

THE INFLUENCE OF VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PITESTI STUDENTS IN ELDERLY PERSONS' QUALITY OF LIFE

Mariana Ionela Tudor*, Constantin Ciucurel*, Elena Ioana Iconaru*, Horia Traila*

*University of Pitesti , Faculty of Sciences, Department of Medical Assistance and Kinesitherapy,
110040 Pitesti, Str. Targu din Vale, nr.1, Arges, Romania
E-mail: margotudor@yahoo.com

Abstract

As the non-formal component of education is increasingly widespread in preparing young people to exercise their role as active and responsible citizens, the University of Pitesti promotes volunteering as a way of involving students in local community's life. With this article we intend to establish, on the bases of a randomized control trial, how volunteering interventions can influence the quality of life of old people from health care units. Our research activity was carried on a sample of sixteen participants aged 65-80 years old that were randomized divided into one intervention (N=8) and one control group (N=8). During 3 months of surveillance, the intervention group was assisted in activities of daily living and in socialization by life stories reminiscence sessions. Physical independence level and psychometric data on stress, depression, sadness, anger, sense of purpose and affection were collected at the beginning and then compared with the final results. Statistical analyses showed significant improvements of the specific quality of life indicators for the intervention group. There were also identified some triggers (sense of purpose, relationships and perceived health) of these improvements. Although an emerging social practice in Romania, volunteering can be used to improve the quality of life through different pathways.

Keywords: volunteering, activities, students, quality of life, elderly.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of quality of life is wide and generally used to express and to measure the well-being of people and societies. Now volunteering activities are more and more promoted to connect individuals and organisations for development of a healthy community. Given the constant economic and social changes, the non-formal component of education is increasingly widespread in preparing young people to exercise their role as active and responsible citizens, involved in all aspects of the society in which they live.

The University of Pitesti is actively involved in local community's life through the promotion of volunteering and development programs to include students, according to their conveyed interest, in specific actions in partnership with governmental agencies and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). These actions are part of the evolution context registered by the Romanian civil society in the last decade and of policy makers' endeavour for Romania's integration to current EU structures and standards at legislative, institutional and individual levels.

The harmonization of Romanian legislation, by adoption the Law of Volunteerism in 2001 (International Year of Volunteering) was an important step not only for public recognition of this movement but also for establishing the coordinates of volunteering in connection with educational institutions and various areas of activity. According to the latest amendments added to the law in 2006, the main coordinates of volunteering in Romania are (Law of Voluntarism, 2001):

- volunteering is a practice undertaken by a person on his own initiative to help others without expecting financial or material rewards;
- areas in which volunteers can activate are diverse: social assistance and services, environmental protection, culture, education, arts, etc.;
- the organization that provides voluntary activities, or the one that receives it may be a non-profit private or public organization and the work is performed under a contract after which a certificate of volunteering is released.

The Romanian Universities have an important role in promoting volunteering as professional practice, intercultural exchanges or lifelong learning programs, all at national and international level. Students are even more motivated to volunteer because of the recent legal regulations by which the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports recognizes volunteering as learning experience by providing credit points (ECTS) in the Diploma Supplement at graduation. Providing students the necessary conditions for their socio-professional integration according to their needs and aspirations is an ongoing concern within the University of Pitesti.

Thus, the university aims at integrating research activities with educational and community partnerships through programs within its departments and centres to ensure students the opportunity to learn and practice skills for becoming responsible and productive citizens.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The University of Pitesti continues to develop initiatives and strategies to provide solutions and material, technical or human resources to different demands within Romanian social context. In this respect the fine cooperation and productive partnerships developed over time with governmental organizations and agencies, NGOs and students' associations offer mutual advantages: support for the beneficiaries and practice activities for students during university semesters or independent activities during the holidays.

For the purpose of our research objectives – to establish how volunteering interventions can influence the quality of life of old people from health care units – we conducted a randomized control trial. Our research activity was carried on a sample of sixteen participants aged 65-80 years old that were randomized divided into one intervention (N=8) and one control group (N=8). Both groups were monitored for 3 months. While the intervention group was assisted by the volunteers in activities of daily living and involved in socialization by life stories reminiscence sessions, the control group received only the usual services of the health care facility. Physical independence level and psychometric data on stress, depression, sadness, anger, sense of purpose and affection were collected at the beginning of our trial and then compared with the final results. With our study we were also interested on what motivates students to volunteer.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Statistical analyses showed significant improvements of the specific quality of life indicators for the intervention group. Quantitative analysis demonstrated a significant decrease in stress for the intervention group. Qualitative analysis identified some triggers (sense of purpose, relationships and perceived health) of intergenerational volunteering influencing these improvements.

Though it promotes lifelong learning, voluntarism is insufficient treated within educational sciences and almost neglected on adult education level. Young people are the most active volunteers in Romania and about 17,5% of all volunteers have medium or high studies (Rigman, 2009). Statistics are confirmed also by the academic records, the students from the University of Pitesti having the possibility to choose between national and international volunteer programs. Thus, at national level, the most popular fields of activity for students' volunteer work were: social services for disadvantaged groups (3%), environment, ecology and animal rights (3%), education, music and culture (2%), sport and leisure activities (2%) (Voicu, 2005).

