

BUILDING STUDENTS' COMPETENCIES THROUGH VOLUNTEERING: LESSONS LEARNT FROM PRO BONO PILOTS AT UNWE

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Abstract

The topics of transferable competencies and soft skills creation have become a very important part of the current understanding of quality in higher education. Building them through volunteering and pro bono, on the other hand, are rarely practiced and studied in Bulgaria.

The article aims to outline ways to implement volunteering as part of the teaching and training processes. It also presents preliminary results of a study on the motivation and satisfaction of students from the University of National and World Economy who have participated in three pilot pro bono programmes in the period of March 2019 – June 2020.

Key words: transferable competencies; soft skills; volunteering; pro bono

JEL: I23, J24

Introduction

The multifaceted notion of quality higher education always incorporates topics like relevance of the knowledge the students receive, the ease of the transfer from the university to the workforce, the role of higher education in later stages of the life and work cycle, even the role of universities in the formation of citizens with informed opinions and views. In the context of the changes in professions and occupations, influenced by digitalization and the later scientific developments, the idea that students should receive a set of skills that would be used in their entire work life becomes more and more prominent. Those skills are called by different authors “**transversal skills**”, “**transferable skills/competences**”, “**soft skills**”, “generic skills”, “professional skills/competences”, “key competencies”, “21st century skills”, “global competencies” (Chadha 2006; Cinque 2016; Justice 2009; Muhamad 2012; Whittemore 2018; Yordanova, 2017).

The transition between student and working life and the corresponding sets of knowledge, skills and motivations have been a trendy topic in the academic research, as well as a significant part of many public policies on the national

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and European level for more than twenty years. The Bulgarian practice is aimed more at studying, classifying and discussing the transferable competences in the area of the secondary education. The topic has rarely drawn the attention of higher educators (for example Angova, 2019 on communication professions and competences; Rusanova, 2017 on the soft skills of social workers; Yordanova, 2017 on university graduates' transferable skills). The ideas of project-based learning / “learning by doing” are not new but we are still at the starting phases of implementing them at the academic environment.

The article does not aim to discuss the different interpretations neither to study in detail the effect of the context – vocational education, higher education, lifelong learning, etc. (for a clear distinction of the types of skills built by formal, non-formal and informal education see for example Тончева-Златкова, 2015a). Clarifying the distinction between the terms “skills” and “competences”, as well as the one between “competency” and “competence” is not a part of that article either. We accept the idea that “competency” is a personal attribute or behavior, while “competence” depends on the knowledge and skills of the employee and means the ability to perform a task to a prescribed standard.

The extensive discussion over their similarities and differences, their overlapping usage and the lack of clear and agreed upon definitions does not diminish the idea that every young person should purposefully build a **set of skills** that can be applied in different contexts and stages of their career. This article presents pro bono workshops as a relatively new to the Bulgarian environment way for expanding, supplementing and training transferable / transversal skills to the students. The pro bono pilots have attracted nearly 50 participants, 26 of whom were students and young volunteers. The second part of the text discusses the opinions and ideas of 24 of them who have filled in the online post-pilot questionnaire.

Transferable Competencies and Higher Education

The expectations towards higher education to deliver graduates who are ready not only to practice specific jobs but also to have competences that will allow them to pass effortlessly from one stage of their career to another (even changing occupations and professions) started to be voiced at the beginning of the 1990s. The spectrum of ideas and their development can be shortly summarized as follows (Cinque, 2016, pp. 397-399):

- In 1993 the World Health Organization called them “life skills” and meant skills for decision-making and problem solving, creative thinking and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, coping with emotions and stress;

- In 2003 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) issued the idea that higher education institutions should create “key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society”. Examples used knowledge and information interactively; interacting in socially homogenous group – meaning the abilities to cooperate, work in teams, manage and resolve conflicts; and to act autonomously.
- In a report from 2006 the European Union listed “key competences for lifelong learning”: communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages, mathematical competence, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression.
- In 2008 the Tuning educational structures discussed the so called “generic competences”. They divided them in three subgroups (1) instrumental competences – cognitive, methodological, technological and linguistic abilities; (2) interpersonal competences – social interaction and co-operation; and (3) systemic competences – combination of understanding, sensibility and knowledge.
- In 2009 OECD listed the “21st century skills” – searching, selecting, evaluating and organizing information; restructuring and modelling of information, development of own ideas/ knowledge; effective communication, collaboration and virtual interaction; social responsibility.
- In 2011 the Institute for the Future issued their list of “Future work skills 2020” – sense making, social intelligence, novel and adaptive thinking, cross cultural competency, computational thinking, new media literacy, trans-disciplinarity, design mindset, cognitive load management, virtual collaboration.

