Erasmus+ Key Action 2

Skills and Competences for a Global World:

Summary of the

Findings from the Impact Study

July 2019

Acknowledgements

List of abbreviations

EVS   European Voluntary Service

HCO   Host coordinating organisation

HO   Host organisation

ICYE   International Cultural Youth Exchange

Background

The 'Skills and Competences for a Global World' project began on the 1st August 2017 and ran until the 31st July 2019. Funded by Erasmus+ Key Action 2, the project was coordinated by the ICYE International Office and involved volunteers taking part in European Voluntary Service (EVS) and being placed in a range of host organisations around the world. A central part of the project was an impact study, which is the subject of this report. Placements for the ten participating volunteers were originally scheduled for the period from the 1st April to the 30th November 2018. However, in several instances the starting date was later due to delays with acquiring visas for the volunteering placements, with some placements running in to January 2019.

Aims and objectives

The impact assessment of the EVS has three specific aims:

1. To assess the impact of the EVS programme on the volunteers;
2. To assess the impact of the EVS programme on the host organisations;
3. To assess the strengths and weaknesses of ICYE / host coordinating organisations in terms of resources, systems in place, skills and competences for volunteer management, training and support.

Methodology

The impact study was undertaken by a taskforce consisting of members of staff from ICYE and an independent research consultant, Nick Ockenden. The following data collection approaches were employed:

- Baseline surveys sent to all ten volunteers shortly before the start of their volunteering.
- In-depth interviews towards the end of the volunteers' placements, with the ten volunteers, staff from host organisations (16), and staff from host-coordinating organisations (nine).

The volunteers

The characteristics of the volunteers

- Median age of 24, with an age range of 20 - 30 years.
- Nine female and one male volunteer.
- Originated from nine different countries, six within Europe, two in Asia, and two in South and Central America.
- Information from the questionnaire completed before their volunteering placement indicated that the volunteers tended to be open to new experiences and challenges, responded well to stress, were empathetic and open to listening, and wanted to learn a new language.
- Motivations for volunteering were commonly associated with learning new skills, meeting people and making friends, helping people, and being linked to their life philosophy. Volunteers also discussed wanting to challenge themselves and move outside of their comfort zone.

The volunteering activities

- Activities and roles undertaken during the placements tended to take place within either a school environment or organisations supporting children or adults with disabilities.

- Roles were frequently supportive in nature, assisting paid staff and other longer-term volunteers in tasks and activities, such as planning and running workshops, recreational activities or games, or assisting with meal preparation.
- Volunteers tended to spend 20 - 30 hours per week undertaking their volunteering.

The volunteering placement and the role of organisations
The key stakeholders in the volunteers' journeys were:

- Host organisations (HOs), where the volunteer conducts their volunteering placement.
- Host coordinating organisations (HCOs), which are organisations based in the placement country who provide much of the practical support to volunteers and host organisations, and who set up the systems and processes required.
- Sending organisations, who are the organisations within the volunteer's home country who coordinate the recruitment of the volunteers and link up with the HCOs.
- Erasmus+ National Agencies, who are responsible for volunteer training in European countries.

Impact on volunteers

Impact on volunteers is examined in relation to personal, social, and intercultural impact. While many notable benefits are identified, it should be noted that they are emergent in nature as their volunteering placements had not yet finished at the time of interview; it is possible that many longer-term impacts may be seen only long after their volunteering has come to an end.

Personal impact
- Language improvements were the most commonly discussed impact from the perspective of volunteers, matching their original desire to gain skills in this area.
- Development of softer skills were also seen to be important, and improvements in patience and communication skills were the most frequently discussed. While they often built on existing character traits displayed by the volunteers, the changes could frequently be significant and would be likely to be important in their future careers and lives in the longer-term.

