

Grundtvig Senior Volunteering project

VOLUNTEERING, SAY YES!

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1. Introduction

Volunteering, Say Yes! is a project of the Institute for New Age Education (Zavoda za novodobno izobraževanje), a non-profit, non-governmental volunteering organisation established in 2005 in Maribor. ZNI Institute is active in unlocking the human potential and encouraging an honest cooperation between people, organisations and the society as a whole. We achieve this by using carefully developed innovative methods of non formal education.

With this project we wanted to address the challenges, which come with a rapid and increasing aging of the population. The trend of an aging population is changing the demographic structures of countries around the world by creating imbalances across generations. These changes in turn adversely impact the economic, social and cultural development of societies and as such present major challenges for everyone. At the same time, for those individuals who are older, interpersonal relations, psychological well being, physical activity, maintaining hobbies, health and independence represent the major components for living a high quality life in old age. Unfortunately however, in many cases they are faced with isolation, loneliness, inactivity, psychophysical health issues and prejudices.

2. Main objectives of the project

Main objectives of our Grundtvig Senior Volunteering project Volunteering Say Yes were:

- raising awareness of the importance of increasing the quality of life by taking personal responsibility for one's wellbeing
- encouraging integration in the society, where every individual actively contributes
- overcoming barriers, prejudices and fears about ageing
- fighting loneliness and exclusion,
- personal development and increased self-confidence,
- encouraging intercultural cooperation and respect for diversity,
- Encouraging intergenerational inclusion and promoting volunteering as a form of active participation in the society for achieving a happier life in the older ages

3. Project content

Our basic motivation for the project was to encourage senior population to become active in the EU society and consequently overcome fears connected with ageing. We wanted to offer the participation in the project to potential volunteers regardless of their education, working experience or status; the only conditions we have defined were: age (50+), motivation for volunteer work, open mindedness and flexibility, readiness to live, work and learn in a foreign country, and enjoyment in working with young persons.

The project was based on exchange of 12 senior volunteers with a partner organisation Gesellschaft für Europabildung e.V. (GEB) from Berlin, Germany and offered the opportunity of 6 weeks volunteering to 6 Slovenian and 6 German volunteers over the age of 50.

Most volunteers worked with children in the field of informal education for young people, which encouraged and achieved multicultural and intergenerational cooperation. Senior volunteers had an opportunity to activate and use their potential, knowledge and values to actively contribute to society in a broad sense.

The project has demonstrated that age presents no obstacle or limitation for learning, evolving and fully contributing to the society. The 6 weeks of volunteering demanded a very intensive social inclusion and integration of volunteers into new and different cultural, social, national and linguistic environment but this has only deepened and enriched their experience. Since the project aimed to encourage important changes in human values and create new forms of co-habitation and co-existence for all humanity, the intergenerational and intercultural dimensions of the project only contributed to greater positive effects.

4. Implementation of activities

In search of volunteers we have cooperated with local organisations of pensioners, network of volunteer organisations and NGO's. After the final selection, six volunteers joined the project; the youngest participant was 56 years old and the oldest was 72 years old. Further activities were divided into three phases: preparation, implementation and evaluation.

4.1 Preparation

We have developed an innovative concept of preparation period during which the volunteers had an opportunity to fully integrate into new environment. They were included in all activities of the Institute, cooperated and socialized with young adults, activated their inner potential and handled unexpected situations. Hence, the volunteers were activated and highly motivated before they left the country.

Preparation period took two weeks and was an essential part of the project. It included personal, linguistic, cultural, practical and technical preparation. Personal preparation was focused on overcoming personal barriers, limitations and prejudices; increasing openness for new environment, situations, people, habits..., increasing flexibility, readiness for cooperation and integration. Linguistic preparation included short language course and cultural preparations included information about the country, region and place of volunteer work, nature, habits, weather and cultural heritage.... Practical information about the programme consisted of information about the hosting organisation, content of volunteer work, expected results, development and learning outcomes, linguistic criteria, duration of the programme, accommodation, local transport, financial plan, insurance and transport to the host organisation.

