



# Stocktaking Report

The state-of-play of validation  
in the voluntary sector across  
the EU

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# I. Advancing recognition and validation for EU volunteers

## 1. Making all learning visible

### a. Valuing the learning that takes place outside the formal education system

**Learning takes place** not only at schools or university but **everywhere**, it can happen in public libraries, outdoor settings, online, at home, while practicing hobbies, and when volunteering. Since public education became a free mass educational pathway, policy reforms have focused on formal education, considering this is as the priority institution for acquiring knowledge and skills, hence laying shadows on other learning environments. For a long time, public policies in the formal sector have propelled positive outcomes to our society and economy. However, it is obvious today that the **formal education sector alone cannot solve all our socio-economic challenges** (e.g. unemployment, skills mismatch, digitalisation, early school leaving). Therefore, it is necessary to consider **alternative** and **flexible pathways** for learning.

Understanding the *lifelong* and *lifewide* concept of learning is understanding that learning is valuable no matter where it takes place but so far, there has been little attention to learning taking place out of formal education meaning, at the workplace or in other leisure activities. To counter this, for two decades, **policy-makers, civil society** and **education stakeholders** have worked together to develop more comprehensive policies, building a new understanding of the diversity of learning environments that exists. In order to provide an answer to the issue of making all learning visible, it is needed to understand where does the learning comes from and look at the existing and future solutions to value it.

The **European Union (EU)** defines **three permeable groups** of learning:

- **Formal education:** mostly compulsory primary and secondary education and higher education
- **Non-formal education.** In this context, non-formal learning refers to learning that takes place through structured and organised action (in terms of learning objectives and periods) but is not part of the formal education and training system.
- **Informal education:** mostly family education but not only. Informal learning refers to everyday learning at the workplace or in leisure time, which is not organised or structured in terms of learning objectives and times and may be unintentional from the learner's point of view.

The **border** between the different categories of learning can be **blurry**, for instance, volunteering is generally classified as informal learning because very often, what volunteers learn is not structured, organised and intentional. Most volunteers would say they volunteer because they want to be helpful to others or to meet new people rather than for its learning purpose. However, with the awareness

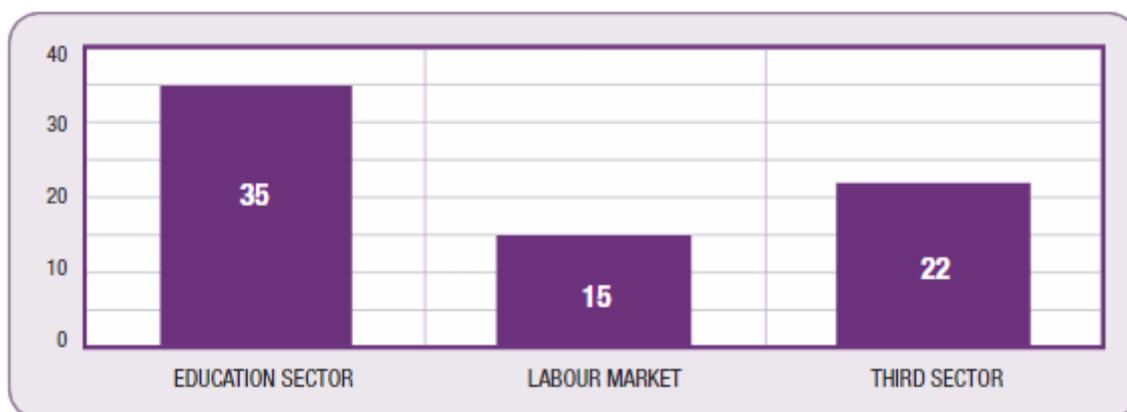
regarding the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences through volunteering increasing, it is now **more and more tending towards the non-formal category**.

Many **volunteer-based organisations** require their volunteers to set their learning objectives and they follow their **skills development**. It translates into the **formalisation of the sector**, which is not without bringing some resistance to keep the sector’s flexibility and “casualness”, hence posing challenges in finding the right balance of formalisation. Nevertheless, it is also a formidable opportunity to address **EU’s main societal and economic challenges** in terms of skills and employment.

To be **aware of one’s own skills development** - skills *identification* - is the first step leading to valuing non-formal and informal learning, which is very important in the process of recognition for bringing outcomes to the volunteer. Following the identification of skills, volunteers need tools to **document** their skills, so to be able to prove the learning and experience they have acquired. **Assessments** and **certification** tools are then needed to complete the process. Today, in the voluntary sector, the recognition and validation process is not always systematised and very often remains informal.

In the “**third sector**”, **validation initiatives** are in place to varying extents in **19 EU countries**<sup>1</sup> (Cedefop, 2016). These initiatives might, for example, support youth work or volunteers, validate non-formal learning opportunities offered by third sector organisations, or might be developed by third-sector organisations, such as charities or NGOs, to support a variety of target groups (third country nationals, unemployed, young people facing exclusion, people with a disability)<sup>2</sup>.

### Validation arrangements by education sector, labour market and the third sector



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

In the **ImproVal project** (2018-2020), a research conducted led to the identification of validation tools for volunteers in **20 EU countries**<sup>3</sup> (all EU countries except in the following eight EU countries: Bulgaria,

<sup>1</sup> Austria, Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and the UK.

<sup>2</sup> Cedefop, European Inventory on VNFIL (2016), Synthesis Report, p.32.

<sup>3</sup> ImproVal project - <https://www.improval.eu/results/tools-collection>

Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Sweden). This is almost the same map as found by CEDEFOP.

The volunteering's contribution to the goals of the **EU strategy 2020** is twofold: it brings more **social inclusion** and **active citizenship** as well as it fosters **participation** in **lifelong learning** activities, for instance, through the upskilling policy. Validation and volunteering both have in common to foster social inclusion and employability. The contribution of volunteering to addressing societal issues, providing non-commercial contribution to the population's well-being (for instance through social care activities or youth work), is well recognised but there is no main focus on the **outcomes of volunteering** for the **labour market** because of the core non-profit dimension of its activities.

Still, the world is experiencing major changes and the European Union is willing to adapt by investing in **skills** and **training**. One of the main challenges is the **skill mismatch** between the workforce and the labour market expectations (or needs). This partly comes as a result of the changes happening in the world of work and can lead to unemployment and lower economic competitiveness. Another main trend is **digitalisation**, it displaces the compass for skills towards new fields, digital skills for sure but also transversal skills increasingly. Finally, **lasting unemployment** of **young people** and **frozen social mobility** can explain the urge for making all skills (and learning) visible.

## b. Key concepts: volunteering, transversal skills and validation

### Learning while volunteering

Volunteering was embedded in the Lifelong learning program, in the Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020. More recently, the European Commission launched a new programme called "**European Solidarity Corps**" to continue and replace the former European Voluntary Service (EVS) with the aim that 100,000 young people become volunteers by the end of 2020. It will be a certain opportunity for young people's skills development.

In a large number of EU countries, the highest levels of volunteering are among **adults aged 30 to 50 years** (Volunteering in the EU, EC, 2010), with some exception. In Bulgaria, most volunteers are rather young and inexperienced and experienced adult professionals tend to volunteer less than in other countries. In the EU however and on average, volunteers age range corresponds to the active population and whether the volunteers may be working or not at the time of their volunteering, they may benefit someday from valuing their volunteering experience in the labour market.

Volunteering is an important way for people to develop themselves, by building new relationships and gaining a whole set of life skills that can improve their employability. It serves to gather important experience in unknown fields and to develop **social, personal** and **organisational competences**. For the partners, volunteering is defined as "*all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal, carried out in support of a non-profit organisation*".

## Transversal skills

*“Hard skills will get you an interview, but you need soft skills to get - and keep - the job”.*

Unlike so-called “hard skills”, which describe a person's technical skills and abilities to perform specifically defined tasks for a job, “soft” or “transversal skills” are broadly applicable across job titles and industries. During their volunteering experience, the kind of skills volunteer acquire is predominantly are those skills rather than “job-specific skills” or “basic skills” (numeracy, science, literacy).

**Transversal competences** are **defined** as *“knowledge, skills and attitudes that are not job-specific (vocational) and that can be used throughout life in various contexts (transversal)”*. In a sense, they can be resumed as “social, (inter-) personal and organisational competences”.

Examples of transversal skills are: Team working, Intercultural competences or handling diversity, Civic competences or active citizenship, Self-initiative and entrepreneurial thinking, Autonomy, Self-reflection, Self-confidence, Adaptability and flexibility, Problem solving, Critical thinking, Leadership, Taking responsibility, Communication skills, Managing relationships, Organising and managing tasks, Learning to learn.

A Research from Harvard University<sup>4</sup> has shown that Stem-related careers – where getting hard skills was the main goal - grew strongly between 1989 and 2000, but have stalled since. In contrast, jobs in the creative industries – the sector probably most associated with the need for soft skills – in the UK rose nearly 20% from 2011 to 2016<sup>5</sup>. Soft skills are in fact increasingly in demand in the workplace. According to a 2014 survey conducted for Career Builder<sup>6</sup>, **77% of employers believe that soft and hard skills are equally important.**

Whereas qualifications and learning outcomes related to “hard skills” are in majority known and even, converging at EU level (EQF / NQF<sup>7</sup>, ESCO<sup>8</sup>), **there is no common understanding and agreed list of transversal skills in the voluntary sector** that can be used as a reference by organisations operating in diverse fields or in different countries. Many sectors have listed those that are relevant in their context<sup>9</sup>, some typologies have been done based on social science research but all these initiatives remain

<sup>4</sup> COY Peter, (February 2018) “Maybe STEM Isn’t the Future After All. Soft Skills Are Coming on Strong”, Bloomberg Business Week article.

<sup>5</sup> Dr JOHNSTON Lisette (June 2018) “We must end this fixation with Stem subjects” <https://www.tes.com/news/we-must-end-fixation-stem-subjects>

<sup>6</sup> Career Builder (April 2014) “Overwhelming Majority of Companies Say Soft Skills Are Just as Important as Hard Skills, According to a New CareerBuilder Survey”

<sup>7</sup> European Qualification Framework (EQF), National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs)

<sup>8</sup> European Skills, Competences, qualifications and Occupations (ESCO)

<sup>9</sup> There has been a few initiatives in the volunteering sector, for instance, in the Scout sector, but it remains context-related.

fragmented. There is now more and more effort at EU level to develop a **reference system of transversal skills**<sup>10</sup>, which is the very first step to better develop and validate them.

From the voluntary to the business sector<sup>11</sup>, the list of most important skills slightly varies but is highly in common with any transversal skills list made for volunteers<sup>12</sup>. The point of this report will not be to re-affirm or ask again which skills are considered more important but rather to help us understand how the labour market needs can be better taken into account when valuing volunteering competences. This is to ensure that the tools and methods used in the volunteering sector can be **easily transferable to a work context**.

## Recognition and validation

An additional challenge related to soft skills is the **recognition and validation** of those. The recognition and **validation of volunteers' competences and experiences is still very limited in the EU**. The reason is that the skills volunteers acquire are mostly soft-transversal skills and therefore are in general harder to measure or evaluate and there is little shared knowledge and longitudinal studies around successful assessment or validation methods in this field.

The key policy document at EU level that intends to remediate to this situation is the **2012 Council Recommendation on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL)**. In 2012, Member States agreed to advance in this area and have validation arrangements in place for non-formal and informal learning by 2018.

As defined at the EU level, **validation is a 4-step process**:

1. **Identification**: In this first phase, individuals become aware of their own knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. It requires reflective recognition of such learning outcomes from individuals, which leads to valuable outcomes. Examples of validation tools that are often used in this phase are ICT-based tools, interviews, dialogue-based approaches, list of competences.
2. **Documentation**: This phase usually follows the previous one and aims to provide evidence on the learning outcomes acquired by the individuals. Different validation providers can have different documentation formats, making it difficult for individuals to present their learning outcomes and have them accepted (i.e. problems with transferability). Thus, it is important to have common formats that can aid transferability and promote a better understanding of learning outcomes. Examples of validation tools that are often used in this phase are CVs, Europass and portfolios.

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<sup>10</sup> See the work of the Joint Research Center and the LifeComp for instance.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. "Top ten" list of soft skills according to the business sector compiled by Eastern Kentucky University from executive listings of Marcel M. Robles (2016), *Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace*, Archived at the Wayback Machine, Business Communication Quarterly, 75(4) 453–465 (pdf)

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Valley project survey results. Valley project: [www.valley-eu.org](http://www.valley-eu.org), Validation system of Lifelong Learning Experience of Youth Volunteering, Social research on youth volunteering in Europe, Comprehensive report (2017)

3. **Assessment:** In this phase, documented learning outcomes are referenced against a specific standard (e.g. official qualification standard, occupational standard or an approved education programme or curriculum). Validation is easier if learning outcomes (what the individual knows, understands and is able to do) are referenced against clearly defined standards and performance levels. Examples of validation tools that are often used in this phase are a combination of written or oral tests and practical challenges; practical demonstrations or simulations, gathering evidence from previous practices, peer review, essays...
4. **Certification** of the assessment results in the form of a qualification or credits leading to a qualification. A competent and legitimised body confirms that an individual is in possession of the relevant skills, abilities and competences and that these have been assessed in accordance with stipulated standards. It is important that the certification process is managed by a credible authority or organisation to assure its value and legitimacy. Examples of validation tools that are often used in this phase are Open badges and diplomas.

These phases **have to be present in all validation processes** but can be developed in different ways, depending on the validation objectives. According to the European Guidelines for Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2015), when working for a formal qualification, the assessment phase has to be robust and credible; in cases such as **voluntary work**, the identification and documentation phases are more emphasised (i.e. recognition) when compared to assessment and certification.

