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Civic Engagement of Higher Education Students in a Central and Eastern European Region

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2020.62.4.07

Abstract

The aim of the study is to provide an overview of higher education students' volunteering and voluntary group membership based on a database (N=2,199), in which full-time students from five Central-Eastern European countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine) were questioned. We analyzed as well, which variables influence civic engagement. Based on the results we suggest that universities in Central-Eastern European regions should make more use of students' potential in the field of volunteering and organizational membership, and should do so in an organized way, with special attention to the groups, which display low civic participation according to our research findings.

Key words: *civic engagement, higher education students, factors of social and demographic background, Central and Eastern Europe*

Introduction

In the literature on higher education, civic engagement of students is discussed in connection with the development in academic and life skill competences, civic consciousness, and responsibility (Astin and Sax, 1998; Hesser, 1995; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997; Mabry, 1998; Khasanzyanova, 2017), it is referred to as a special teaching method (Freese 1998, Zlokowski 1996, Mabry 1998) and as a protection against attrition (Kim & Schneider 2005; Perna & Titus 2005; Baker 2008; Altbach 2009; Pusztai 2015; Pusztai et al. 2019).

In this study, we discuss the factors which influence higher education students' volunteering as well as their voluntary organization and group membership through linear and logistic regression models. In the post-socialist countries, civic engagement is underdeveloped, but recent years have seen a rise in volunteering and non-governmental organization memberships, which, however, still lag behind Western European countries. The same is true for higher education students' civic engagement. Consequently, it is important to follow the above trends and to uncover the social and demographic background factors, which affect civic engagement. In the summary, we evaluate our hypotheses, which is followed by some recommendations for education policy.

Volunteering and Organizational Membership among Young People

In 2019, according to the Flash Eurobarometer (N = 10,786), 58% of young people aged 15–30 stated that they had done volunteer work or had been at least once involved in an activity which helped the local community. Some 41% had been members of youth and student organizations. Membership prevalence is higher for women than for men (44% and 39%), and this pattern is also present with respect to participation in local or voluntary projects (61% and 55%). It is also typical that urban youth display greater civic engagement than their rural peers. In addition, it can be shown that young people with higher educational attainment are also more active in this field (Flash Eurobarometer 2019).

The organizational framework of higher education institutions and students' lifestyle create a special situation for volunteering and civic engagement. On the one hand, it is important to highlight that students' social background can be best described as middle-class (and as we have seen, more favourable background results in higher civic engagement), but on the other hand, campus lifestyle often generates semi-independent and relatively freely adjustable boundaries, which allows for activities to be inserted into the schedule. Higher education institutions in several countries offer opportunities for students to do volunteer work (service-learning), often awarding it with credits (see Brozmanová Gregorová and Heinzová 2008, Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010; Yusop and Correia 2013, Shin, 2018), which, however, is uncommon in the area we examine. In contrast, school community service was introduced in Hungarian secondary education in 2011, requiring students to complete 50 hours of community service up until graduation at any non-governmental, religious, or governmental organization with which

the school has a cooperation agreement. It is not possible to engage in similar community service activities in higher education, although it has been shown in the international literature that there is a positive correlation between academic performance and service learning, among other benefits, for example increase in life skill competences, civic consciousness, and responsibility (Astin and Sax, 1998; Hesser, 1995; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton, 1997).

Studies on students' civic engagement highlight that such activities develop skills, which are difficult to address through classroom instruction and contribute to the adaptation of theoretical knowledge into real-life environments (Gaston and Kruger, 2014). Since moral elements are increasingly excluded from education, which focuses on professional knowledge and practical skills (Reuben, 1996), volunteer work also provides an opportunity to convey these. The phenomenon is similar with respect to interpersonal skills and time management. Other studies report positive cognitive effects (Shin, 2018; Moore et al., 2014).

Some studies also focus on the question as to which students are more likely to engage in voluntary activities or join the work of organizations. Moore et al. (2014), examining data of higher education students from the United States, has found out that older, female, and better-performing students, as well as those who engage in collective religiosity are more likely to do volunteer work. Although the link seems logical, the effect of paid work has not been found to be negative in their study. There are also differences across fields of study: students studying health sciences, social sciences, teacher education, and humanities are more likely to participate in such activities (Khasanzyanova, 2017).

In our previous studies, we analyzed volunteering among higher education students. In the five Central and Eastern European countries we examined, we recorded a gradual increase in the proportion of volunteers among higher education students between 2005 and 2015. The proportion of regular volunteers doubled between 2005 and 2010, and the proportion of those who had done volunteer work reached 26% by 2010 and then increased to 39% by 2015. According to 2015 data, the highest proportion of students volunteered in Romania, which is most likely explained by the fact that in 2014 Romania allowed higher educational institutions to accept volunteer work as formal internship.

Concerning voluntary group memberships, in 2010, the most popular groups were religious groups and sports clubs, with only about 12% of students participating in each of them. About 10% participated in cultural groups and 6% in student representative organizations. In contrast, involvement in voluntary and non-governmental organizations was only 5.2% and 3.4%, respectively, and participation in political organizations was even lower (1.9%) (Fényes and Pusztai, 2012).