Involvement in volunteer work has different motivations from one student to another and it is influenced by the system of values or religious beliefs. When asking students about their motivation to volunteer, we found that: the desire to help, the need for work experience, and the possibility of a future job are the most common motivations, as it can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Motivations of involvement in voluntary activities

Type of motivation	% from total number of volunteers, N =8
The desire to help those in need	51,1%
The need to gain experience in a particular field	51,0%
The need to enrich my CV	38,2%
The possibility of future job test	32,3%
Opportunity to implement new ideas	10,3%
Another reason (curiosity, experience of persons with disabilities in family, complementary with the study / work domain, spending free time)	8,2%

Graduates must have not only academic knowledge but also the right aptitude, abilities and skills in order to qualify for jobs. Volunteering is the most accessible and cost/effective intervention with many benefits for volunteers (gain experience, develop new skills, facilitate employment, obtaining prizes, trips, etc.) and also for the University of Pitesti, the organization / institution that hosts volunteers and for the community.

Analyzing the role of both University of Pitesti and public institutions in the development of local volunteering it can be identified some issues, important for any public institution that wants recognition in the community as an active and responsible actor:

Table 2. SWOT analyses on volunteering programs within the University of Pitesti

Strengths	Weaknesses
- creative approach of community problems;	- legislation is still inadequate or improperly applied;
- completes material resources with human resources;	- University of Pitesti coordinates many areas of specialization leading to heterogeneous groups which are difficult to manage;
- include informal aspects of education and training;	- lack of a system of mentorship for the specific training of all volunteers;
- facilitates the employability of the students;	- organizations are not encouraged to accept voluntary;
- recognition in the educational system by providing credit points;	- excessive bureaucracy in order to enter the voluntary program;
- facilitates mobility and exchange of experience among students.	- lack of specialised information, a job description and a clear finality of volunteering.
Opportunities	Treats
- gives students the opportunity to gain experience in their chosen career;	- the instability of Romanian legislation;
- expanding volunteer programs among adults in the context of accentuated aging of the Romanian society under the effect of low birth rates;	- the possibility of conflicts between voluntary and employees as a result of lack of information on institution's internal regulations;
- mediating the acquisition of transversal competences among students;	- staff turnover in the labour market;
- promoting reflection, evolution and establishment of a career development plan;	- improper selection of volunteers in relation to their activity;
- changing perception of assisted citizens and developing university - community active partnerships.	- the economic crisis facing most countries today.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Although voluntarism gained ground in Romania, there is still much to be done. According to statistics, the percentage of Romanians involved in volunteering alters between 10-15% of the total adult population, the numbers varying with the meaning given for the term volunteer. The development of volunteer centres and university networks for volunteering, the awareness

campaigns and media dissemination led to an increased visibility of volunteering in the recent years, but, nevertheless we continue to find ourselves on the lowest place among European ex-communist countries.

Also, the volunteering opportunities at the University of Pitesti are different depending on the academic specialization, the scientific profile and the aim pursued (specialty practice, volunteering for employment, development of new skills, support for institution's employees or beneficiaries). Voluntary service is a form of social participation, educational experience and a factor of employment and social integration, and thus it justifies the expectations of young people and society alike.

Considering all the efforts and achievements volunteering is still an emerging social practice in Romania and has a discrete presence at national level from the point of view of both the percent of people involved and the impact of the actions they carried out. Voluntary service is a form of social participation, educational experience and a factor of social integration, and thus it justifies the expectations of young people and society alike on improving the quality of life through different pathways.

5. REFERENCES

- Chung J.C. (2009) An intergenerational reminiscence programme for older adults with early dementia and youth volunteers: Values and challenges. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*,23(2): 259–264
- Dalu A., Plaesu A., Angheliescu G. (2008), The Social Situation and Expectations of Young People. Barometer of Public Opinion-Youth 2008. Published by the National Agency for Supporting Youth Initiative (ANSIT), http://www.ansitromania.ro/upload/BOP_2008.pdf
- DeSouza E.M., Grundy E. (2007) Intergenerational interaction, social capital and health: Results from a randomised controlled trial in Brazil. *Soc Sci Med* 65:1397–1409
- Jarrott S.E., Bruno K.A. (2003) Intergenerational activities involving persons with dementia: An observational assessment. *Am J Alzheimers Rel Dis* 18:31–38
- Lee M.M., Camp C.J., Malone M.L. (2007) Effects of intergenerational Montessori-based activities programming on engagement of nursing home residents with dementia. *Clin Interv Aging* 2:477–483
- Rigman C. (2009), Volunteers in Romania: A Profile. In European Commission (2010), Study of Volunteering in the European Union. Country Report Romania, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/eyv2011/doc>
- Voicu B. (2005) Voluntariatul, penuria pseudo-modernă a postcomunismului românesc. In Schimbarea socială și acțiunile indivizilor, Vol 1. Editura Expert Projects, Iași, pp. 121-136
- Wykle M.L., Whitehouse P.J., Morris D.L. (2005) Successful aging through the life span: Intergenerational issues in health, New York: Springer Pub. Co.
- Fried L.P., Frick K., Carlson M., Rebok G. (2006) Experience Corps: a social model for health promotion for older adults that, simultaneously, harness the social capital of an aging society, *Gesundheit und Gesellschaft*:23–35
- Martinez I. (2006) Recruiting and retaining older volunteers to service that enhances health: successes and challenges of the Experience Corps TM in Baltimore, *J Urban Health*
- ***Law no.339 of 17 July 2006, for the amendment and completion of the Law of Volunteerism no.195/2001, http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.http_act_text?id=74382
- ***National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training (Agentia Nationala pentru Programe Comunitare in Domeniul Educatiei si Formarii Profesionale – ANPCDEFP <http://www.anpcdefp.ro/>
- *** Pro Vobis National Volunteer Centre http://www.provobis.ro/index_en.php
- ***WHO-QOL (1993) Measuring quality of life: The development of the World Health Organization Quality of Life Instrument (WHOQOL), Geneva.