There are many **approaches, methods** and **tools** to **assess volunteering competences**. Some focuses a **specific (transversal) skill** whether others developed a **holistic approach** towards all the learning that volunteer have acquired during their service. The assessment can be **summative**, but it is very often **formative** as this is common in the VNFIL field. Assessment can be a self-assessment, others required support from an assessor. One can lead to a certificate with detailed feedback on acquired skills others are just a self-reflection process.

## 2. Validation of non-formal and informal learning in the EU: background and context

### a. Before the recommendation (2004-2012)

The work of the EU on the validation of non-formal and informal learning dates back to 2004 when the **Council of the European Union** adopted **Conclusions** on “Common European Principles for Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL)”. The document was already stating the impact in social and economic terms of validation emphasising those approaches aiming to the (re)integration of individuals into education and training, labour market and society at large.

It is also at that time, that the **Europass** and the **Youthpass** were invented as the **first EU-wide attempts to provide instruments facilitating the recognition of learning between EU countries**. The Europass is the **most used European tool** to document one’s skills. Its aim is to increase transparency of qualifications

and the mobility of citizens in Europe<sup>13</sup>. The **Youthpass** on the other hand, is a recognition tool for learning happening in the youth sector, it is also the main instrument to recognise learning in volunteering sector (recently, it celebrated the first 1 000 000 of users). Many other tools now exist but very few of them are as widely used across the EU.

**Youthpass** is a tool to document and recognise learning outcomes from youth work and solidarity activities. It is available for projects funded by Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme, and is used largely for the European Solidarity Corps. It is a part of the European Commission's strategy to foster the recognition of non-formal learning, putting policy into practice and practice into policy.

The **Youthpass certificate** describes learning outcomes along the Key competences for lifelong learning, which were first outlined in 2006 and revised in 2018 (Council Recommendation on *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*). These key competences define a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that each individual needs for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. Using this framework, Youthpass helps to build a bridge from non-formal and informal learning to other forms of education.

The **European Inventory on Validation** started to be elaborated in 2004 by CEDEFOP and it has been updated in 6 occasions (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014, and 2016)<sup>14</sup>. It provides an overview of the situation of validation practices in Europe covering all sectors of education and practices taking place within the labour market or in the voluntary sector. It covers 36 countries (all the EU countries, the EFTA countries and Turkey) and has also thematic studies that go deeper into specific aspects of validation.

In 2009, CEDEFOP published the first edition "**European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning**", which was later revised in 2015. The guidelines aim at "assisting stakeholders by clarifying the different options and possible steps they face when establishing and operating validation arrangements in Europe" (European Commission and Cedefop, 2015, p. 10). Those guidelines are the first contribution to a set of European guidelines for validation but, according to the author in the 2009 publications, "further development and strengthening in the coming years is obviously needed." This further development and strengthening of the guidelines happened three years later with the VNFIL Council Recommendation.

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<sup>13</sup> Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)

<sup>14</sup> Cedefop, European Inventory on VNFIL (2016), <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

## b. The VNFIL Council Recommendation: from design to implementation (2012-2019)

In 2012, EU Member States agreed to establish by 2018 arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

“VNFIL can play an important role in **enhancing employability** and **mobility**, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the **socio-economically disadvantaged** or the **low-qualified**”.

Although the Recommendation is not binding and relies on a **soft law approach** (Gornitzka, 2006; Villalba, 2010), most Member States have shown an increasing commitment in the area of validation that can be attributed to the establishment of the Recommendation (Cedefop, 2014).

The recommendation points to the importance of **involving** both **employers** and the **voluntary sector** in the **implementation of validation**:

“4 a) employers, youth organisations and civil society organisations should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities, using relevant Union transparency tools such as those developed under the Europass framework and Youthpass” (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4, point 4a).

In the frame of the **European Qualification Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG)**, coordinated by the European Commission, every Member State is invited to present one-off reports on the state-of-play of the implementation of the VNFIL Council Recommendation but those reports generally focus on putting validation arrangement in place rather than on assessing the impact of the implementation. Some Member States made progress while others still lag behind. Therefore, it is needed to **evaluate the results of the Recommendation**. The Recommendation foresees that the Commission will evaluate the implementation in **2019**, and report back to the Council. At the date of the writing of this report, the first round of feedback from stakeholders on the EC evaluation has been implemented and the public consultation is currently being run. Before the results of the evaluation are out, CEDEFOP will publish this year its new edition of the Inventory on VNFIL.

In 2016, Cedefop Inventory showed that **many challenges remain** in particular, in **improving the uptake of VNFIL** and **guidance support**, especially among disadvantaged groups. The VNFIL Council Recommendation stated that validation arrangements will be implemented “in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate” (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. C398/3). This was common sense because validation arrangements need to be adapted to the existing practices within each country but it also **leaves room** for **heterogeneity** across European countries. This will be particularly detrimental for international mobility across Member States, as validation arrangements might not be connected from one country to another. It is likely that the EC valuation will show that although progress in legal framework and policies has been made, the results are not only difficult to assess but also limited in terms of impact. **Fragmentation of national systems** will remain a main issue for the next programming period. More generally, there is still need to **raise**

**awareness of all stakeholders** about validation to have coordinated approaches in the implementation, including within the same country.

All the latter policy developments make the Job Bridge project very timely.

### 3. The research on validation: aims and methods

#### a. “Job Bridge for volunteers”

The present research and study on **“the state-of-play of validation in the voluntary sector across the EU”** is part of the European project **“Job Bridge - Job Bridge for Volunteers”** (Erasmus+, 2018-2020, <https://job-bridge.eu/>), which aims to improve the **recognition** and **validation** of **volunteers’ competences** in the **European Union**. The project, which is coordinated by a German adult education center named **BUPNET**, gathers **eight partner organisations** located in **seven EU countries** (Germany, Bulgaria, Italy, United Kingdom, France, Belgium and Spain). Partners are organisations active at **multi-level** (European, national and local) and **across sectors**, in the civil society and non-profit sectors, non-formal education and volunteering, business and Chamber of Commerce. The report presents the results of qualitative and quantitative research. The surveys were running between **mid-April** and **May 2019**. The interviews and focus groups between **April** and **June 2019**.

The stocktaking exercise is intended to ascertain the **level of progress** that has been made by EU countries and volunteering stakeholders as regards validation. The report focuses on remaining **gaps**, **challenges** and **opportunities** with regard to the advancement of VNFIL in the voluntary sector. It is expected that the report will guide the discussions by providing **insights**, **inspiring good practices** and **recommendations** to the **key stakeholders** concerned by the issue: **volunteers, organisations, employers, public authorities** and **other validation stakeholders**.

**Today, the competences acquired in volunteering are seldom assessed and validated**, even though employers place a lot of emphasis on finding candidates with the right skills, especially soft skills. 50% of employers expressed the need for certificates or portfolio to evidence volunteers’ skills<sup>15</sup>. This is why one of the main focus of the project is **developing products and services taking into account the needs of the labour market**. **Digitalisation**, which is often an argument for developing stem-related or hard skills, also **reinforces the need for soft skills**. Indeed, soft skills very often cannot be replaced by computers and automation. They are however more difficult to evaluate. According to a survey toward 9,000 talent leaders and hiring managers from around the globe<sup>16</sup>, it was found that if structure interviews are still the main technique in use (74%), it is mostly failing in assessing candidate’s soft skills (63%). Indeed, **“attractive and charismatic interviewees aren’t necessarily more capable, for example, but we unconsciously assume they are.”** **Soft skills assessments are mentioned as the most useful interviewing innovations and many of these successful innovations are already implemented in the non-formal sector.**

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<sup>15</sup> GR-EAT project, Erasmus+, 2014-2016, Survey, July 2015.

<sup>16</sup> LinkedIn Research (2018) “Reinventing the interview”, Global recruiting trends.

Based on the needs of volunteer-based organisations and employers, the Job Bridge project aims to provide the most appropriate **methods** and **tools** to **assess** volunteers' **transversal competences** and **support** their **learning paths**. With improving VNFIL in the voluntary sector, the objective is to **create a bridge for volunteers** to have better **employment opportunities** and **employability**.

To conduct the research, **all eight partners** of the **Job Bridge project** have gathered **quantitative** and **qualitative data** based on a common methodology:

- **Desk research:** a collection of projects, initiatives, policy context in partners countries
- **Two surveys** distributed in 6 EU languages, one for former and current volunteers and one for volunteering-based organisations
- **Focus groups** and **interviews** with volunteers, volunteering organisations and/or validation experts and employers (from private and public sectors)

All the partners of the Job Bridge project were involved in the organisation of those research activities (survey, focus group and interviews). They followed the same methodology (a list of suggested questions) and the same reporting method (from the collection of inputs), although they could freely adapt the questions to their audience and depending on where the discussion was leading them.

Following the publication of this report, the project partners will use the results as a basis for developing **quality** and **transferable products** benefiting the project target groups, stakeholders and final beneficiaries. More information here: <https://job-bridge.eu/activities>.

To resume, the project's main ambition is to provide an **EU integrated approach bridging informal, non-formal and formal learning for the voluntary sector**.

## b. Challenges of a fragmented panorama

The research aims to identify the challenges of VNFIL in the field of validation and look for concrete solutions by providing recommendations.

The existence of **heterogeneous legal frameworks for VNFIL** and **volunteering** between countries renders difficult their comparison and connection according to a single benchmark. In one of the partner countries, for instance Bulgaria, there is not a law yet on volunteering and there has been policy debates about validation. The proposals for a law on volunteering that recently entered in parliament contain the idea of a volunteering pass. It would contain information about the organisation where the volunteering took place, the type of activities, and the period but would not allow for documenting specific skills and competences.

The **diversity** and **sustainability** of **validation initiatives, tools, arrangements** and **methods** makes it necessary to regularly update the data collected. When doing the desk research, partners had looked into several databases with validation tools for volunteers. It has appeared the general lack of updates. Some database include tools that do not exist anymore, the website is offline or the tools are just not used. This can happen once a European project is over, for instance.

Regarding validation in the voluntary sector more specifically, **there is little evidence at EU level of common and converging progress**, except with the use of two main EU tools (Europass, Youth Pass). What applies in the voluntary sector also applies for the validation of transversal competences, where there are numerous tools used by various sectors, organisations and countries. Many countries have put a system in place that is connected to their national qualification framework but they **may not differentiate in which type of non-formal or informal context has the individual acquired those skills** (work-based, family, volunteering, etc.).

Overall, there is a **limited availability of data** regarding how the validation arrangements and tools work, who and how many users are using them. This is the case, although there has been many EU-funded projects on validation (see the non-exhaustive list in the Reference section of this report). Those mostly focused on finding the tools and listing some of their characteristics rather than explaining in detail how they work. This is another barrier for their transferability: the **irregularity of transparency and access to information regarding the tools**. There is little data available regarding the actual **uptake**, which appears to remain limited and low, especially among **disadvantaged groups**<sup>17</sup> and this restricts potential for adequate monitoring, costs-benefits analysis and impact assessment of validation.

There is a **lack of connection between levels of governance** (from local to European levels), **between sectors** (formal education, labour market, public sector, civil society) and **between countries**. In many countries, validation tools for the volunteering sector are not connected to any EU qualification or competence frameworks (EQF, NQF, Key competences for lifelong learning). Cooperation between the formal, non-formal and informal sectors is still largely insufficient. The labour market plays a role in only one EU country for the validation taking place in youth organisations and in 27% of the countries with civil society organisations (*Figure 10: Involvement of stakeholders*, CEDEFOP, Inventory of VNFIL, p.51), which means that **cooperation for validation between the labour market and the volunteering sector is low**. As part of a research of another EU project on validation, among the 48 tools collected in the EU, it was found that half of them are only available in one EU language<sup>18</sup>.

It is acknowledged widely that one of the **main barriers** for the voluntary sector to engage in validation is its **lack of financial and human resources**, in terms of skilled staff, time and monetary resources and that is the main obstacle in systematically implementing processes to recognise and validate competences. Therefore, the Job Bridge report and recommendations for future project developments will provide a specific attention to **user-centred solutions** that respond to the needs of the target groups (volunteers, organisations and employers) by providing hands-on solutions to scarce resources.

Focusing on the voluntary sector, the **following questions are important**<sup>19</sup>:

- In which cases should validation be limited to identification and documentation?
- In which cases should validation apply assessment and certification in a summative approach?
- How can validation initiatives in the voluntary sector interact with and strengthen arrangements in the public sector, particularly in education and training?
- Which assessment standards used in the voluntary sector could be complementary with formal education and training systems?

<sup>17</sup> Cedefop, European Inventory on VNFIL (2016), Executive summary, p.16.

<sup>18</sup> ImproVal project (2018-2020). <http://improval.eu/>.

<sup>19</sup> CEDEFOP (2015), European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.

- How can the voluntary sector ensure reliability and recognition of existing validation tools?

We hope the Job Bridge results will provide some answers.

## II. Research results

The aim of the research activities was to understand the **panorama of validation in volunteering**, what are the **needs of stakeholders** in this field and which **difficulties** they cope with. The research was combining **quantitative** with **qualitative methods**. All results coming from the **two online surveys**, **focus groups**, and **interviews** presented in this section are combined because they complement each other.

The collected inputs bring valuable insights to the **state-of-the-art of validation** in the **voluntary sector** and for the **labour market**, stressing the need for **relevant validation tools** and reaffirming the **fragmentation** within the sector's systems, knowledge and practices as presented in the first part of the report.

It was also needed for the Job Bridge partners to collect stakeholders' feedback on existing and future tools they know of, either that can assess transversal skills and/or validate the learning acquired through volunteering in order to provide recommendations for the future outputs of the Job Bridge project.

**Is validation relevant for all volunteers, organisations and/or employers?** How to promote and/or improve its implementation? What are the key features that that tool would need to be appreciated by employers?