The discourse of identifying key competences gradually shifted at the end of the first decade of the 21st century to the concept of the so called transferable / transversal competencies – a set of competences that can be transferred from one professional field to another and are related to attitudes, values and procedures (Torres-Coronas et. al., 2014). The topic keeps its relevance and freshness due to the rapid and constantly changing nature of the labour market as well as the new trends in the expectations of the society towards the system of higher education.

One of the results of that search is ESCO – the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations classification (<https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal>). It describes 2 942 occupations and 13 485 skills that are linked to them. ESCO doesn't distinguish between skills and competencies but subdivides the skills pillar into four parts – (1) attitudes and values, (2) knowledge, (3) language skills and knowledge, and (4) skills. The skills set is additionally split into eight narrower sections: S1 – communication, collaboration and creativity, S2 –

information skills, S3 – assisting and caring, S4 – management skills, S5 – working with computers, S6 – handling and moving, S7 – constructing and S8 – working with machinery and specialized equipment. As relevant to the transition between university and professional occupation we can accept S1-S5.

Another interesting approach to classifying the knowledge, skills and motivations sought in graduates by the employers is the concept of transversal competencies presented in a white paper of the e-learning company “Skilla” (www.skilla.co.uk). Here transversal competencies are defined as ones that are applicable in any context (occupation, stage of the life cycle, location), are cross-functional and strongly related to social and interpersonal relation, and “cannot be easily taught” but are “learnt through experience and development” (Whittemore, 2018, p. 9). The author, having analyzed the latest findings of major international organization as the World Economic Forum, the European Commission, UNESCO and the OECD, identifies seven core transversal skills: (1) collaborative problem-solving; (2) learning to learn, continuing to learn; (3) digital competencies and mindset; (4) initiative and independent thinking; (5) resilience; (6) adaptability; and (7) cultural awareness and expression. These two classifications will be used to test how pro bono workshops can contribute to building students’ competencies in a controlled environment.

Pro Bono in Higher Education

Implementing **pro bono activities and programmes** as part of the curriculum is one of the relatively new and not that common ways to build various transferable skills in Bulgarian students.

The idea is even more challenging in light of the low levels of **youth volunteering**. According to a study, 71% of the young people in Bulgaria have never been volunteers, only 2% devote their free time to volunteering “very often”, 4% do it “often” and 14% - “rarely” (Митев и колектив, 2019). The European Youth Report cites an even larger number of young Bulgarians – 78% - who are indifferent to volunteering. At the same time there is a positive trend, compared to the previous research from December 2014. At the EU level volunteering has increased by 6 percentage points, while in Bulgaria the increase is double – 12 percentage points (European Youth Report, 2018, pp. 20-22). The young Bulgarians have participated mostly in sports clubs, followed by activities in youth organizations, cultural organizations, local organizations, political parties and various nonprofits.

One possible explanation of this favorable development is the efforts of many Bulgarian and foreign youth nonprofit organizations to make volunteering more popular. Volunteering is presented as a travelling opportunity (by the likes of the European Voluntary Service), as a good way to start a career or at least to

distinguish oneself from one's peers by writing down a different experience on resumes and job applications. The improvement of employability in Bulgaria due to volunteering experience was recently proved by a social experiment, conducted by the TimeHeroes foundation. They applied for the different jobs with fake CVs, some of which showed that the person has been a volunteer. This resulted in 85% higher employers' interest in the candidates. So the Bulgarian employers have started to recognize that volunteering allows young people to develop more transferable skills – working in teams, being flexible, learning from experience, adapting, widens their leadership traits and communication abilities.