Social impact
- Making new friends and forming relationships was the main impact discussed by volunteers in terms of interpersonal relationships. This included the volunteers making comparisons about the ease of making friends compared to their home country.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, the main topic of the volunteer's wellbeing was homesickness, which all volunteers felt to some degree. The severity of this could be impacted on by the extent to which they had made friends during their placement, and the degree to which they felt isolated.
- Physical illness was not commonly discussed as an aspect of wellbeing, but where it was more serious and sustained, it was seen to have had a more negative effect on the volunteer and the impact they could have in their placement.
- All volunteers discussed their personal enjoyment and satisfaction gained from their volunteering placements, whilst acknowledging the presence of stressful and challenging situations. For many, their volunteering appeared to be a life-changing experience that they would remember for their whole lives.

Intercultural learning

- Reflecting the importance of this to the volunteer programme, volunteers described important changes in their sense of identity and changes in their personality.
- Awareness of others and learning about new cultures were also important impacts for volunteers. This reflected the volunteers' willingness to learn from others and to experience new challenges and environments that was identified through the baseline questionnaire before they started their placements.

Impact on host organisations and beneficiaries

The impact of the volunteers' placements on the host organisations (HOs) and their beneficiaries is discussed in this section. The findings are predominantly drawn from the interviews with HOs, but also in some cases on the reflections of the volunteers themselves.

Impact on the host organisations

- The most frequently mentioned impact, discussed by both staff in the HOs and the volunteers, was an enhanced ability for the organisations to deliver more activities and services to their beneficiaries as a result of the involvement of volunteers. In many instances this included running activities that would likely not have been possible to deliver without the presence of the volunteers.
- Volunteers also frequently brought new skills, creativity, and energy to the host organisations, some of which resulted in new activities for their beneficiaries which were led by the volunteer.
- In some cases it could be difficult for volunteers to articulate the impact they had on the organisation, as a result of working on multiple activities, sometimes working alone, and some cultural differences in the extent to which feedback is provided. In most cases, however, they felt that they were making a positive difference to the organisation.

Impact on staff

- While this connected closely to the impact on the host organisation, staff discussed personal impacts for them, including having been inspired by the courage of the volunteers to change their lives to do something new, and learning from their approach and skill sets.

Impact on beneficiaries

- Staff and volunteers commonly described how they felt beneficiaries – most commonly children and adults with disabilities – enjoyed their presence and appeared to be having a more enjoyable time, as well as forming good working relationships and, often, friendships.

Systems and process for volunteer management and support

The perspective of the host coordinating organisations (HCOs) for each of the countries which had hosted volunteers was explored. This was the ICYE office in each case, which had a coordinating role between the volunteer, the sending organisation, and the host organisation. This focuses on what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of their own volunteer management and support systems and processes, identifying areas on which to build and areas which could be further developed or improved; it does not, however, critically assess what is working and what is not.

<u>Resources and capacity</u>

- HCOs described how their limited resources could prevent them from providing a more comprehensive service to the host organisations and volunteers within their country.
- They also described how their physical location, which was often a long distance from the volunteers' placements, could prevent them from having a closer physical relationship with them and thereby practically limiting the support they could provide.

<u>Systems in place for volunteer management</u>

- The key strengths discussed focused on the comprehensive approaches to personal support, including induction, mentoring, and training, as well as mechanisms to support and help resolve conflicts and problems during the volunteer placement.
- Areas of weaknesses and those that could be improved included challenges associated with detecting problems with the volunteers' placements (partially related to their geographical location), but also the challenges of resolving some conflicts, the timing of the start of some placements which clashed with school holidays, and wishing to enhance their work on monitoring and evaluation of placements.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Volunteers experience important and significant personal benefits.

- Host organisations are able to deliver more services and have a bigger impact as a result of the volunteers.

- The cultural exchange element remains a strong and important element of the programme.

- Good volunteer management and support is vital to helping to achieve positive impact.

Recommendations for ICYE, host organisations and host coordinating organisations

1. Build in time for reflection on volunteer management processes.

2. Monitor and track past volunteers to better understand longer-term impact.

3. Seek feedback from volunteers more proactively throughout their placement to better identify emerging problems.

4. Give greater consideration to volunteer placement start times, where feasible.

Contact

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