The **two online surveys** gathered **over 1 000 complete answers** from both volunteers and organisations hosting them. The surveys were launched online in **6 EU languages**: English, German, Italian, Spanish, French and Bulgarian. A vast majority of respondents were volunteering in one of the biggest volunteer-based (or -led) organisations in the world (Red Cross). The geographical coverage and representativeness of the project partner countries was not sufficient to allow national comparisons. However, as indicated below, respondent's volunteering experience took place in **various EU countries** (21 out of 28).

The **focus groups** and **interviews** have involved **up to 92 individuals**, not only **representatives of the voluntary sector** (volunteers, volunteer-based organisations and other stakeholders) but as well **representatives of the labour market** (from both the public and private sectors). One third of the individuals consulted were representing the employment sector.

On the side of employers consultation, the aim was to understand to which extent they already **value volunteering experience** during the **recruitment** and to a certain extent, **"on the job"** (e.g. companies that encourage volunteering as part of their corporate and HR strategies).

## 1. Key findings

The survey contains insights from **volunteers** (their motivation, expectations, development and validation of the skills acquired), **organisations** (before, during and after the placement) and from **employers** (from the recruitment process to the elaboration of corporate volunteering strategy for employee-volunteers).

1. Volunteers carry their tasks for philanthropic reasons mainly, and very few act motivated by the professional outcomes that volunteering will provide them with. Nonetheless, **most of the consulted volunteers had learning expectations** at the beginning of their placement and developed transversal skills that could potentially help them get a job in the future. There is a general agreement on the personal benefits of volunteering, for instance, on the skills it develops. However, there is a lower rate of agreement on the improvement of the professional prospects.
2. **Not all volunteers, organisations or employers consider the recognition an important part of the volunteering experience**, this can be explained by several factors, one of them being little knowledge about the validation process and its benefits. This argues for more awareness raising on the benefits of validation. Employers mostly agree that volunteering are valuable experiences for developing skills and are generally ready to consider such experience, in particular during the interviews, but they do not always see a point in having validation during the volunteering as they might not consider the tangible and intangible outcomes from it (e.g. certificates and other presentation of results of assessments). Some employers believe they can better rely on their own tools to assess candidates' soft skills, others consider they can assess those during the interview process.
3. **Validation in the voluntary sector is perceived to be particularly relevant for young people with little professional experience**. It is mostly useful for them because it significantly increases their "employability" (chances in the labour market). Going through a validation procedure can better help them to value the skills they developed, in particular transversal skills, in a way that referring to formal education cannot achieve. Older volunteers would tend more to feel it is not so relevant because they believe they already have developed the skills that are needed for their professional activity.
4. Regarding the **tools** to formalise the **learning outcomes** in some sort of certification, there is **no instrument or method among respondents that is widely known or used**. All mentioned EU tools - Youth Pass, Europass, ProfilPASS and Open Badges - were unknown for the largest part of the stakeholders participating in the study and online tools are seldom used according to the answers gathered from both parties. Nevertheless, most volunteers consider important receiving a certificate - be it just for participation (certificate of attendance) or for the learning experience or competence developments itself<sup>20</sup> - and those that used these certifications (either mentioning them or providing the recruiter with them) had the impression that employers considered these documents relevant.

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<sup>20</sup> The survey question did not clearly specify "certification" as in the validation process.

5. In addition, there is a **widespread lack of awareness concerning the available European competence frameworks** - the Common European Framework Reference of Languages, the Key Competence Framework for Lifelong Learning, the Digital Competence Framework, the Entrecomp Framework and the European classification of Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications - that were presented to volunteer hosting organisations. However, although little known, the **Key Competence framework is the most used** when it comes to build competences framework. It shows signs of convergence. This might result in the creation of new tools, which would “reinvent the wheel” instead of using or replicating those that already exist generating inefficiencies and difficulties to harmonise validation systems.

## 2. Results of the online survey, interviews and focus groups

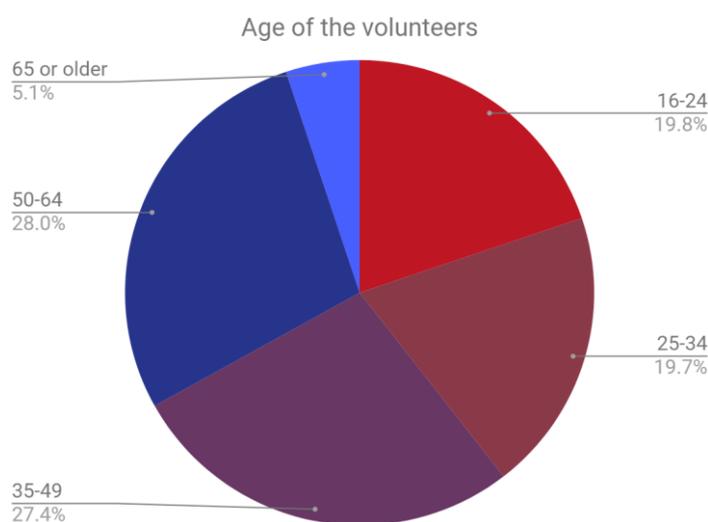
### a. The respondents and their volunteering experience

#### Respondents (Volunteers)

In total, **904 volunteers** fully completed the survey.

Age-wise, there is an even distribution between the four largest age groups with a smaller share of volunteers being 65 or older.

The **majority of the volunteers were full-time employees** (42%) or university students (17%) during their “most relevant volunteering experience” while the rest of them were in a different professional situation - e.g. interns, self-employed, high school students, etc. Of these volunteers, 47% are secondary school graduates, 44% hold a university degree and the remaining 9% present no formal qualification, so there is also an equal share in terms of low / high education degrees. It has been observed by volunteering organisations that the degree of development of skills through volunteering is proportional to the educational level of the individual. This information poses a policy challenge on how to make volunteering equally fruitful for all, regardless of their educational level.



Regarding the **volunteering placements** of the respondents, they took place **mostly in NGOs** and they were spread across **21 of the 28 Member States**<sup>21</sup> and other countries outside of the EU. In terms of weekly commitment, the bigger share was volunteering between 2 to 10 hours per week (46%), followed by 11 to 20 hours per week (23%), less than 2 hours or not a regular commitment amounted for 20%.

**90% of the respondents were engaged in volunteering activities for a long duration** (more than six months).

The **sectors** of the organisations where volunteers had these placements was generally **transversal** and they **worked in more than one field**, being the **most frequent one “health issues”** (63%), followed by **“Youth”** (41%), **“Persons with disabilities”** (40%) and **“Migrant/Refugees”** (39%). Other categories such as **“Elderly people”** or **“Families and children”** were also well-spread among the consulted volunteers (34% and 22% respectively) while **“Sports”** (6%) or **“Media and communications”** (7%) received the smallest share of answers.

The **tasks most frequently** carried out by volunteers during their placements are **“Social and/or care support” (40%)**, **“Fundraising” (30%)**, **“Logistics activities” (28%)**, **“Training and/or learning support”** or **“Event organisation”** carried out in at least 25% of the cases. Other tasks identified as missing by the respondent (“Other, please specify”) are: health care (rescue, emergency medical aid...), art (theatre), research, school support, sales, marketing and finance, teaching and gardening.

**67% of the volunteers** taking the survey had their volunteering placement **unlinked to any larger framework or programme**. Programmes like European Voluntary Service or European Solidarity Corps are mentioned along with several national programmes present in Italy, France or other EU countries.

## Respondents (Organisations)

The answers of **140 organisations** that involve volunteers have been collected. These organisations were generally based in the countries of Job Bridge partnership but there were also responses from other countries in the EU and outside of it. **A large majority of the responding organisations identify itself as non-profits**, leaving almost non-existent the representations of other types of organisations (political parties, cultural institutions, youth organisations, healthcare institutions, municipalities...). **Organisations working at all levels were represented**: local (47%), regional (19%), national (31%), European (16%) and international (36%).

Most of the respondents (81%), defined as “volunteer facilitators”, have **at least two years of experience in their organisation** and the most common positions in these are **managers, team leaders and programme coordinators**. These ensures the reliability of the answers in terms of knowledge of their own structure and volunteering programmes.

**A majority of responding organisations** involve volunteers out of a **larger programme or framework** (55%).

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<sup>21</sup> Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Most respondents welcome “any person who wants to help” (71%), although it is also frequent that organisations as compared to seeking **volunteers with specific skills or competences** (41%). Among these volunteer profiles, there is a large variety in terms of occupations (students, professionals, retired or unemployed volunteers) and backgrounds (migrant background, fewer opportunities).

There is also a representation of **organisations of all sizes**, from the smallest ones hosting less than ten volunteers on average to the largest ones with over 1000.

These volunteers are engaged in **83% of the cases for more than six months on average**. Only in 5% of the cases, this engagement happens for less than three months. The answers are then more relevant for assessing the state-of-play of validation because skill development is stronger.

Concerning the time that volunteers dedicate to these activities with their hosting organisations, the highest share is for two to ten hours per week (47%). 21% of the organisations claim that volunteers spend between one and two hours per week in their placements and 14% of them have a weekly engagement of more than 21 hours. Out of the polled organisations, 5% offer eventual volunteering opportunities that do not require a regular commitment.

The **most common tasks** carried by volunteers according to the polled organisations are: *“Information/Communication”, “Fundraising”, “Social and/or care support” and “Event organisation”* being all of them present in at least half of the placements. Other tasks like *“Training and/or learning support”, “Organising leisure, sport or cultural activities”, “Logistic activities” or “Administrative tasks”* were also popular appearing in more than 40% of the cases.



## Motivation to volunteer

Volunteers were asked to specify the **three most relevant reasons** for them to volunteer. Solidarity appears as the first stimulus for respondents when making the decision to dedicate their time to volunteering activities as *“To be useful and to help others and/or the society”* was chosen by **88%** of the ones polled and confirmed that philanthropic reasons is the first reason for volunteering.



Respondents also seem to understand their **personal development** as one core output of volunteering activities: *“To make new experiences”* or *“To gain new competences”* was stated by **58%** and **56%** of the volunteers. **Social reasons** such as *“To meet new people”* or *“To increase my network”* are the next most given answers but with significantly lower shares (17% and 15%).

If most of the volunteers have learning expectations when starting this kind of activities (see answers further on), less than 7% of the respondents chose to engage in volunteering to enhance their employability. Even “To have something to do in my free time” (11%) or “To have fun” (10%) appear as more appealing reasons to volunteer than the professional prospects. Other reasons such as tackling injustice (12%), discovering other countries and cultures (4%) or fulfilling others’ expectations (3%) were also mentioned among responses.

## Wider benefits of volunteering

In general, volunteering has many benefits - solidarity, social cohesion, resources, social solutions - but little attention is given to the educational or learning benefits.

Volunteers were asked to what extent they improved in different areas thanks to volunteering. The same question was formulated to organisations regarding how much their volunteers benefitted from their placements. They were given statements and they had to rate their accuracy being 1 “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree”.

Generally, **hosting organisations have a more optimistic vision of the benefits of volunteering than volunteers themselves**. The number of times that organisations scored a statement with 4 or 5 was higher than the times that the same scores were given by volunteers in 6 out of 7 of the cases. Only when asked about the **increase in their willingness to learn**, volunteers have the impression of improving to a larger extent (80%) than organisations (65%).

To the question, the **volunteering experience has developed or fostered**:

	Volunteers ("rather agree", or "strongly agree")	Organisations ("rather agree", or "strongly agree")
Social network	79%	94%
Self-confidence and interpersonal skills	77%	90%
Willingness to learn	80%	65%
Job-related skills	46%	74%
Clearer idea about their professional goals and opportunities	39%	51%
Clearer idea about their further educational path	40%	55%

Table 1: Benefits of volunteering; comparison between volunteers and organisations.

The table above shows **significant discrepancies** between volunteers and organisations regarding the **estimated or perceived impact** (or benefits) of a volunteering experience. One or the other might be in the position of under- or over-estimating the impact that volunteering has on its users. However, overall, high results show great benefits in volunteering for professional and/or educational purposes. This contrasts in return with the previous answers regarding the learning expectations of both organisations and volunteers, which are significantly lower (or relatively lower compared to other outcomes).

The interviews and focus groups confirmed though that that volunteering brings better job opportunities and improved employment conditions. "Volunteering activities are a source of **complementary education and training** and this can be assessed in the selection process. It happened to me several times that employers asked me about these experiences" (volunteer). A volunteer said that volunteering helps them in acquiring a "**great deal of competences**" – social, personal - that are very useful in a job. Those **competences** that are **sometimes insufficiently developed otherwise, in "purely educational situations"** (probably referring to formal education here). Volunteering teaches them better to "take responsibility" than school, for instance.

Indeed, although it is less perceived or more controversial, volunteering also brings **benefits to the world of work**. Employers have good appreciation of volunteering experiences because it...

- helps individuals to get **professional orientation and experience** (for "junior candidates, volunteering experience could compensate the lack of work experience");
- helps them to **get useful skills for their job**, such as social care, logistics or communication. These are in many ways equivalent to those in the job. Volunteering experiences are considered by some employers as "**highly educational and formative**";
- is benefiting in the sense that volunteers learn to "think not only for themselves but get engaged in society". Volunteering experience is proof of the candidate's motivation and moral qualities and some employers value this in the recruitment.

Some of the consulted employers also mention their **own company's volunteering policy**. They said that offering or encouraging volunteering opportunities to their employees can **help** in the **recruitment and retention of younger employees**.