In line with these later developments, a team from the University of National and World Economy is involved in the **Boosting Employability and Empowering Social Engagement in Higher Education through Pro Bono (BEESE)** project since September 2018. BEESE (<https://beeseprobono.eu/>) is a European strategic partnership between five nonprofit organizations (NGOs) and four universities from five countries – Hungary, Spain, Portugal, France and Bulgaria. The members of the project consortium are as follows: from France – Pro Bono Lab (www.probonolab.org/) and Junior Consulting (www.juniorconsulting.com/); from Portugal – the University of Porto (sigarra.up.pt/); from Spain – Work for Social (workforsocial.org/) and the Autonomous University of Madrid (www.uam.es); from Hungary – ÖKA (www.onkentes.hu) and Obuda University (www.uni-obuda.hu); and from Bulgaria – Time Heroes (timeheroes.org) and the University of National and World Economy (www.unwe.bg).

All participating nonprofits are pro bono intermediaries – they promote pro bono and provide a platform for the academia and business (companies and professionals acting as volunteers) to help solve all kinds of problems that NGOs face. The project is financed by the Erasmus+ KA2 and aims to promote pro bono practices among the students in European universities and to strengthen the links between higher education institutions, NGOs and enterprises. The expected positive outcomes from the project are multifaceted:

- For the students – to get new knowledge and skills, to generate more active civic behaviour, to be more competitive on the labour market, to gain confidence but at the same time – more realistic expectations, to widen their understanding and empathy, to build social capital.
- For the academia – to narrow the gap between graduation and first job for their students, to offer a unique opportunity for refreshing ways of teaching, collecting real-case examples for different academic disciplines, to prove once again the value of a well-structured bachelors' or masters' education, to reinforce connections with all kinds of stakeholder groups – businesses, administrative structures, civil society institutions, the community as a whole.

- For the beneficiary NGOs – to get expert ideas and opinions free of charge, to spread their causes to wider audiences – students, professors, business people, etc., to increase their social impact by getting visibility and recognition.
- For the businesses (represented by the professionals who serve as mentors to the students) – to easily test potential future employees, to motivate current employees, to give them fresh ways to apply their professional knowledge, to practise corporate social responsibility and fulfil their social mission.
- For the communities – new networks appear as a result of the interactions of diverse groups of people gathered by a common cause. This means that the social capital of that community is being strengthened and widened. Joining forces to solve specific social issue creates satisfaction and long-term trust between everybody involved.

Pro bono activities are a specific form of volunteering. Widely accepted features of **volunteering** are that (1) it is done for free – no participant has the expectations for any kind of material reward; (2) it is an expression of the free will of the volunteer; (3) the volunteers actually commit their time, energy, knowledge, skills and ideas (in contrast of donating money or material supplies); (4) it is devoted to non-related third parties – strangers, the community, society as a whole; and (5) most often it is done via nonprofit organization. **Pro bono** adds to that list the following specific characteristics: (1) it is more professionalized – the participants donate specific professional knowledge or experience and (2) it is more structured as long as mentors from businesses and from higher education institutions are involved. As a result, a logical final touch is the opportunity to certify the participation in such kind of events and to make it verifiable for university professors (via the ECTS system) and future employers (through certificates, testimonies and other tangible documents).

The BEESE project modifies and uses three already existing **pro bono models**, implemented previously by members of the Global Pro Bono Network (globalprobono.org/) – short-term, mid-term and long-term pro bono programmes. As far as this is the first time when higher education institutions are involved, the programmes are planned to be as diverse and flexible as possible. The objectives are to simultaneously promote pro bono, to improve the students' transversal competencies and to collect evidence which type of pro bono programmes are best fit for the academic environment.

All programmes should deliver a solution to a specific problem of one or several NGOs and should involve students, representatives from the beneficiary organization(s), university professors and the so called mentors – business people who should provide advice, practical experience and leadership to the team. The **short-term** pro bono had to be conducted by a small team (up to 5 students and

1 mentor), working together for 3 to 5 hours. The **mid-term** pro bono should be one encounter of 8 hours of a team of 10 people. The **long term** pro bono was intended as a collaboration of 5-8 people working together for 15-20 hours.

Building Transferable Competencies through Pro Bono

The first intellectual output of BEESE, finalized at the end of 2019, was a large-scale study called IO1 “In-depth understanding of **students' motivations** to participate in Pro Bono Programmes in the University and recommendations in order to implement pro bono projects”. All five participating countries simultaneously run a unified online questionnaire among European students that was filled by over 1500 respondents.

