



Volunteering

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What Does Volunteering Reveal About the University as a Community?

Universities are, by nature, communal spaces. They are living communities that welcome students eager for knowledge; academics and researchers who share their expertise and deepen their understanding of the world; and staff members who, together with them, contribute to the everyday life and shared mission of the university. Beyond this internal community, universities operate within concrete territories, in dialogue with the societies that surround them. Yet to what extent does this dialogue translate into a genuine understanding of the people, vulnerabilities and challenges of the communities around them? It is within this horizon that volunteering takes shape as an expression of service and as a relational space of transformation.

The word volunteering derives from the Latin *voluntas* and refers to the idea of free will. To volunteer is to place oneself freely at the service of the community, in a spirit of commitment and relationship. Shaped through encounter, it implies responsibility, reciprocity and sustained engagement. In this relationship, where giving and receiving are intertwined, volunteering reveals its transformative potential, both at a personal and at a communal level.

In this context, the role of universities, within their educational mission, becomes particularly significant in ensuring that volunteering is understood and lived as an integral part of institutional life and community identity. When volunteering ceases to be merely complementary and becomes an institutional priority, universities not only transform their internal communities, but also place themselves freely, and without expectation of return, at the service of the wider community, building

relationships over time. In contexts of sustained university–community engagement, volunteering functions as a lived practice through which knowledge, service and responsibility are brought into dialogue.

Volunteering has its roots in long-standing practices of mutual aid and communal cooperation. From the nineteenth century onwards, when organised volunteering gained clearer expression in Europe, voluntary action has continued to evolve and expand its reach.

Today, according to the most recent report published by the United Nations, approximately 2.1 billion working-age people engage in volunteering every month, representing around 34.5% of the global adult population. Yet a significant part of this contribution remains invisible, particularly in its informal and community-based forms, raising questions about how volunteering is recognised, valued and understood. In this global context, the recognition of 2026 as the *International Year of Volunteering* reinforces the timeliness of this debate and invites higher education institutions to reflect on the academic recognition of volunteering, as highlighted in the *Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering*.

While the scale of volunteers is striking, numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Volunteering is about relationships, emotions and lived experience. International studies point to students' concern for educational spaces where experiences such as volunteering are recognised as meaningful to their education. In this regard, the *Youth Talks* survey, involving over 50,000 young people worldwide, shows that young people's aspirations are profoundly humane, with peace, respect, solidarity, kindness and care for others emerging as central concerns, alongside a strong need for listening, empathy and emotional protection. The volunteer is someone who freely places themselves at the service of others. Through contact with people, contexts and concrete forms of vulnerability, volunteering challenges abstract readings of reality and invites a form of learning grounded in encounter. As Pope Francis observes, the invitation is "to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group (...) I should no longer say that I have neighbours to help, but that I must myself be a neighbour to others—" In the university context, such engagement invites students, academics and staff to step outside familiar frameworks and to assume a responsible commitment shaped by listening, humility and openness to transformation.

If such learning is truly transformative, one might speak, with Portuguese poet Alexandre O'Neill, of a certain "compulsiveness" in volunteering, not as external obligation, but as an inner adherence to a way of living that is freely chosen. In a free rendering of his poem V.C., O'Neill writes (author's translation):

*Under a regime of Compulsory Volunteering,
life becomes easier to live:
you end up having to do,
not what you do not want,
but what you truly want to do.
(...)
Under a regime of Compulsory Volunteering,
this is how I live —
because I choose to.*

In a world marked by increasing complexity and fragmentation, education cannot be reduced to technical training or the acquisition of specialised knowledge alone. The OECD *Learning Compass 2030* emphasises the need for educational systems to prepare students not only to reflect, but also to participate actively and responsibly in collective life. In his work *The Idea of a University* (1852), Cardinal John Henry Newman argued that the mission of the university goes far beyond professional preparation or the transmission of specialised knowledge. He proposed an integral form of education, oriented towards the development of critical thinking, discernment and a sense of responsibility towards society. Volunteering may be understood as a current expression of this vision, offering a space where knowledge enters into dialogue with reality. Yet to what extent do universities today create the conditions for this dialogue to take place in a consistent and sustained manner?

Volunteering also invites universities to reflect on the relationship between ideas and lived reality. Knowledge that develops at a distance from concrete contexts risks remaining abstract or insufficient to respond to complex social challenges. By fostering sustained encounters with people, needs and vulnerabilities, volunteering reminds academic institutions that learning is not shaped by reflection alone, but also by proximity, attention and experience. In this sense, volunteering becomes a space where reality questions ideas and deepens educational responsibility.

Contemporary social challenges exceed the capacity of individual responses and call for communal networks grounded in cooperation and shared responsibility. In this context, volunteering may emerge as a privileged space of encounter and reciprocity. The question that remains is this: what place do universities choose to give to volunteering in how they understand themselves, organise institutional life, and relate to the communities around them?

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