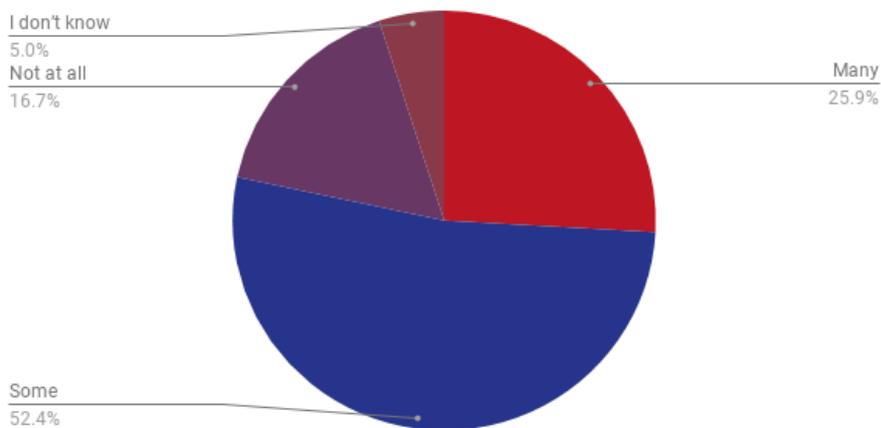
## b. Skills development in volunteering

### Learning objectives: expectations and planning

In the survey, volunteers were asked whether they had **learning objectives** when they started their placement. This could mean three things: (1) either they set for themselves learning objectives, or (2) learning objectives were established by the organisation, or (3) they build their own learning objectives together with the organisation.

It is observed that **more than half of volunteers (52%) had "some" learning objectives** when they started their placement while **26% had "many"**. **17% did not have any learning objectives**.

### Do/did you have any learning objectives when you started to volunteer?



For half of the volunteers who had learning objectives, we can say that the learning environment was tending to non-formal and already had some kind of embryonic structured learning process was foreseen.

49% of them always elaborate on a specific plan for learning and/or competence

development when the volunteers start their volunteering activity and 39% of the polled organisations do so often or sometimes and only 12% never prepare this plan for the learning outcomes of volunteers.

### What competences are developed and assessed in volunteering?

Survey respondents were asked to measure to what extent they developed a list of 27 competences during their volunteering. Eight of these competences happened to be developed “a lot” by at least half of the volunteers completing the survey: teamwork (67%), social engagement (63%), autonomy and taking responsibility (59%), self-reflection (57%), flexibility and adaptability (57%), empathy (55%), reliability (53%) and managing relationships (52%). Volunteers who participated in the survey were asked to mention any other competence that they felt it was developed during their placement. Self-reliance, foreign language, mediation, group facilitation skills appeared among their answers.

**Autonomy and responsibility:** “Volunteering work is often unsupported and the volunteers are challenged to take responsibility for managing their time and efforts”. “Yet untrained, inexperienced volunteers cannot be realistically expected to take charge of the activities”. Autonomy and responsibility is said to be easy to assess because it is a “feeling shared by the majority of volunteers” (volunteer).

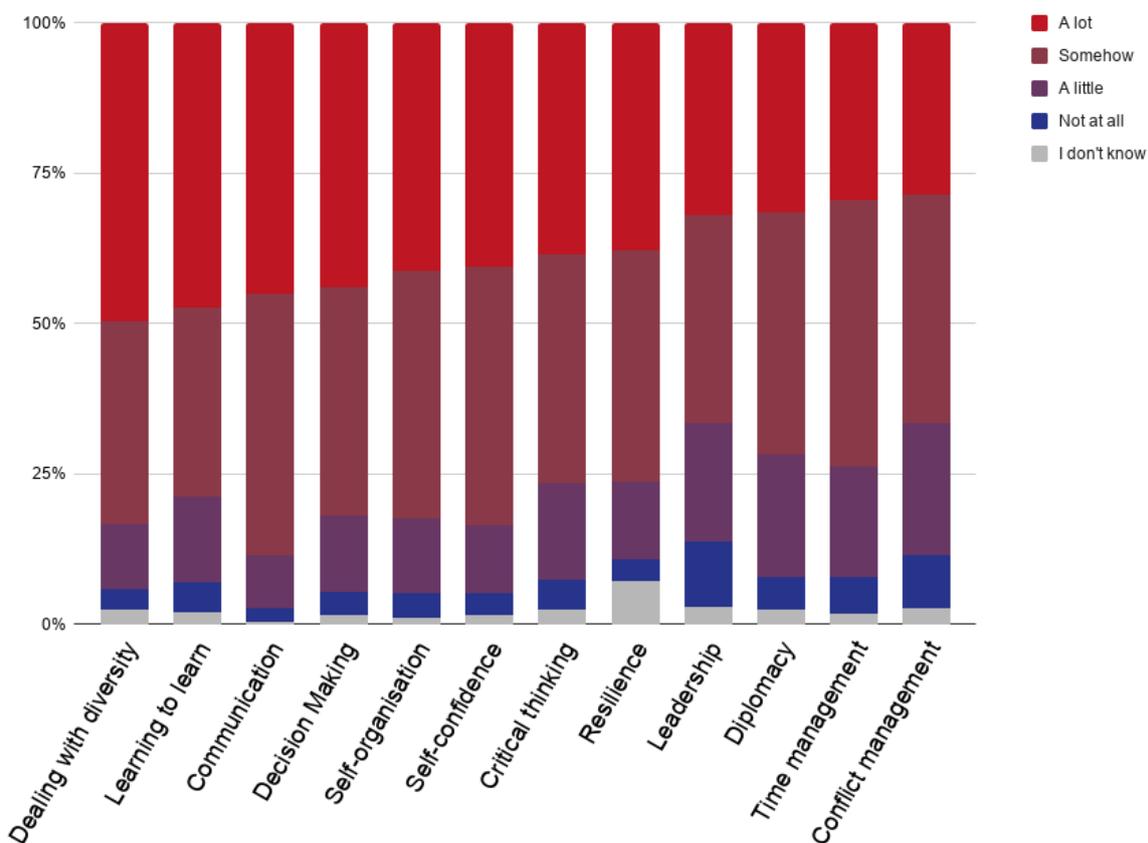


Figure 1: Skills development according to volunteers (12 out of 27 from the list).

On the other hand, more than one third of the consulted volunteers stated that the following competences were not developed “at all” or only “a little” during their volunteering experiences: ICT competences (65%), negotiation (46%), project management (45%), intercultural competence (39%), creativity (38%) and self-initiative and entrepreneurial thinking (33%).

The question addressed to organisations was slightly different: “which competences (in the list) are assessed by the organisation?”. It makes sense at this stage to compare organisations’ answers with what volunteers said they develop most.

The table below shows in the left column the most developed competences according to volunteers and in the right column, the competences that are most assessed by organisations. Respondents also added to the list because they felt it was missing: project management, and job-specific competences (i.e. non-transversal skills) linked to a task in a sector (rescue, social worker, emergency, right etc.), benevolence and event organisation.

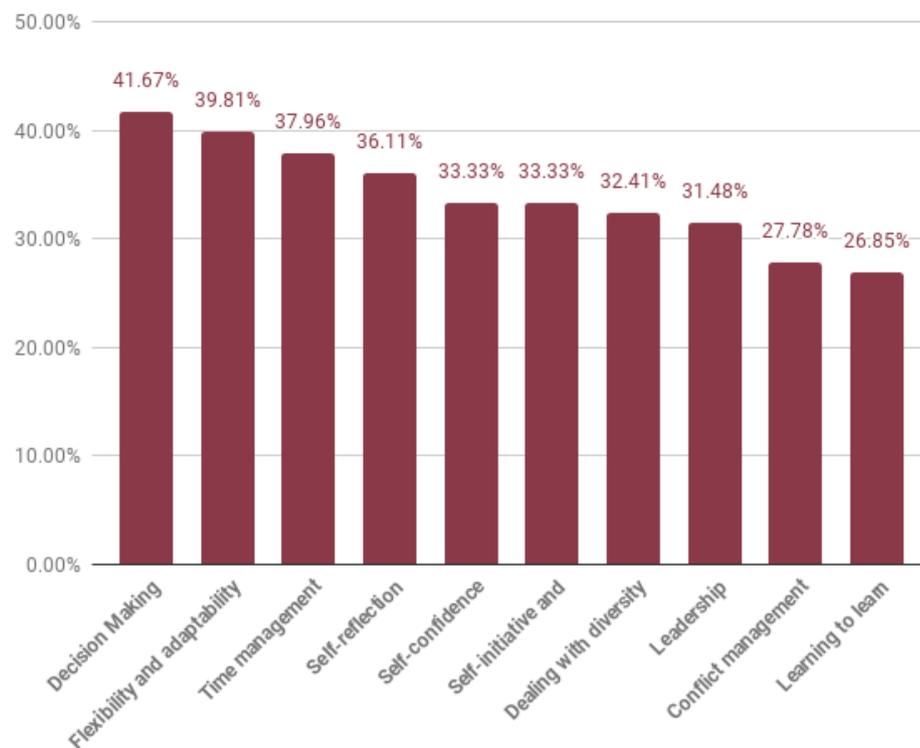
Most developed competences according to <b>volunteers</b> :	Most assessed competences by <b>organisations</b> :
1. Teamwork (67%) 2. Social engagement (63%) 3. Autonomy/taking responsibility (59%) 4. Self-reflection (57%) 5. Flexibility and adaptability (57%)	1. Teamwork (80%) 2. Communication (69%) 3. Problem-solving (64%) 4. Managing relationships (54%) 5. Empathy (52%)
Least developed competences according to <b>volunteers</b> :	Least assessed competences by <b>organisations</b> :
1. ICT Competences (14%) 2. Negotiation (20%) 3. Intercultural competences (30%) 4. Diplomacy (34%) 5. Critical thinking (41%)	1. Negotiation (8%) 2. Diplomacy (13%) 3. ICT Competences (16%) 4. Intercultural competences (20%) 5. Critical thinking (21%)

*Table 2: Aggregation of answers from volunteering survey (“somehow” and “a lot”) compared to answers from the organisation survey on most and least developed competences.*

The **least assessed competences match**, usually, those that **volunteers feel they are developing the least**: negotiation, diplomacy, ICT competence, intercultural competence and critical thinking.

It is relevant to highlight the fact that **teamwork** is the competence that volunteers claim to improve the most during their deployment and at the same time, it is the one whose assessment is more widely spread. Nonetheless, hosting organisations do not seem to focus their assessment on tasks that volunteers feel the most developed during volunteering (e.g. social engagement). The **perception** and/or **value given to certain learning outcomes** compared to others regarding other competences can have multiple explanations but the surveys do not tell.

From the focus groups and interviews, other skills, such as **motivation, result-orientation; attention to detail; pedagogy; curiosity; emotional intelligence; psycho-social skills; work ethics** were also added to the list.



### c. Importance of recognition and validation for volunteers

*Validation “recognises and celebrates the work volunteers do.”*  
(volunteering stakeholder).

Half of the polled volunteers consider the recognition of the competences acquired during their volunteering fairly or very important. Only 14% of the volunteers think this recognition is not important at all while 19% consider it just slightly important. 17% of the respondents gave a medium grade of importance to the recognition of these competences awarding three points out of five.

#### Why is validation relevant for volunteers?

It was mentioned during the interviews and focus groups that taking part in the validation process brings benefits:

- The first benefit is obviously to **make their learning visible to themselves**. They get an evidence of their learning (e.g. enriched portfolio). Since volunteering was reported by young people to be “trendy and cool”, having proof of the benefits it brings to them in terms of skill development increases their motivation. “Often these skills are not explored; the validation of these skills could help in order to give a more complete view of yourself and of your profile” (volunteer).

- The other side of the coin is that it **makes their competences visible to others** (“social benefits”). Validation serves the communication of the competences gained towards others. “It is not always easy to bring out the developed skills and how they are potentially transferable to work” but they say that it is easier if the volunteering experience is in a field similar to the professional one.
- Volunteers develop **better self-awareness** of their improvement through **self-reflection**. Validation enables volunteers to become more aware of the learning dimension of their volunteering experience” (volunteering provider). Reflecting on learning outcomes makes learning more conscious and more effective. A volunteer stated “I can better formulate what I am able to do and what I know based on the assessment of my competences.”
- It helps reinforcing the **“goal-setting” capacities of volunteers**. Validation has the positive effect that the volunteers actively work on their development and set themselves goals in order to improve their performance: “being involved in the process of validation increased their motivation to set further goals for their development” (volunteering provider).
- It increases the **level of commitment** and **motivation during the volunteering** (“to make visible their commitment to their peers”). Volunteers feel valued because they can demonstrate their learning outcomes and working experiences. They feel ‘listened to’ during the process and are motivated to engage in participatory actions.
- It brings **credibility** (“the benefit of the validation of my competences is the credibility it provides to my experience (...”). This works in particular because employers also see value in the validation process (“it would be a way of recognizing formally transferable skills for employment”).
- All the previous benefits lead to an **increased sense of achievement** and **self-esteem**. Considering that self-confidence is also one of the transversal skills, this is a very valuable impact. Gaining new and improving existing competences gave the volunteers a sense of achievement as they witnessed their progress and development. “They (volunteers) could hardly believe what they had reached during the relatively short time of their volunteering experiences – it was great to see how pleased they were about the visualisation of their positive development” (volunteering provider).
- **Support volunteers in their future career and help them to build their professional project**. Validating competences is seen as a means to improve educational and career prospects and opportunities. “Helping volunteers become aware of their abilities and achievements, and to help them take advantage of their experiences with their plans for the future in mind is of great benefit” (volunteering provider).

It was noted however that the motivation for **both skill development** and **validation** varies in degree **depending** on the **age of the volunteers**, although both age groups recognise the contribution of volunteering to **build soft skills** in particular (e.g. learn to listen, empathy, resilience). Young people are more eager to gain skills when volunteering than older generations. Also, there is a belief among older and employed volunteers that they already know how to assess their skills by themselves.