The Bulgarian sample was 240 young people (the majority of them – students) aged 16-35. The results showed that there is a strong positive attitude towards volunteering with 55,8% of the participants having had and 39,6% willing to participate. Additional interviews conveyed that the positive trend is there but there are no large numbers of real volunteering experience because the students don't know about it or haven't been offered such an opportunity.

The survey showed that young people in Bulgaria have the predisposition and values to become volunteers – they want to experience something “new, different and exciting” (n=154), like to engage in challenges that can make the world a better place (n=110), and prefer to be decision-makers (n=102). Totally 150 of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that “humanity and its environment depend on their actions”, the same number believe that they can change the world through voluntary actions. In regards with building competences the results show that:

- Volunteering can help young people test myself and evaluate my skills (n=177 for those who agree);
- It is a way to gain new skills, knowledge and experience (n=211) and to enhance one's CV (n=127).

After studying deeply students' motivations, attitudes and predispositions towards volunteering as a concept and practice and pro bono as a special kind of volunteering, the second phase of BEESE tested three different types of pro bono pilots. Each pilot was thoroughly documented and discussed at the expert meetings. The opinions of all participants were studied by online questionnaires (for the students) and in-depth interviews (for the mentors and the nonprofit beneficiaries). The collected evidence, good and bad practices, and the entire know-how will build the third intellectual output – creating a study guide and an on-line course for higher education institutions willing to make pro bono part of their academic routines.

The first pro bono pilot in Bulgaria was a **short-term** one. Three beneficiary NGOs were selected: “Ideas Factory” (ideasfactorybg.org/), “Alzheimer Bulgaria” (alzheimer-bg.org) and “The Generations Together” Foundation. The commonalities between them were their cause and target audience – working with the elderly, reinforcing their connection with other age groups and positive social change; and their need for a better digital communication strategy. The problem deepened because the typical communication habits of their beneficiaries and the potential volunteers or donors were quite different. After the diagnosis phase, the mentors prepared mission briefs for each of the NGOs and set the tasks for the students. At the same time the university team performed the students’ call and selected 9 participants. The short-term pro bono pilot took place on the 9th of April 2019.

The second pilot was a **mid-term** one. There we had one beneficiary NGO – the National Polytechnics Museum in Sofia. It was selected by the Bulgarian pro bono intermediary among the total of seven candidates because of its importance for the cultural and tourist development, because of its uniqueness and because of the problems it encounters, namely: attracting more young people as visitors to the museum and attracting more young people as employees of the museum. This case was considered extremely fit and challenging for the students. The participants – 13 students in total – worked for a whole day (8+ hours) under the supervision of three mentors (operational and project managers from large businesses with extensive volunteering experience). This workshop, called “Creative solutions”, is by far the most successful one because most of the students’ ideas and proposed tactics and strategies are already implemented by the museum. The mid-term pilot happened on the 29th of November 2019.

The last pilot – the **long-term** one – had to be modified literally on the go due to the COVID-19 situation. It was planned as a parallel experience for the students studying “Civil Society Institutions” during the summer semester of the third year at the bachelor programme of “Public administration” at UNWE. Requiring 15-20 hours of load, it was meant to be spread in three sessions – at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the semester. The lockdown made the physical meetings of students, mentors and NGOs impossible, so the Bulgarian team decided to choose a task that can be performed mostly online by Internet searches, e-mails and phone calls. The participants were minimized to 4 students and 1 professional mentor while the academic representatives were more actively involved. The mission was to collect data about all existing funding options for the Bulgarian nonprofits in the middle of 2020. The COVID-19 crisis gave a real boost to donating and volunteering but at the same time it limited critically the options for many NGOs, cutting their abilities for fieldwork, reducing the human support and redirecting the scarce financial resources to health-related causes and

structures. So the students had the task to search for, check, summarize and put in a handbook the remaining options for nonprofits lacking financial sustainability. The long-term pilot started at the end of April 2020 and ended on the 15th of July 2020. It was conducted entirely online through the MS Teams platform and resulted in a handbook that will be distributed by the networks of the Bulgarian partners.

