worked more than 160 volunteer hours perceived their competencies as more developed overall than those who had worked less than 160 hours. See Table 4 for more details.

Table 4. Difference between groups of respondents according to the levels of volunteer hours worked in the perceived development of competencies

	Categories of hours worked	N	Median	Kruskal Wallis	p-hod
Communication competencies	< 80	50	2.5	8.668	0.013
	< 160	11	6.3		
	< 240	4	4.2		
Information competencies	< 80	50	1.1	0.708	0.702
	< 160	11	1.6		
	< 240	4	0.3		
Problem-solving competencies	< 80	50	1.3	2.541	0.281
	< 160	11	1.7		
	< 240	4	3.0		
Learning competencies	< 80	50	0.7	1.571	0.456
	< 160	11	1.0		
	< 240	4	0.0		
Social and personal competencies	< 80	50	4.8	0.858	0.651
	< 160	11	6.2		
	< 240	4	7.0		
Work and business competencies	< 80	50	4.2	1.175	0.556
	< 160	11	6.7		
	< 240	4	8.0		
Civic and cultural competencies	< 80	50	0.4	4.133	0.127
	< 160	11	2.6		
	< 240	4	3.0		

## Discussion

According to our research findings, there was a statistically significant shift in our research sample in the subjectively perceived level of development of all assessed key competencies of the unemployed in favour of the assessment of key competencies after completion of the volunteer experience. When comparing respondents according to their educational attainment, we found that respondents with the highest attained secondary education assessed their key competencies as more developed than in the sample of university-educated unemployed. The second variable monitored was time devoted to volunteering activities by the unemployed, where we found that the respondents of our research sample assessed their competencies as more developed if they had worked more than 160 volunteer hours.

The results of our research correspond to other, similar research on the development of skills, competencies or attitudes of the unemployed developed through volunteering. Several studies (e.g., Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Hirst,

2001; Newton, Oakley, & Pollard, 2011; Nichols & Ralston, 2011; Ockenden & Hill, 2000) show that volunteers themselves believe that volunteering allows them to increase their employability and develop many hard skills (for example, IT, language, business management and customer relations skills) and many soft skills (communication, teamwork skills, routines and time keeping and discipline).

Newton, Oakley, & Pollard (2011) came to the conclusions, that developing soft skills was not usually the main reason for becoming involved in volunteering for unemployed young people, but the majority of young people felt that they had improved in this respect, or had been able to demonstrate that they already possessed certain soft skills. Communication skills and teamwork were those that young people were most keen to develop. They also reported development of problem-solving and time management. Gains in soft skills often appeared to reflect an increase in confidence. Nichols and Ralston (2011) in their study show that volunteering provides social inclusion benefits beyond employability by enriching volunteers' lives and empowering them to make new choices. The authors of the qualitative study (Vegeris & Vowden et al., 2010) Support for Newly Unemployed and Six Month Offer evaluations state that staff who offered support to the unemployed were generally positive about the benefits of volunteering and considered the option as an excellent tool to help unemployed people improve their employability, particularly for those who lacked recent work experience. The volunteering experiences of unemployed people in the study varied greatly, with some indicating gains in self-confidence and skills, while others reported few tangible benefits from the experience.

Ockenden & Hill (2000), based on their research report, also argued that volunteering can improve employability – to provide people with a better chance of entering the labour market. This might involve acquiring or retrieving skills; learning or re-learning the habits and discipline of employment; and improving confidence and self-esteem. This process is often described as a 'journey' which will vary in length according to the circumstances in which the volunteer finds themselves at the outset, and in which volunteering may only be one stage.

Hirst (2001) lists the number of hours devoted to volunteering among the factors that correlate with whether volunteering experience is associated with a chance of obtaining a job.

The results of our research confirm replacement hypothesis in the analysis of the effects of volunteering of the unemployed. As Hrmo and Turek (2003) argue, key competencies can be used in most professions (even in non-

existent ones) and should serve to solve numerous and diverse problems, in different contexts, to achieve multiple goals, to be applied not only in different professions, but also in various areas of human activity: at school, at work, in social and personal life. The acquisition and improvement of key competencies is considered a lifelong learning process, not only at school but also in employment, family, cultural, social and political life, etc. The acquisition of key competencies is not only a matter of the personal effort of the individual, but requires a favourable social and ecological environment. Thus, the environment of the organisation in which the volunteers work and its support from politicians can greatly contribute to the development of these competencies. We agree with Hirst (2001) that volunteering may, therefore, be worthy of public support (not counting the positive impact which may accrue to the wider society as a result of volunteering activity). However, if public support for volunteering is appropriate, it should be as much as a means of supporting ongoing self-development and the widening of horizons as a welfare-to-work mechanism.

We are aware of the limits of our research. The research was carried out on a small sample of unemployed and we did not work with a control group, which was not possible in this case. The limit of research is also the fact that it is based on self-assessment of the unemployed themselves. We are aware that, ideally, this self-assessment should be compared with an external assessment by a person who has had the opportunity to observe the unemployed volunteer before and after the volunteer service. However, in reality this cannot be ensured for every volunteer. Part of our research is also a qualitative analysis of the benefits of volunteering for the unemployed obtained on the basis of individual interviews, but this will be the subject of a separate study.

## Conclusion

Although there may be concerns that regular volunteering may take some time and discourage the unemployed from actively seeking employment, research by Kameråde & Bennett, (2015) shows that even regular volunteers, such as in the UK, volunteered for only four hours a week on average, which leaves enough time to search for a job. Other potential mitigating roles for volunteering during unemployment are two key implications for policy and practice. Findings that volunteering has a clear link to life fulfilment and mental health show that it is appropriate to give the unemployed the opportunity to engage in volunteering so that they can benefit from these positive effects.

Based on evidence of the positive effects of volunteering, many countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Slovakia) have begun to take measures that see volunteering as a tool to support employment, and governments have begun to use volunteering as a policy instrument. In many cases, these measures have violated the basic principles of volunteering and in some cases are even referred to as “compulsory volunteering”. We met the same practice in the conditions of Slovakia. We therefore recommend that volunteering should not be seen as a political tool in the fight against unemployment, but as a tool for dealing with the consequences of unemployment and a means of self-development for the unemployed. We agree with Penny & Finnegan (2019), that policy makers and voluntary organisations should shift their justifications for volunteering of unemployed people to its role in providing access to self-respect, and refocus the implementation and measurement of these policies around this alternative justificatory frame.

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