### Recognition tool – RECOGNIZE (Spain)

Successful initiative #1



Reconoce is a Spanish project that aims to build a network of national organisations that foster the recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering. The project aims, among other goals, to elaborate a study on the status of the volunteering sector in Spain and an [online system](#) for the non-formal certification of volunteering.

The project has an orientation towards employment with a sensitisation campaign aimed at the business sector to give visibility to the skills and competences acquired through volunteering. It also features round table discussions involving the public administration and youth organisations to develop an official process for the recognition of professional skills.

The website is available in Spanish, English and Basque and the project focuses on 12 transversal skills. More than one hundred organisations have already joined the network.

## Why is validation relevant for volunteer-based organisations?

- **It helps with the recruitment and retention of volunteers** (said a volunteer) It is a way to encourage volunteering, because if the experience is recognised, young people might be interested in volunteering. “Many organisations experience difficulties recruiting enough volunteers, so having transparent offers such as certificates of developed competences can be very motivational” (volunteer).
- **It allows more effective planning of the volunteering experience:** “For the organisation, the assessment and validation of competences allows for planning and following volunteers’ activities in order to develop the competences they chose. Validation helps volunteers to reflect on their competences and to set learning objectives” (volunteering organisation)
- **It can be an asset for the organisation when they have to promote their work** (e.g. to policy-makers, companies, financial donors). They can argue that volunteering brings many benefits and one of them is their effectiveness in providing non-formal or informal learning opportunities and fostering the development of skills and competences of the volunteers they host.

Overall, it contributes to the **professionalisation of the organisation**, for instance, by **building up competence management** and/or by fostering the **implementation of quality assurance principles** to host volunteers, hence proving the **quality** and **reliability** of the **volunteering offer**.

## Why is validation relevant for employers?

*“Outside of the capital, the workforce shortage is so great that employers will gladly consider any candidate with a volunteering background, but they seldom get any.”*

(Employer from Bulgaria)

Not all employers are convinced that it is beneficial for them that volunteers undertake validation in the voluntary sector (“it is more the volunteering as such that is perceived as an important added value – validation does not necessarily add any particular value to the volunteering”). However, **some of them recognise the usefulness of the process.**

- **Employers recognise that validation helps volunteers to identify and highlight their skills**, so that they can better present them when recruited or on the job. Validation helps employers to “objectivise and secure the recruitment thanks to the quality of the information, which does not rely on self-declarative statements from the volunteers”.
- Some also noted **economic** or **financial interest**. They said that it reduces training costs within the company. In one of the research countries, the national employment agency, which deals with learning and competence development for employees, agreed that skills gained through employee volunteering could be a key part of the general learning and development programme for employees and ultimately would give them greater potential to grow in their job.

The collection of inputs was limited, maybe because only few employers had the experience of recruiting candidates that went through a validation process in a volunteering context.

## Challenges and barriers to the validation of volunteer competences

Below in the text, we will address specific barriers and challenges in the assessment phase in particular. In this section, we listed the most common barriers and challenges that affect the validation process and its implementation in the voluntary sector as a whole.

In general, the **motivation of volunteers** to go through the validation process can be a barrier. It depends on **several factors** among which, **sufficient duration** of the volunteering activity, **time** and **effort** to do it, if it is “fun” to do it, their own **personal interest**, and the **adequacy of tools** (“existing instruments for validation of transversal skills are impractical”).

- (1) The fragmentation of validation arrangements (already mentioned in the first part of the report). The fragmentation is shown by the use of own instruments and methods rather than using the same or compatible tools. In Germany, since the middle of the 1990s different instruments to recognise competences were developed in national, regional and local initiatives. Meanwhile the landscape of tools for recognition has become complex and unclear. The Ministry for Education

and Research has published a study in 2004 where more than 150 tools for recognition were listed in the country.

- (2) **The “mismatch” between the informal character of volunteering with formal aspects of validation required by other stakeholders:** “The reason is that there is the ongoing struggle of youth workers against the formalisation of their work. There is concern that the field gets occupied by external expectations and is instrumentalised for career purposes contrasting the initial idea of the generic value of youth work as such.” (volunteering stakeholder) But formal validation processes are still largely expected. In Germany, there is a very strong orientation towards formal education and respective degrees, which does not correspond to the changing reality of ever more young people who often cannot follow these traditional paths of education. However, “patchwork biographies” require to further open the traditional ways of certification. On institutional level, there is a clear notion that progress is needed, but the struggle to overcome institutional persistence slows down these change processes.
- (3) **Volunteering context and tasks vary** “In the same volunteering context, you can do different activities and therefore develop different set of skills”. Almost all the participants consulted during the qualitative research (both from the volunteering sector and employers) underlined the methodological difficulties of evaluating and certifying volunteering competences because of the very different contexts where it takes place. There are different experiences in terms of type of activity, duration, commitment. Based on the context is the evaluation methodology built in different ways: hybrid methods, longitudinal and processual or only at the end of experience?
- (4) **The experience must be significant** “It makes sense to deepen and evaluate the candidate’s volunteering experience if they are of depth and meaningful”. All participants (both volunteers and employers) underlined that in order to assess competences it is essential that the volunteering experience has been significant in terms of duration, commitment required, activities carried out as otherwise it is difficult to develop skills more depth.
- (5) **It is also related to the occupation** of the volunteer. The value of the recognition of volunteering experiences depends on what activity - studies, work, other - the volunteer performs while he is volunteering. Depending on the occupation of the volunteer (volunteering and/or personal and/or professional activity), it does not require the same set of skills necessarily.
- (6) **Lack of resources leading to low sustainability of instruments:** As soon as the funding ends, often there are no structures or resources to carry on the validation initiatives. The German Kompetenznachweis Kultur is a prominent example, where a procedure with high quality standards for counselling youth in their learning processes had been developed and was published, but in practice most organisations lack funding to offer it to their volunteers. One exception is the Profipass, mainly because this tool has received great amounts of funding over a long period of time by the Federal Ministry of Research and Education and thus could reach a broader dissemination and visibility.

## d. The validation process

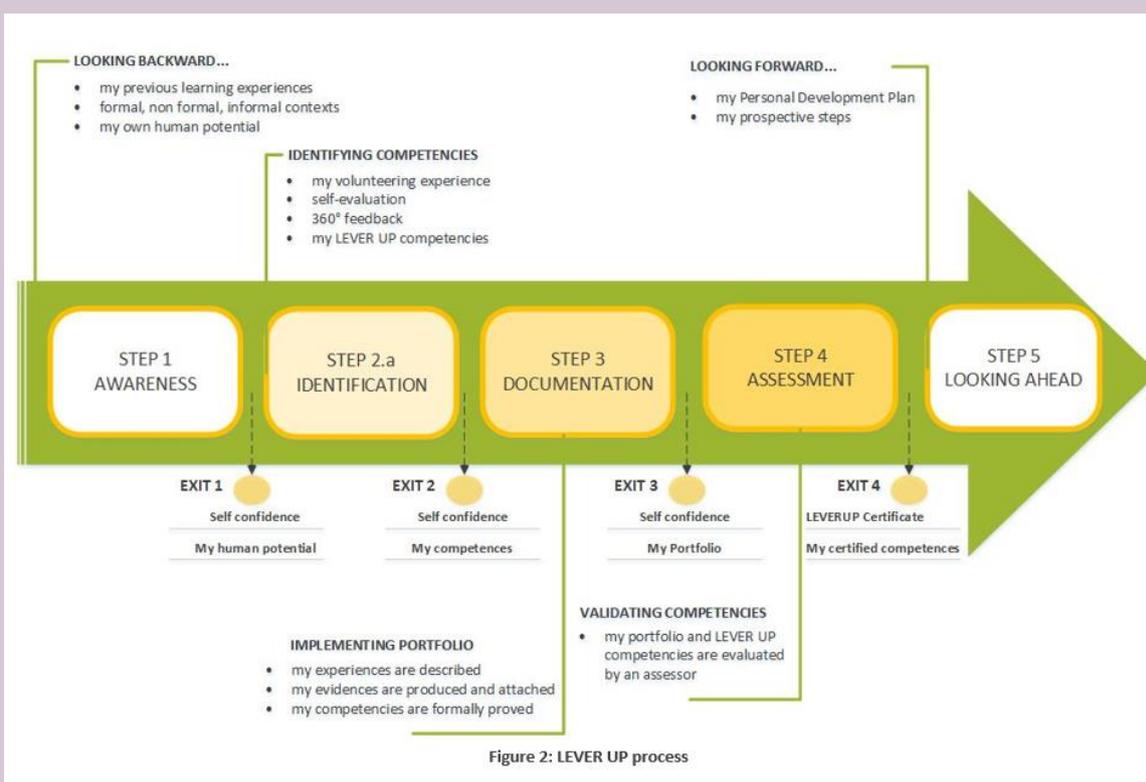
In the surveys, there was no specific focus on the first steps of the validation – although they are essential – identification and documentation. It is very common that the steps overlap, for instance, self-assessment tools can be considered as tools that aim mostly at identifying skills. Documents and certificates are often used as synonyms by the respondents.

### Comprehensive tool (i.e. full validation process) – Lever-UP Project (European)

Successful initiative #2



The Lever-UP Project was designed within the framework of the [LEVER project](#), which ran from 2014 until 2016. Project partners from Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain and Poland contributed in testing the model. The LEVER UP Model was created to assist people in valuing skills and transversal competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning experiences such as volunteering with the aim to help them to increase their employability, social responsibility and mobility.



The LEVER UP process consists of 5 stages from raising awareness of one's own prior learning up to validating competencies and beyond. The volunteer can exit the process at any stage getting different outputs from it in the form of self-confidence or an actual certificate.

Lever Up project is a good example of sustainability of projects in the field of validation in the voluntary sector. It is also a good example for having developed an extensive reference framework for competences acquired in volunteering.

## Identification of skills

In the identification phase, volunteers become aware of their own knowledge, skills and competences. It requires **reflective recognition** of such learning outcomes from individuals, which leads to valuable outcomes. Examples of validation tools that are often used in this phase are ICT-based tools (cf see Successful initiative 4 called “Empower Yourself”, p. 39), interviews, dialogue-based approaches, list of competences.

### ESN Skills dictionary, questionnaire and report (European)

Successful initiative #3



The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is the biggest student association in Europe, they are present in more than 1000 Higher Education Institutions from 39 countries and last year they actively involved 15000 young people. All volunteers that join the organisation are encouraged to take a questionnaire to understand their volunteering skills and have access to the ESN dictionary.

This dictionary is inspired from the Key Competence Framework, first of all, it provides a definition of soft skills and can be used as an **identification tool** since it contains a comprehensive compilation of competences that a volunteer would develop through their involvement in ESN.

The competences are divided into six categories:

1. Communication skills.
2. Interpersonal skills or “people skills”.
3. Managerial skills.
4. Practical skills.
5. Personality traits.
6. Intercultural skills

Each skill included in these six groups are defined and illustrated with an example.

ESN also elaborated a questionnaire on acquired skills among their volunteers to be aware of the skills that are developed in each volunteering position of the organisation. The dictionary is aligned with the information extracted from the report of this questionnaire. Recently they did a study (ESN, Skills Acquisition Report) among their volunteers, they analysed the connection between the Fields of Action in ESN, the skills available on Skills Dictionary (developed by ESN – ICE “International Committee for Education”) and the Positions in ESN.

Through the analysis, the team was able to identify three skills ESNers develop through different positions: as active members (volunteers): “teamwork, general communication skills, and creativity” as coordinators “leadership, teamwork, and project management”, as President “diplomacy” is key and other more specific positions like treasurer, “problem-solving, negotiation and work & self-management”, and web administrators “ICT skills” etc.

These tools helps volunteers to better understand their skills and help them to translate their learning into something valuable for themselves and others, including for their career.

## Documentation

Documentation means describing the skills gained, showing proof. They usually rely on whether volunteers keep a record of their own learning and development programme.

Other most common documentation methods are:

- **Demonstration by CV or interview**, volunteers can use those traditional - and still most widely-spread - modes to give visibility to extracurricular and extra-university experiences. Furthermore, it is more and more common now, that recruiters are more interested in the “narrative” than formal qualifications;
- **Portfolios** are very situational, they are very common for creative professions, but of less spread in other fields. An employer: “using a portfolio of skills to help to put words on experience”. The most common portfolio in volunteering is the “**volunteering booklet**”;

### ANIMAFAC “Volunteering for skills” (France)

Successful initiative #4



It aims to help young volunteers in the identification of skills developed during a volunteering period. It’s a self-assessment tool and a portfolio for four main transversal skills: communication, administration, team management and interpersonal skills and project management.

« Bénévolat et Compétences » [Bilan de compétence portfolio](#).

- **Guided reflection process**: Documentation through diaries and journey narratives – especially relevant for young volunteers far from the labour market who want to demonstrate the skills gained to employers;

- **Case studies** where volunteers have described what they gained from their volunteering and evidence from volunteers’ surveys the skills they gained from their experience;
- **References** – volunteering experts reported that they are often asked to give a reference and to list the skills gained.