After the end of every pro bono pilot a **post-pilot questionnaire** was distributed among the student participants. It studied their opinions on the mission of every workshop, how they assessed the overall experience, the organization of the event, the group dynamics, the acquisition of skills and its relation to employability. The response rate was very high – 100% for the short-term and the long-term workshops and 84,6% for the mid-term workshop. In total 24 out of the 26 student participants shared their opinions.

The **motivation to participate** in a pro bono activity was measured by four questions. All answers were highly positive or positive and rank the motives from strongest to least strong as follows:

- The leading motive was “*I like gaining new skills, knowledge and experience*”. Every participant expresses strong agreement on that statement. This is a proof that Bulgarian students need more options for building competitive CVs during the period of their higher education. The typical nonspecialized jobs and low-level positions are available and are already not a competitive advantage. The pro bono experience that also offers the opportunity to get acquainted with business and nonprofit people is a very suitable solution. It is no surprise that the second most agreeable motive was: “*I like knowing new people*” (strongly agreed by 21 people).
- Pro bono as a challenge was mentioned by 20 respondents who strongly agreed with the statement that they like “*testing myself and evaluating my skills*”.
- The least common reason was *working in a team*, strongly agreed by 17 students. It is interesting that almost all of them highly assessed the teamwork after the workshop (only one student “somewhat agreed” with such a statement).

When giving an **overall assessment** with the pro bono experience, the students again were very positive. One quarter of them were “somewhat satisfied” and 75% were “strongly satisfied”. The participant stated that they “felt useful” and believe that the mission has contributed to their personal development. The second outcome was not that explicitly stated – one of the respondents was neutral to that statement and four students did not agree “strongly” but “somehow”. The open answers to the question “Which part of the mission have been the most enriching to you” gave valuable additional information. Among praise for the

whole experience, the interesting cases and the useful mentorship one could also find recognition of trained skills and acquired new skills, i.e. *“the tight schedule and the preparation of the presentation in just a couple hours was more than challenging”*, *“the aspects of the mission that I had the pleasure to work on, taught me to be more observing of my surroundings, to express my opinion openly and discuss various opinions of different ideas”*, *“to talk with my team and see their way of thinking”*, *“the possibility to work in a team and to use my theoretical knowledge turning it into practical experience”*, *“the search for information”*, *“searching for solutions and communication with many people”*. It becomes clear that the students perceive the pro bono experience as a valuable opportunity to test themselves in a friendly environment while practicing all kinds of transversal skills. Some of the most interesting results are shown in the following figures.

As can be seen on figure 1, all kinds of skills considered important as part of the BEESE project were perceived by the students as demanded by the missions and practiced during the workshops. There are no significant differences in the assessments of the groups of skills – making decision is viewed as the most practiced, but being an innovative and strategic thinker are not worse performed. Practically even the last trait – developing confidence – is equally assessed.

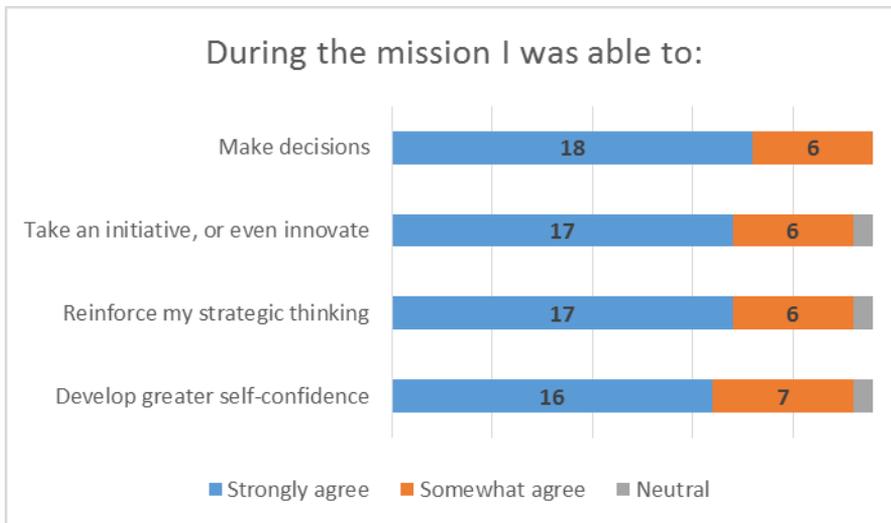


Figure 1: Skills practiced by the students during the pro bono pilots

It is interesting to track the ranking of experiences during the pro bono workshops. As can be seen on figure 2, the most frequent outcome is developing skills, followed by using existing skills and expertise and broadening the personal and professional network. These results prove that that particular form of volunteering is very well targeted to students in the last years of their university