Our experience indicated that volunteers, who were well prepared for their mobility, integrated faster and more easily and had fewer problems than those, who did not have a preparatory period. We firmly believe that a two week preparatory period was not only necessary but was essential for successful implementation of the project as a whole.

4.2 Implementation

Implementation of the programme was mostly managed by hosting organisation and included introduction of the volunteer to the organisation, staff and its activities, assigning of a mentor, assisting with administrative requirements, organisation of accommodation, work placement and local transport, assistance with adjusting to new environment, personal support for the participant, cultural activities, arranging supervision and guidance, monitoring of participant's overall progress, preparing evaluation questionnaire about satisfaction with the programme, and regular communication with the sending organisation.

We have also connected volunteers from both countries who have responded to the exchange, so that they got to know each other and socialized during their time abroad. We have used all means possible for volunteers to be treated equally and included in all sorts of activities so that they had an opportunity to share and contribute to the society as much as they possibly could.

4.3 Evaluation

Evaluation was just as important as the preparation period – our experience indicated that it softened the shock of reintegration into domestic environment. Evaluation was managed by the sending organisation and the volunteer and it consisted of evaluation of the programme by the participant, the hosting and the sending organisation, comparison of expected and achieved results and outcomes, suggestions for improvement and written final report from the hosting organisation and the participant.

During the evaluation period improvement on personal development, intercultural and intergenerational inclusion, linguistic improvement and improvement in skills and competences necessary for quality volunteer work were followed.

5. Project impact and added value

Project activities had a significant impact and benefits for the volunteer, participating organisations and other persons involved on the local and the European level:

- The participants improved their knowledge of a foreign language and the use of ICT technologies,
- they activated their inner potentials, experiences and professional knowledge,
- raised awareness about the importance of volunteering and its impact,
- developed key competences for taking an active role in the society,
- became more open for intercultural and intergenerational cooperation and inclusion,
- developed competences for overcoming difficulties and skills for problem solving,
- became aware of responsible European citizenship,

- increased self-confidence, openness, flexibility and adaptability to new life situations,
- became more accepting and had more respect for diversity,
- overcame personal barriers, limitations and fears,
- reinforced patience, inner peace and solidarity,
- made new friendships,
- improved their quality of life.

The project created conditions for long-term partnership cooperation in the field of volunteering, mobility and exchange of good practices. The staff in both organisations improved their abilities and skills for cooperation, coordination, integration, leadership, organisation, project management, problem solving, and intercultural and intergenerational integration.

The impact of the project was not limited only to the benefits of individuals and organisations cooperating in the project.

Other important outcomes of the project are:

- an improvement in the general direction in the society toward social inclusion and solidarity
- transfer of values, wisdom and experiences from elderly on to the young generations,
- encouragement of understanding and solidarity among generations,
- new possibilities for active ageing,
- promotion of mutual cooperation and exchanges for better development of new forms of co-existence,
- reinforcement of sustainable development,
- encouragement for intercultural exchange among individuals, societies and countries,
- strengthening tolerance and acceptance of diversity,
- raised awareness about interpersonal relationships on global level,
- elimination of prejudice about ageing,
- dissemination of positive values,
- promotion of volunteering as best example for participation and active citizenship.

The European dimension of the project resulted in intercultural cooperation among volunteers, organisations and community, encouraging tolerance, diversity and open-mindedness. It enabled the elderly to become familiar with different opportunities offered to citizens by the European community and made them more independent and eager to learn and develop new skills and competences for the new millennium.

6. Conclusion

This project was developed to encourage the integration into society, to promote intergenerational cooperation and understanding as a solution for active ageing. The project was much more than the sole exchange of 12 volunteers; it was about searching for new opportunities to spread positive influence on society on a global level, to encourage important changes in human values, to raise awareness about life's main principles, to activate inner human potential, to increase the quality of life and create new forms of co-existence in the society. We believe the project results have exceeded expectations and hope for this project to be an inspiration and an example of good practice for other European organisations, interested in undertaking a similar project.