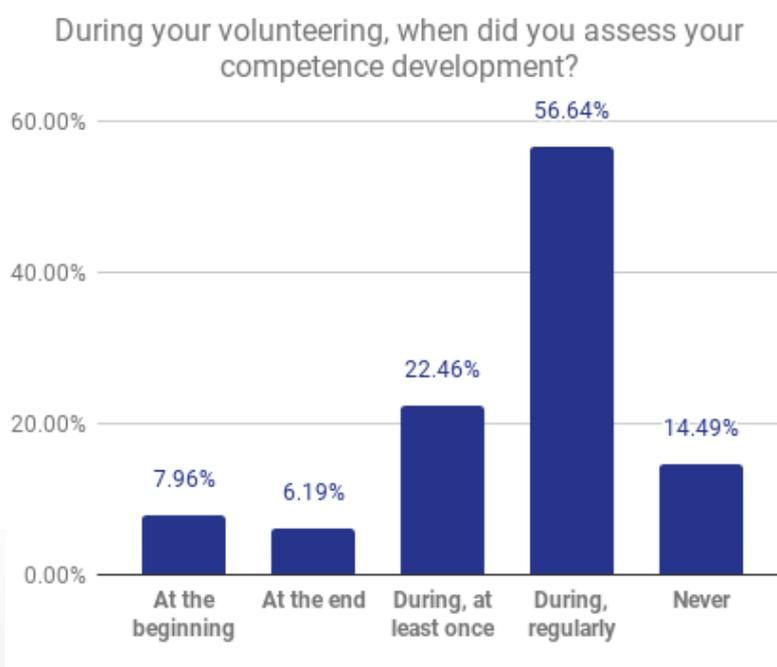
For this second step in the validation process, **reliability** of the **proof** is perhaps one of the most pressing barriers for employers. Generally, employers are interested in meaningful documentation of the competences of their (future) employees, but have doubts about the congruence between existing tools for recognition and their actual requirements on the company level. In addition, the **growing number of different portfolios and passes** reduces their impact and credibility. A **lack of transparency** and **systematic approaches** is perceived, but if these obstacles can be tackled it can be a valuable step towards formal recognition.

## Assessment of competence development

*An important question:  
“Would it be an assessment of how much you have that competence  
or how much you developed it with volunteering?”*

(Volunteer consulted)

Up to 79% of the volunteers who answered the survey had their competence development assessed **during their volunteering experience**, either one single time or regularly. 8% of the respondents had their development measured only at the beginning of their placement while 6% went through this assessment at the end. There are **14% of the volunteers that never had their competence development assessed**. During the qualitative research, participants stressed that the assessment require a **combination of pre- and post-assessment** in order to visibly demonstrate the development of concrete competences.



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**Continuous forms of assessment or monitoring systems for competence development** are the most effective according to the stakeholders consulted. This can happen through **regular emails** to volunteer managers



**14%**  
of volunteers **never**  
have their competences  
**assessed**

who reports the volunteering experience. Some organisations ask their volunteers to **record their experience** each time they volunteer. For example, volunteers who visit vulnerable families and offer practical support will document in an email to the volunteer manager, the discussion with the family, what support they offered etc. The skills deployed can be extrapolated from this document.

In companies having a corporate volunteering policy, they use “**talent management systems**” – competences are identified and especially, lacking competences, by means of **interviews** and **questionnaires** – mostly based on self-reflection of candidates, this is a time-intensive tool and the reliability is not guaranteed. Employee-volunteers on the other side can make use of **periodic evaluations** as part of their Continuous Professional Development policies. Employers also use “**appraisal interviews**”: each year, many companies have regular appraisal interviews with their employees to identify room for development and employee’s specific interests. It is not only a performance review but also for career management and development. **360° Evaluation tools**, evaluates competences and behaviours on the job.

When **organisations** were consulted on the assessment of the learning outcomes or competence development of their volunteers, **44% claimed to always go through this process** while **34%** do so sometimes. The remaining 22% do not ever assess the learning outcomes of their volunteers.



**half**  
of the organisations  
**always** assess  
volunteers’ competences

Those **organisations** that **do not have an assessment process for their volunteers** were asked about the reason(s) that prevented them from doing so. **Lack of time** (47%) was the most frequent answer, followed by a **lack of skilled or qualified staff** for this purpose (31%) and the **lack of appropriate tools** (28%). Some organisations have the feeling that another reason is the fact that **volunteers do not have enough interest in this issue** (28%). Other reasons for not carrying these activities given by volunteer coordinators are that they have not thought about it, they say there is no need for it or that “they already have the necessary qualifications to fulfil their tasks”.



**22%**  
**never do**

From the **perspective of volunteers**, the most spread **reasons to not have their competences validated** were that their “volunteering is still ongoing and the assessment will happen later” (40%); or **they did not consider this possibility** (24%); or the **lack of support** for this matter (14%). 42 volunteers gave additional reasons in the survey, among which are: “not useful or relevant”, “I was not given the opportunity to do it”, the lack of tools, methods and process, and “I am used to often self-assess myself”.

For the **employers**, they find it **hard to translate the skills acquired in volunteering to a job**. Employers underlined that evaluating and prefiguring the possibility to transfer in the job field the skills developed

in volunteering is a big challenge and it is not easy. Employers also **lack qualified personnel** to perform validation of their employee's volunteering experiences.

According to a career expert consulted in the research, in the 2000s it has become common to value extracurricular activities and other hobbies following qualitative approaches. Then, it has shifted to the use of data and measurement (objective assessments) for the recruitment and assessment of candidates' skills for the job. Now, it is focusing more on the person as a whole, its motivation and its commitment.

"It is about understanding and considering the jobseeker as a whole, with all its experiences, competences and motivations" (employer)

Most big companies have their own assessment tools. The methods do not assess specifically volunteering experiences but rather focuses on the soft skills that were acquired.

#### → Feasibility of assessment for transversal skills

During the qualitative research (focus groups and interviews), participants were asked about what **competences** they felt were **hard** or **easy to assess**. According to one employer consulted, "none of the transversal skills is remotely easy to assess, because it takes a long time and multiple points of view to do it reliably". What it means is that it cannot be done solely using a summative approach and/or by self-assessment.

Among the **easiest to assess, teamwork, problem-solving** and **communication** were brought up. They can be assessed through group exercises, role-play, psychological testing in a practical context. Communication was said to be one of the easiest to assess through interviews. Both volunteers and employers agree, it can be observed and identified through multiple assessment practices: interview, role play, oral presentation, daily life, etc. It can also be demonstrated in personal contact but communication skills are often mistaken for **self-confidence**. It shows in the behaviour to be at ease when orally speaking, and showing less signs of stress can be taken as good communication skills, whereas this would not apply in a different context.

Many transversal skills can be demonstrated through **practical assessment methods**, but it generally **takes time to assess** (most likely to be assessed throughout the volunteering experience), for instance, **time-management** (and self-organisation), **flexibility** and **adaptability** ("one of the most sought after by employers"). It can be assessed by concrete examples of lived situations. Regarding **project management**, although not the most developed or assessed competence among volunteers and organisation, it is a skill that can be assessed through practical activities. It can be identified by means of a determined task, assessed through practice and combined with other set of skills (skills, communication, organisation, fundraising or creativity).

**Example of a method to assess project management skills:** “One volunteer, between the first and the second row of interview got a scenario presented and had to organise the next steps of a project so she had to reach a new scenario with the tools provided. She was given one week to write a work plan and to “contact” a funder asking for more money. It is a replicable system and the interviewee’s organisation still does it” (employer).

**Decision-making**, some of the research participants tried to imagine a simulation game where decision-making was the main competence to be evaluated but again, it is complicated to measure one skill alone. Features of the simulation would be: short timeframe, stress, ability to prioritise or task delegation. **Intercultural competences (or “dealing with diversity”)**: It can be observed and/or simulated in role plays, simulations, daily life. During volunteering projects, volunteers are often encountered with intercultural miscommunication and misunderstandings. In overcoming them, they develop the skills required by most international companies (“in a globalised world, this is of vital importance” - volunteers).

Other competences that can be assessed are “**negotiation**”, it can be identified in a group exercise, role-play, simulations, psychological testing. **Learning to learn**: it was said that a lot of peer-to-peer learning happens during volunteering (volunteer and employers). It can be demonstrated in practical situations (volunteer); and **ICT Competences**, it can be assessed standardised assessments or exam and through practical exercises.

There were some **disagreements** between **consulted stakeholders** about what is **easy to assess** and **what is not**, for instance, “**creativity**”. One employer said, “it is among the easier to reveal skills through personal contact in an interview” while another said “creativity has multiple layers so it can be hard to assess solely (independently)”; “**Empathy**”. It is relatively easily measured by standardised psychological tests, but self-assessment is extremely unreliable (volunteer). “Personal contact during an interview could create a reliable estimate” (employer).

More **difficult competences to assess are: self-reflection, managing relationships, conflict management, reliability, leadership, social engagement, critical thinking and resilience**. One of the main reasons is the time needed to assess the competence (long-term observation), which is often very dependent on real-life situations faced by the volunteers. For **Self-reflection**, Volunteers and employers said “it is not does not easily lend itself to external observation”. Self-evaluation can help to develop this skill. **Managing relationships**: It is difficult to assess because it takes a considerable amount of time to reveal how well one can really deal with them. Also, making the evaluation of relational aspects “objective” is seen by volunteering stakeholders as complex and difficult. “People who can handle relationships in quite well familiar situations can change drastically in a new setting” (volunteers and employers). **Conflict Management**: much like measuring relationships, it takes a long time to discover how well one can manage conflicts. “Sometimes conflicts fail to arise, and until they do, there is no way to discover how one can manage them” (volunteers, employers)

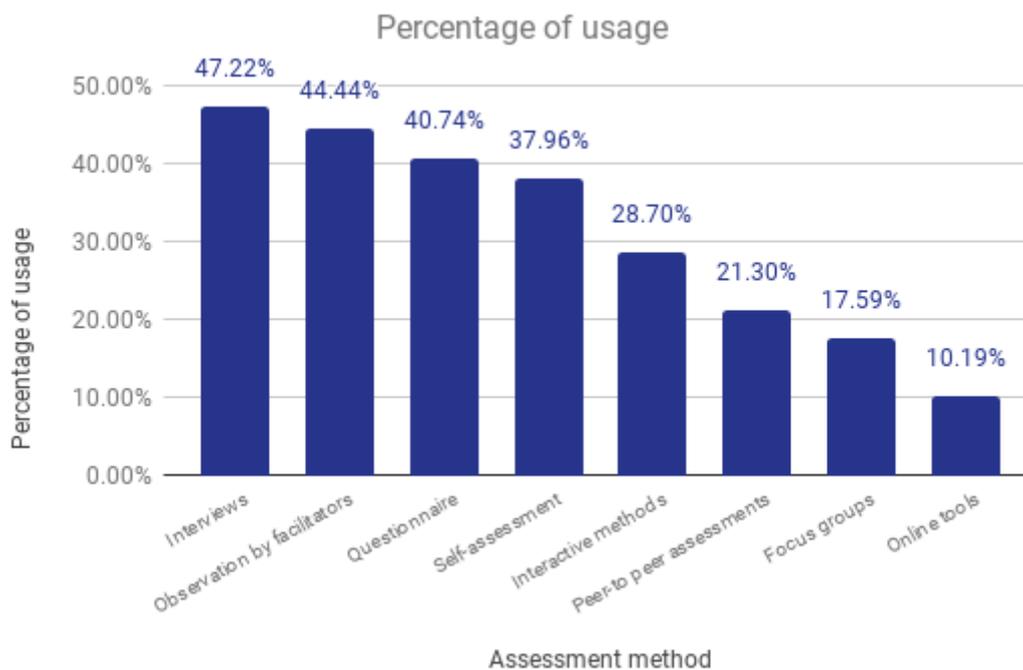
Other difficult skills to assess are: **reliability; leadership** (“A true leader is revealed when faced with certain challenges – and those do not occur every day” employer); “**Social engagement**” is considered as a “value” shared by all volunteers, but its authenticity is difficult to check (volunteer). Also, this one

is not very clear for employers. Others say it takes time to reveal true commitment (employers); **Critical thinking**: volunteers and employers agree: “not all tasks and activities require critical thinking. Even when they do, it is difficult to measure”. **Resilience**: resilience is considered as the resistance to pressure and frustration. It refers also to “**stress management**”, “except in cases where it was very clear that the volunteer could not manage, it highly depends on the challenges encountered” (volunteer). “Assessing it reliably takes a longer period of time and multiple points of view “(employer).

**Other listed competence** where the feasibility of assessment was not mentioned are **Self-initiative** and **entrepreneurial thinking** and **diplomacy**.

→ Types of assessment

Those organisations that assess their volunteers’ competences do it with a **focus on specific competences in 61%** of the cases as opposed to **39%** carry this assessment through a holistic approach.



The **most used methods** to proceed with either these specific or holistic assessments by **volunteer-hosting organisations** are: **interviews** (47%), **observation** by facilitators or mentors (44%) and **questionnaires** (41%). On the other hand, there are a series of least spread methods such as focus groups (21%) or online tools (10%).

Another innovative method mentioned during the research was the use of **digital story telling**. At the end of their volunteering experience, volunteers had to present and value their experience to other people in a 3-minute video (Voyce project - see in References). It was said to be a similar condition as if

the volunteer had to explain in 3 minutes his or her experience as a volunteer to an employer, so it had to be like a pitch: concise and convincing.

Surprisingly, volunteers' answers show a different reality as the majority of them have had their competences assessed through **self-assessment methods** (43% of the cases) or via **peer-to-peer activities** (34%). Online tools and focus groups happen to be by far, again, the least used tools with less than 5% and 11% of usage respectively.

## Empower yourself! (European/French)

Successful initiative #5



This tool, **created by the French Scouts** (in French, [Valorise-toi](#)) and aimed to other young Scouts, is a self-assessment tool that contains definitions for 50 competences. For each of these skills, the volunteer will assess if they know how to do them perfectly, if there is room for improvement or if they have not developed a concrete competence at all.

After self-assessing their competences, the volunteer will choose their biggest assets and will answer a series of questions that will help them understand how to apply their skills to a selection process depending on which orientation they want to give to their career.

The tool has been translated from French to English, Czech and Spanish.