studies who need to start a professional career. The workshops add transversal skills that couldn't be developed during traditional seminar classes and also link theoretical knowledge and case studies to some tangible field experience. Pro bono activities put all these concepts in a practical context and as students say "give them meaning". It should be noted that all of the respondents think that they will use these skills in their professional life or as volunteers. All students said in the interview that they will add that experience to their CV, share it on their LinkedIn profiles and use it on job interviews.



Figure 2: Interrelations “mission – skills”

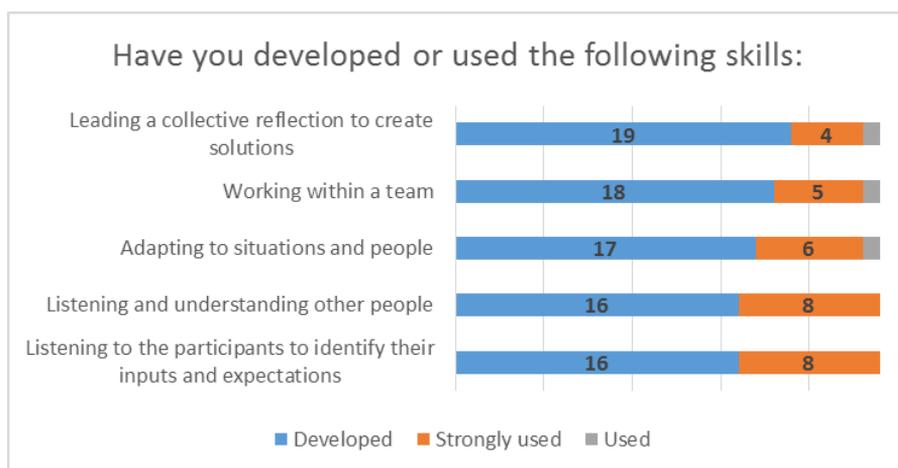


Figure 3: Frequency of development or usage of skills

The ranking of the skills that were new (“developed”) or applied (“strongly used” and “used”) is shown on figure 3. None of the respondents chose the “not used” option for any of the statements. It’s interesting that most of those skills are classical transversal skills – creativity, teamwork, flexibility, active listening. Again there are no significant differences and all of the skills are considered raised to a higher level or strongly used.

Table 1: Transversal skills developed through pro bono workshops

	Short-term pilot	Mid-term pilot	Long-term pilot
ESCO skills			
S1. Communication, collaboration and creativity	√√√	√√√	√√√
S2. Information skills	√√√	√√√	√√√
S4. Management skills	√√	√√	√√
S5. Working with computers	√	√	√
Skills transversal skills			
(1) Collaborative problem-solving	√√√	√√√	√√√
(2) Learning to learn, continuing to learn	√√√	√√	√√√
(3) Digital competencies and mindset	√√	√√	√√
(4) Initiative and independent thinking	√√√	√√√	√√√
(5) Resilience	√	√√	√√√
(6) Adaptability	√	√√	√√√
(7) Cultural awareness and expression	x	√	x

Legend: √√√ - strongly developed, √√ - relatively developed, √ - somehow developed, x – not developed

In conclusion, the brief description of the missions of the three pro bono pilots, combined with the experiences shared by the participants, allow us to summarize the **types of transferable / transversal skills** built or developed by the students. Table 1 briefly presents them, using different classifications discussed in the first part of the article. Most of the groups of skills (no matter what the classification approach was) are strongly or relatively developed. No rise in the cultural awareness and expression was detected due to the specifics of the missions of all three pilots – they didn’t include working in a multicultural environment or solving problems of that kind. Another type of slightly developed skills is working with computers. The students gained more knowledge and experience with developing media content and strategies for its dissemination through social media channels opposed to typical computer literacy skills.