Valorise-toi is a **digital tool**, it is the French original version of "Empower Yourself".

step	Competences:	This has enabled me:	I can do this very well	There is room for improvement	I don't know how to do this
1	<b>1. Organisational skills</b>	Manage projects: planning, running and evaluating			
		Prepare activities in the framework of projects respecting deadlines			
		Respect a budget and financial resources			
		Evaluate, manage and maintain supplies and equipment			
		Ensure administrative follow-up			
		Reliably engage myself			
		Assume legal responsibilities			
		Conceptualise: from the idea to reality using creativity, innovation and ambition			
		Review a project and self-assess own role			
		Learn from my own experience and capitalise experiences of others			
	<b>2. Responsibility, sense of initiative and analytical skills</b>	Anticipate and evaluate a project, analyse risks			
		Assess a completed project			
		Insist on finding solutions in spite of obstacles			
		Adapt myself to changes			
		Have a practical sense, optimising available means			
		Accompany new team members			

step <b>4</b>	These are my skills:	The evidence, I can...			
<b>3. Relationship skills</b> Management Teamwork Communication Conflict Management	Promote communications: trust, respect, individual participation				
	Promote leadership rotation				
	Delegate and distribute roles				
	Be a good team player, fulfill a mission, apply and execute				
	Share information with others				
	Lead a meeting				
	Adapt my language to the audience (young people, adults)				
	Listen				
	Present, argue and dialogue in public				
	Maintain constructive relations with partners				
	Testify				
	Identify and prevent conflict risks				
	Manage a (conflict) resolution process, encourage participation, propose solutions				
	Show tact, diplomacy and humility				
	Show cultural and intercultural sensibilities				
<b>4. Intercultural skills</b>	Adapt myself to cultural contexts and manage conflicts based on cultural misunderstandings				
	Encourage and run intercultural exchanges and activities				
	Be creative (drawing, drama, dance, music, singing, ...)				
	Animate an activity				
	Animate and motivate, adapt myself to my audience				
	Ensure physical and emotional safety of young people				
	Educate: the relationship between the young person and the adult				
	Educate: follow-up of personal development of young people				
	Transmit my knowledge and train				
	Be able to use information technology				
	Manage documents and data bases				
	Use software for visual and animated presentations				
	Use, adapt myself to and respect the environment				
	Have a knowledge of First Aid				
	<b>5. Technical and artistic skills</b> Animation Training Computer Technology Environment Health And Safety Management Orienteering Camping Navigation	Orienteer myself			
Live in nature					
Organise a camp					
Plan a balanced menu					
Navigate and orient myself on open sea, maintain a boat					

The different methods used by employers:

“Interviews are the best way to assess soft skills, combined with recommendations from former employers. These references are trusted, since personal observation is seen as more valuable than a document” (employers)

- **First, add the experience to a CV.** An example is to add it in the "interests, hobbies" section of the CV and build the interview around these topics. However, some volunteers are hesitant: “writing volunteer experiences in the CV and saying to the interviewer that you do so many hours of volunteering a week in my opinion sometimes could be penalising because the employer may think that you steal time and energy to work” (volunteer).
- **Then, it is asked during an interview** (or conversation dialogues): Employers value direct observations made during interviews and personal recommendations, they prefer to examine first-hand the candidate’s soft skills, rather than rely on any sort of documentation. Non-verbal communication is seen as an important clue. Afterwards, over the duration of the trial period, there can be carried out an evaluation consisting in performing job tasks. In small companies,

competence assessments are primarily based on interviews that are carried out along standard job interviews guidelines.

- **Personality test:** they provide a profile, e.g. concerning creativity, team working, problem solving, but it is general, not regarding volunteering. They can measure motivation for instance. They are quick and easy to use, but they incur costs. Their reliability is not guaranteed and results must be cross-checked through observation (employer).
- **Aptitude test** (cognitive test)
- **Role-play** e.g. leadership: can assess behavioural competences
- **Performance tests:** they are used to make a pre-selection in the recruitment process (partially online) – based on self-reflection to check the profile of candidates and their suitability for the job.
- **Competence assessment tools** (most used by big companies): examples of the most famous are the CMC Competency Framework, The SHL Occupational Personality Questionnaire, and the Basic Personality Inventory (BPI). They are very reliable according to employers. They allow to identify the red flags, also allows to have a direct action plan to develop certain competences. However, these tools cost a lot (for interpretation of results mostly). The main barrier for not using them is “managers thinking they don’t need them because they say they can assess through the interviews” (employer) and their cost.
- **Other methods:** In addition to these existing methods, companies also use evaluation questionnaires, examinations, volunteer observation and personality tests.

→ What method(s) to use?

According to a stakeholder from the voluntary sector, a **collection of different tools** will work much better than any single one, since they can cover the weaknesses of each one of them (volunteer). Employers also value a **combination** of different methods. “Role-plays are the best way to reliably assess competences during an interview” (employer). “A team of psychologists is needed to evaluate. Self-assessment is fine but a more objective assessment is needed” (volunteer).

Very often, it requires a “**multi-method and longitudinal evaluation**” (e.g. learning itinerary).

Most participants (both employers and from the voluntary sector) suggested **off-line tools** to do the assessment but without explaining why. IT tests and certificates are practical for the concrete competence they are intended for but there are no similar alternative tools for other competences (employer). This maybe explains their low uptake.

**Self-reflection and self-assessment can be used for all competences** (e.g. Scout - Empower Yourself tool and good practice, cf p.39), through a questionnaire for instance. The volunteer addresses questions “are you good at...” and must assess to which extent they are good at it (in terms of “levels”, usually “beginner”, “medium”, “advanced”). Even though, the results might not be as reliable as the ones of external assessments, the reflection exercise is still beneficial as it makes competences and their developments more conscious.

### Self or assessment with support?

According to some of the research participants, “self-assessment is irreplaceable”. It fosters taking responsibility for one's own development. It can take place at any time, and developed as a mindset, can facilitate continuous professional development. It is also one of the most easily affordable methods. However, from an external point of view, it can be rather inaccurate and not always suited for employers.

**For others, self-assessment can be enough.** There is a shared belief that “older volunteers and employee-volunteers are much better at assessing their skills, they know when they are using skills in volunteering which were or are their professional skills”. To illustrate this statement, they gave the example of employees of a large accountancy firm who volunteer in schools to help with maths or give workshops on financial literacy to young people.

**Self-assessment requires a certain level of self-awareness.** Sometimes, there is a need for support to complement the self-assessment part (a volunteer: “It's hard to assess a skill on a scale”). In one of the consulted organisations, young volunteers are coached by staff to recognise and assess the skills they are gaining through volunteering because they often do not immediately realise that they are gaining skills.

**Self-assessment is more subjective?** Self-assessments are obviously more subjective, that is why the development of a competence framework and some kind of reliable measurement of the competence is considered a very interesting idea by the consulted organisations in the research. One of the Job Bridge partners described the project to a group of 30 volunteering experts and all of them welcomed the concept of the project and the idea of a more reliable and formal way of assessing competences.

### Peer support, then?

There was disagreeing views from the investigation participants regarding support (“peer support is impractical”, “It requires too much mentoring support, and unguided, it can be dangerous and lead to interpersonal conflicts”). On the contrary, others would say “it is a useful way of combining different points of view”. Even in the case of self-assessment, some support is usually needed.

**Ongoing mentoring** is practiced by most organisations. It is one of the best ways to foster learning, and the external point of view of the mentor is considerably more accurate and objective than self-assessment (volunteer).

Any volunteering organisations who is thinking of using tools, instruments and methods for the validation of their volunteers' learning and competences can consider the following questions:

- **In-house or external assessment?** Some employers value the use of assessment centre, a practice that is still common in the business world. Those centres are used for jobs with higher salaries, as it needs quite some time and resources. It is very unlikely that volunteer-based organisations would use that forms of assessment, unless in the situation where volunteers have their skills validated and certified by an authorised body (like in France).
- **Individual or group assessments?** Individual forms of assessment are more accurate and show a greater deal of appreciation of the volunteer's efforts than group ones (volunteer)

- **What level of formality?** It goes from “just being asked about volunteering experience and the skills gained” to more elaborated methods. Higher levels of formality can include a set of standards, reference frameworks, quality assurance, etc.

**Personalised or standardised systems?** In some cases, there are **standardised systems** to assess specific skills like ICT. Many of the transversal skills can be assessed through practice-based exercise e.g. project management – can be identified by means of a determined task. However, “it is difficult to standardise the assessment and therefore the certification since the world of volunteering is very diverse” (volunteer).

→ Benefits and difficulties of the assessment

Volunteers were asked to express their degree of agreement with three different statements: “As a result of the assessment of my competences gained during volunteering...”

- “...I became more aware of what I learned during my volunteering.”
- “...I understand more clearly what kind of skills and competences I would like to improve or obtain in the future.”
- “...I can better explain to others what I learned during my volunteering.”

There is a very low grade of disagreement with all the statements and for all of them, at least **75% of the volunteers rather or strongly agreed**. This means in almost all cases, assessment of competences was useful for the volunteers.

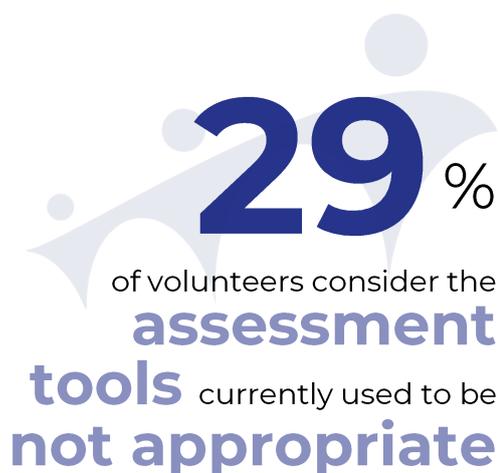
Concerning the **challenges of the assessment**, the most commonly reported difficulties to cope with for **organisations** are the **lack of time** and **appropriate tools**. When these organisations were asked about the difficulties that volunteers meet during this process, **lack of time, incapacity to self-reflect** or **little interest** appear as the most common answers. These obstacles that organisations find in the process of assessing volunteers’ competences happen to be the same that keep other organisations away from doing so (lack of time and of interest from the volunteers) as stated in the previous section “assessment of competences development”. This information confirms the inputs collected from those organisations that do not assess the competences of their volunteers.



**75%**  
of volunteers **agree**  
that **assessing** their  
competences was **useful**

*“It is difficult to express these skills with a number or grade, but also a report with your profile is open to interpretation by the recruiter”*

Volunteers taking the survey had the impression that the evaluation process could have been improved by **having more time available** or the **support of an expert** on this matter (34% in both cases). Furthermore, **29% of the respondents** considered the tools used as **not appropriate for the assessment**. 15% of the respondents think the process would have improved by making it more fun.



How to **improve** the **evaluation process**?

- more **time** (34%)
- support from an **expert** (34%)

In the open answers, volunteers expressed other ways to improve their assessment experiences such as **higher regularity on the process**, the importance of **removing any stressful factor** from them or feeling that the **process is more valued**.

## Assessment of competence development

*“The fact that there is a certificate at the end, I think serves as a catalyst to motivate the people that have shown interest to come on board”*

(Volunteering provider)

Certification is the **last step of the validation process** and according to the results of the survey, **68% of the participants went or will go through it**. More than half of the respondents will get/got a certification for participation.

Examples of certificates are:

- **Certificates of participation** (those generally only attest of the attendance, they are given to all volunteers and do not describe the skills acquired in details).
- The **Youthpass certificates**. They are mostly used for the recognition of learning that took place during youth exchanges.

## Certification tools – VOL + (Spain)

Successful initiative #6



The Spanish Platform of Volunteering (PVE) has developed a certification tool, Vol +, that assesses competences acquired through volunteering and distinguishes three levels of development (basic, intermediate and advanced). The process is composed of three steps: first contact meeting, self-evaluation questionnaires and analysis with the tutor.

The PVE as the issuer of Vol+ certificates works with volunteering organisations to implement the programme among their volunteers, companies that foster volunteering among their employees and volunteers assisting and guiding them along their certification process. This way, volunteers will be able to enrich their curriculum or prove, when applying for employment, the knowledge and experience they have acquired by exercising the solidarity task.

The project offers a [report](#) (translated into English, “Report on the results”, 2018) where figures on the number of volunteers that used the programme, their demographics and the competences they certified can be found. A high number of volunteers (79%) mentioned their volunteering experience and their certificate in their CV and most of them consider it produces a positive effect on employers.

→ What form for the certification?

This includes statements about the **desirable format of such instruments**. For some employers, it should be **short** and **precise**, other employers prefer **extensive descriptions**. The question, what is the ultimate format of a recognition tool remains to be answered individually.

Another way to support the recognition of competences acquired in the voluntary sector is to provide the volunteer with a **classical reference letter** that can be used (e.g. for job applications).

**A certificate of participation a certificate describing skills?** Usually, “a document written by the organization certifies that the candidate did the volunteering experience, but it gives no information about developed skills” (employer). Certificates of attendance are widely used by volunteering organisations because they are easy to prepare, but they have limited use for competence validation (volunteer).

**A sound certification requires time.** “It is difficult to compare different reports and, both the certification and the understanding of the evaluation, require time” (volunteering stakeholder).

**Certification requires a combination of online and offline tools.** Online certification is practical, as its authenticity could be checked immediately. Participants often require a paper copy because it makes them proud, but this could be “harder to prepare and more expensive” (volunteering stakeholder).

**Open badges as a peer review system**, where you can create badges and send them to your group and they will decide if you really learned those skills or discuss them. These badges can be extremely detailed. Open badges is an assessment method and a type of certification.

### Digital tool – Open Badges (International)

Successful initiative #7



The Open Badge system is used by one of the larger volunteering. Although, relatively unknown for the moment as demonstrated in the survey results, increasingly projects and initiatives are aiming to see it as a tool for the certification of competences. It is probably to most spread tool for e-validation and e-certifications in the non-formal sector. It is an open source tool that organisations can adapt to their needs to issue their own badges.

**One of the respondents from the research testified:** The creation of an “open-badge civic service (...) makes the different skills implemented during my mission validated by my peers, my tutor and with evidence”. The badge can be distributed of this badge on social networks, job search platforms and on my CV.

The tool can still be improved, “open badges are not user-friendly” (volunteer). It raises questions about its accuracy because “Everyone can get it!”.

These badges are visual representations of skills and achievements. Each badge is associated with an image and information about the badge itself, its issuer, its recipient and any supporting evidence. Schools, employers, non-profits or libraries, among many other types of organisations and communities, can issue open badges and they have been used by several NGOs and project compendia to certificate knowledge and skills acquired in volunteering activities.

Some initiatives mentioned in the reference list at the end of this report are using Open Badges: EU project called « SoftSkills4EU”, La Ligue de l'enseignement in France, project “Badgeons l'engagement”, and ReOpen, for the Recognition of Valid and Open Learning. It is a platform that creates tools to help recognise non-formal learning such as learner credentials, digital badges, learning path recognition and assessment tool. The development of free, open-source tools such as the EU-funded OEPass project's Learning Passport and the MicroHE project's Credentials Clearinghouse are promising signs.

## → Importance of certification

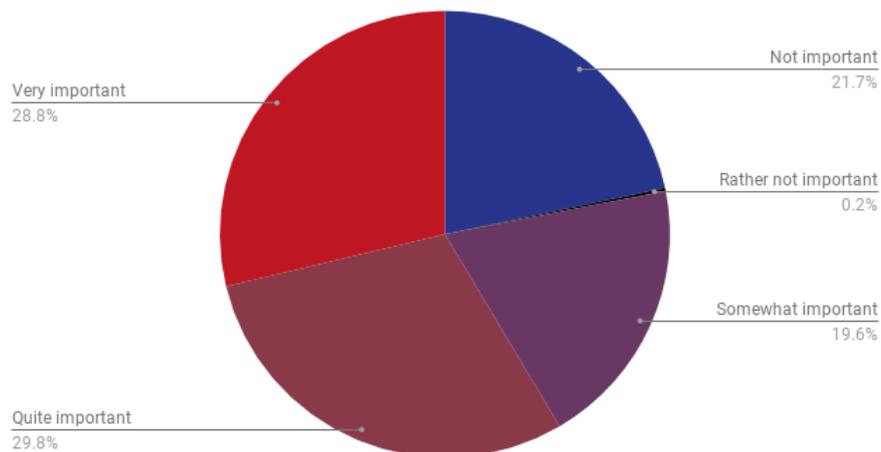
A respondent from a volunteering organisation noted *“the important thing is that they do not volunteer for certification; but if there is also the certification, it is better”*.

*“The certification can be a tool to repay the volunteer for his/her commitment, but I wouldn't use it to attract volunteers”*.

(Volunteering provider)

Of the hosting organisations, 43% ensure that the majority of their volunteers or all of them ask for **some sort of certification** while 16% of these organisations claim none of their volunteers does so. Out of the polled volunteers, 22% do not consider important having a certification after their deployment while **58% of them consider this last step of validation either quite or very important.**

How important is it for you to get a certificate, diploma or document that describes and validates the competences you acquired during your volunteering?



Certificates as a result of the validation process are seen as important in terms of **increasing volunteers' self-esteem** and **motivation, valuing volunteers' development** and making it **visible**.

However, they are not sought by all volunteers or offered by volunteering organisations:

*"I have doubts about certification because in my opinion it is very complex. Some selectors are attentive, seek them out and deepen these experiences, but not in all contexts there is the same sensibility".*

(Volunteer)

*"In my opinion it is simpler and more effective to do education or training in companies to explain the value of volunteering experience (e.g. development of skills), rather than certifying the skills developed during volunteering; the certification seems to me too difficult".*

(Volunteering provider)

→ Use of the certificates for job search and the receptivity of employers

Almost half of the respondents assure they would use the certificate when applying for a job if they **received it**. Furthermore, 26% do not know if they would use it while 25% assure they would not.

From those willing to use this certificate, **93% would mention it in their CV, 37% would talk about it in their interviews** and **21% would include the actual certificate as an annex.**

“Any form of certification must be integrated not only within the CV, but also with **LinkedIn**, as it is preferred by many employers”  
(Volunteer)

It is not easy for volunteers to know how to present their volunteering experience to the employer, this must be decided on a case-to-case basis. Some employers think “no one needs another separate document, especially if it is not recognised by the employees”. For several employers, only one document – the CV – should be submitted during application. All others should be included as a link.

Volunteers, generally after using these certifications during the selection process, have the impression that employers **find this kind of document relevant**. Out of those that have already used their certificates to apply for a job, **34% of the respondents assured it “was relevant” for their employer and 36% claimed it “seemed important” for the recruiter**.

Employers have mixed feelings regarding certification:

- They have doubts regarding the legitimacy of accreditation as “official accreditation of the experience”.
- Some consider it important but not sufficient, “It is important that when the volunteer does a job interview, the experience is certified. In this way, the company will be able to check the skills developed during the volunteering and the competencies that it has acquired to know if it fits the working profile”. But the three interviewed employer stakeholders pointed out that even if the candidate provide a certification, then the experience must be deepened, for example, in the selection interview.
- Others would prefer certifications that tend to be more formal: “Documents provided by the candidate in which it is certified by a university or by a volunteer facilitator, that he/she have had a volunteer experience and that he/she developed certain skills in my opinion are equal to a reference letter. I go on exploring this experience and skills in the job interview” (employer).
- Others do not trust anymore formal certifications: Employers are increasingly not interested in formal certificates – they doubt their reliability. “University certifications are reliable and usable, but then everything is relative and must be examined in depth during the selection process” (employer).
- Everyone gets the same certification? “I see the risk that people who show different commitment and contribution in the same volunteering activity could have the same certification. It does not seem right to me that a slacker and a committed volunteer, having the same volunteering experience in the same context, could obtain the same certificate” (volunteer).

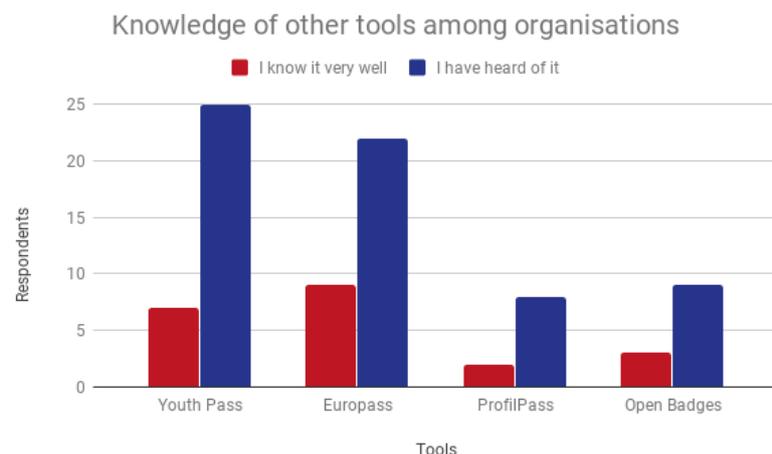
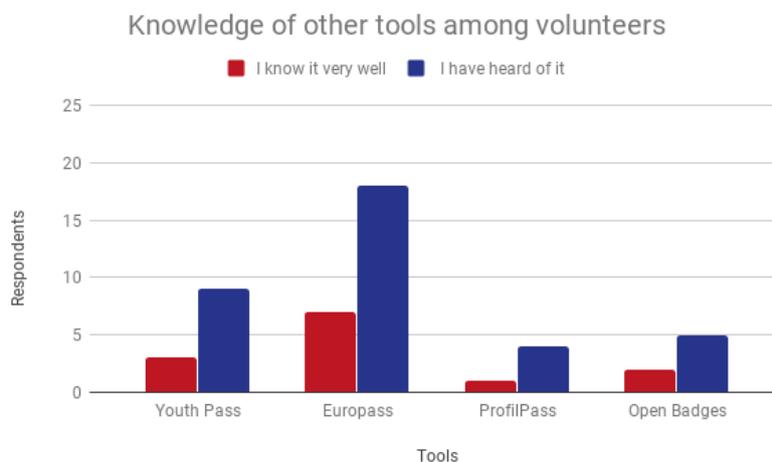
How would you **use** your volunteering **certificate**?  
 mention in **CV** (93%) •  
 mention during **interviews** (37%) •  
**annexed** to applications (21%) •

In the focus groups and interviews, some employers said “It is unusual to consider volunteering experience during interviews unless the candidate brings it up (or the employer must ask)”. Another employer said “I consider volunteering experiences as any other experiences that the candidate may have had”. This means that **validation outcomes is useful in some situations and not in others** (it depends on the employer’s preference).

Some employers consulted during the research consider that the validation of competences is not “a must”. CEO and HR would **rather use their own assessment tools and methods** to find out themselves which kind of competences the candidate has and whether he/she fits the job profile.

### e. Knowledge of EU validation tools and competence frameworks

A series of other tools for validation were enumerated and both volunteers and organisation representatives had to express how well they knew them. The mentioned tools were **Youth Pass, Europass, ProfilPASS** and **Open Badges**, and in general, **the workers of organisations dealing with volunteers had a better knowledge of them than volunteers themselves.**



The **most popular tool** among both volunteers and organisations was **Europass** with 9% of the organisations knowing the tool well and 22% having heard of it. On the side of volunteers, 7% claimed to know the tool very well and 17% had heard of it. Numbers are generally low, being the least known tool ProfilPASS by organisations and volunteers with 2% and less than 1% of them knowing it very well respectively.

ProfilPass is a tool to assist individuals in identifying their skills and interests. German-born initially, it has been translated into 7 languages and has reached job-seekers, young people looking for training according to their skills and preferences, students that want to learn more about their own competences. Profilpass is not a recognition tool in the primary sense, it is rather a guided biography-based reflection tool without offering further proof or competence recognition.

Asked for the recognition of instruments like Youthpass by employers and representatives of business, one of the participants to the research pointed out that this question was raised on a number of occasions (e.g. in a study of the European Youth Forum among employers), and that regardless of country, branch and size of company, the range of answers reaches from one extreme to the other - from great appreciation to seeing not much use in it (EC, Youth Pass Impact Study, 2012-2013).

*“YouthPass can be used as an example of how certification should not be done”*

(Volunteer)

Organisations were also consulted about their **knowledge of European competence frameworks**. The **Common European Framework Reference of Languages** happens to be the most known with 16% of the respondents knowing it well. The **Key Competence Framework for Lifelong Learning** and the **Digital Competence Framework** are also popular tools that 39% of the consulted either knew well or at least had heard of it. The **Entrecomp Framework** and **ESCO classification** are rather unknown with only 2% and 5% of the polled organisations being well acquainted with them respectively. The Job Bridge research led to find that many EU projects are using European frameworks (ESN skill dictionary, Lever Up, ValidVol, Level5...).

## III. Recommendations

### 1. Volunteering organisations

- a. Check out the existing tools before building a new one or select the most appropriate to apply in your context
- b. When building a list of competences applying to your context, take inspiration from the KeyComp and other lists of competences already existing in the sector to define the competences
- c. Make sure to raise awareness and show the potential uses and benefits of validation for the volunteers by linking it with their own educational, personal and professional pathways. For instance, for them to know themselves better and empower them
- d. Collect ongoing feedback from volunteers to identify what are the most relevant skills to assess according to his/her specific tasks and his/her professional expectations
- e. Provide volunteers with a tool and support that motivates them to go through the process
- f. Provide the volunteer with an informal and relaxed atmosphere when completing the validation process to avoid stress in relations with the assessment
- g. Build capacity among their staff in the assessment process and assign working time of volunteer facilitators for carrying out the assessment of competences
- h. Promote the wide use of validation tools in the framework of volunteering programmes at national, European and international level (ESC, Erasmus+, etc.)
- i. Promote the use of online tools, currently one of the least used methods for both organisations and volunteers, as complementary, analysing their potential to save resources or help in the monitoring of competence developments
- j. As certificates of participation are very common but not always enough to reflect the outcomes of one's experience. More elaborated certificates or documents could include results of summative and/or formative approach towards the skills developed during the placement
- k. Validation tools for the voluntary sector, whenever helping volunteers to get better chance for employment, must clearly state (e.g. in the document or certification results) how this can be applied in certain or specific jobs

## 2. For validation practitioners (of VNFIL)

- a. Organise training towards volunteering stakeholders on how to use validation tools, implement a validation process and/on benefits of validation
- b. Adopt or promote the use of successful tools, methods and instruments for the recognition of learning outcomes in volunteering
- c. Build cross-sectoral synergies and partnerships inviting public and private stakeholders

## 3. Policy-makers

- a. Raise awareness about the advantages of validation of skills and the relevance of non-formal and informal learning to acquire them
- b. Raise awareness about the existing tools for validation, the suitability of each of them to different organisations and for different volunteers
- c. Map the existing tools, support and promote the most successful or promising ones
- d. Look for synergies and implementation of competence frameworks in different contexts
- e. Provide organisations with budget allocated for competence validation when funding volunteering opportunities
- f. Support the sustainability of EU / transnational partnerships, initiatives and projects around validation, either of the past and current projects, or towards new targeted funds for the creation of a European Community of Validation practitioners and stakeholders, gathering both the VPL (Validation for Prior Learning) and VNFIL communities under the same chapel

## 4. Employers

- a. Raise awareness about the potential of volunteering for professional development.
- b. When providing feedback to candidates, inform them about the relevance of their informal learning and how valuable its certification is.
- c. Promote corporate volunteering policies when possible
- d. Take into consideration the resources that can be saved in training for volunteers that can already demonstrate their competences.

- e. Build partnerships with volunteer-based organisations, adult education centres, NGOs, youth organisations

## IV. References

### 1. Policy publications

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