The shorter versions of the pilots (5 and 8 hours) tested the abilities of the student to distribute tasks; to gather, analyze and select information; to coordinate

teamwork. One of the recurring recommendations after the short-term and the mid-term pilots was that there wasn't enough time. The students were not used to working under the stress of such short deadlines where the deliverable should be ready and presented to the beneficiary NGOs at the end of the workshops. As table 1 shows, the long-term pro bono workshop (that was also entirely online organized and conducted) tested the resilience and adaptability of the students. In order to distribute the workload evenly, each week one of the students was appointed to be the leader of the team, responsible for the coordination and communication among all participants.

Conclusion

The experience of the Bulgarian part of the BEESE project in organizing and conducting pro bono pilots allow us to make several conclusions:

- Pro bono as a specific form of volunteering is a new, interesting and highly effective way to build student competencies. It can be applied to almost all types of disciplines taught at the UNWE.
- Incorporating pro bono as part of the curriculum should not be the only option for the students to get their extracurricular credits. As already mentioned, volunteering means expression of free will. In case it becomes obligatory to pass an exam, it cannot be considered volunteering. Nevertheless, pro bono programmes can become part of the teaching / training process parallel to other more traditional options.
- An interesting topic for discussions is the opportunity to consider pro bono as an alternative way to organize the obligatory work placement of the bachelors before their state exam. For a small number of students that mixture of a professional business mentor, an academic mentor and a real-life NGO case could be useful both as a study experience and as a smooth transition to employment.
- Depending on the NGO case / mission, pro bono workshops are a sandbox for gaining and developing all kinds of transversal skills some of which are unattainable in the typical classroom environment. As one researcher concludes, every type of project/ task/ exercise/ case must have a focus on these success skills: critical thinking/ problem solving, collaboration, and self-management (Toncheva-Zlatkova 2018, p.107).
- The pro bono experience is a very valuable addition to the CV of the young people (both bachelor and master students). It is a feature that can become a competitive advantage at the labour market.
- Opening new venues for young Bulgarians to experience the cause-related work, to gain understanding of other people's life situations and to become

part of the volunteering movement means that the university can offer not only academic knowledge but is also working to create critically thinking citizens of tomorrow.

The next step of the BEESE project consortium will be finding an easy and universal way for official **recognition** of the pro bono experience.

As it can be seen in table 2, according to the ECTS national practices, one credit means 25-30 hours of student load (in the classrooms and extracurricular). As far as the longest type of pilot is 20 hours, this means that even if we consider the preparation and the post-pilot activities, the students could get no more than 1 credit for their efforts. The current logic and structure of the degree programmes (and not only in Bulgaria) do not allow such a low-level educational component to become recognizable. So far the pro bono experience can only be implemented as part of the syllabus of a specific course and cannot officially be recognized in the student's diploma.

Table 2: Transversal skills developed through pro bono workshops

Country	Hours per credit point
European Union (EU)	25-30
Belgium, Bulgaria , Croatia, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Spain	25-30
Austria, Italy, Malta, Slovakia	25
Czech Republic	~26
Estonia	26
Sweden	26.667
Finland	27
Denmark, Lithuania	~28
Netherlands, Portugal	28
France	29
Cyprus, Greece, Hungary , Latvia, Romania	30
England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland	10

Source: ECTS Users' Guide 2015, <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

The solution that the project team is now testing is to propose to universities to (1) recognize pro bono programmes as an eligible educational component or course unit and (2) to find ways to accept pro bono experiences as relevant information that can be added to the Diploma Supplement. The ECTS Users' Guide explicitly point out that social and community activities are an educational component equal to work and clinical placements, research projects, laboratory

work, etc. The ways to officially recognizing and verifying pro bono experiences (especially in Bulgaria) are still not clearly defined in the legal framework and university practices.

Despite its newness and some obstacles, pro bono activities are a good variable of problem-based student-centered learning that helps graduates build new and develop available transferable competences and skills. It encourages collaborative problem-solving, teamwork, information finding and processing, digital communication and finding new ways to learn. All of those skills are indisputably part of the competences needed by everybody in the context of lifelong learning in the 21st century.

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