Hypotheses

- H1. Both the proportion of young people doing volunteer work during their years in higher education and voluntary group memberships show an increasing trend in parallel with the development of democracy and civil society in the examined region (Juknevičiūsa and Savicka, 2003, Fényes and Pusztai, 2012; Fényes 2015; Markos, 2018).
- H2. Volunteering is more common among students in Romania, women, children of highly educated parents, those who enjoy a favourable financial situation, urban students, those who go to church more often. The literature suggests that volunteering is higher among those, as well who have a closer relationship with faculty and external friends but have a relatively distant relationship with their parents, students of humanities and helping professions, those who engage in paid student employment, and those with better academic performance. (Moore et al. 2014, Khasanzyanova, 2017, Fényes and Pusztai, 2012; Fényes, 2015; Bocsi et al., 2017; Markos, 2018; Flash Eurobarometer, 2019).
- H3. Voluntary group membership is more common among women, children of highly educated parents, well-off and urban students, religious and minority students. Students, who have a close relationship with faculty and peers, who engage in paid student employment, and who have better academic performance, are also more active in group membership (Pusztai, 2017; Flash Eurobarometer, 2019).

Methodology of Research

The database consists of a large-sample student survey¹ (N=2,199), conducted in the academic year 2018/19. The survey was carried out at higher education institutions in Eastern Hungary² and in four other countries³ (Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia). The Hungarian subsample (N=1,034) was collected using quota

¹ The title of the research project was “The Role of Social and Organizational Factors in Student Attrition”.

² University of Debrecen, University of Nyíregyháza, Debrecen Reformed Theological University, Saint Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological College.

³ Babeş-Bolyai University (BBTE), Emanuel University of Oradea, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Mukachevo State University, University of Oradea, Partium Christian University (PKE),

sampling and is representative with respect to faculty, field of study, and form of funding. At institutions outside Hungary, the aim was probability sampling: groups of students in university/college courses were selected and surveyed exhaustively (N=1,165). The sample consists of full-time bachelor's students in their second year and of second-year or third-year students from undivided programs, which offer a master's degree.

In the first part of the analysis, we examine the frequency of voluntary activity and the patterns of group membership. Then we employ linear and logistic regression to investigate the factors which influence students' volunteering and group membership. The explanatory variables are gender, country of the institution, variables of social background, students' religiosity, social capital variables, academic achievement, the field of study, and paid work. The dependent variable is either students' volunteering (1: has done volunteer work during higher education studies, 0: has not), or the voluntary group membership index (0–8), which was compiled based on membership in various organizations.⁴

Results of Research

According to our data, there is a rise in volunteering in the investigated region: recent data show that 45.3% of students have done volunteer work, while this figure in 2015 amounted to 38%. In contrast, voluntary group membership is still low, with students participating in 0.88 groups on average. However, detailed data reveal an increased membership in almost all organizations compared to our findings from 2010 (see Fényes and Pusztai, 2012). Membership in religious organizations surged significantly (from 12% to 24%), in a similar way to student representative groups (from 6% to 11%) and to voluntary and non-governmental organizations (from 3.4% and 5.2% to 13.2% and 10.8%, respectively).

In the following table we present the findings of the linear and logistic regression analysis with respect to the factors, which affect students' group membership and volunteering (Table 1).

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, J. Selye University, University of Novi Sad, Uzhhorod National University.

⁴ Non-governmental organization, sports club or association, religious organization or small religious community, political organization (party, movement), student union or other representative membership, art group, charitable organization, other group or organization.

Table 1. Effects on students' volunteering and on the voluntary group membership index (logistic regression Exp(B) and the significance of Wald statistics and linear regression Betas and their significance) N=2199

	Dependent variable	
	volunteering	group membership index
	Exp(B), sign. (Wald stat.)	Beta (sign.)
Gender (1: male)	0.827	0.075*
Hungary ⁵	0.840	-0.123**
Romania	1.871**	-0.060
Ukraine	0.685	0.098**
Slovakia	1.144	-0.059
Mother's years of education	1.023	0.037
Father's years of education	0.953	-0.021
Objective financial situation of the family based on the possession of durable consumer goods (index, 0-9)	1.073	0.013
Subjective financial situation of the family compared to the student's peers (1-5)	0.949	-0.055
Objective financial situation of the student based on the possession of durable consumer goods (index, 0-6))	0.913	-0.011
Subjective financial situation of the student (1-4)	1.042	0.021
Place of residence at the age of 14 (1: urban)	1.207	0.052
Frequency of praying (1-7)	0.992	0.005
Frequency of churchgoing (1-5)	1.427***	0.223***
Index for the relationship with parents ⁶	0.950**	-0.074*
Index for the relationship with faculty	1.065**	0.117***
Index for the relationship with university peers	1.050	0.016
Index for the relationship with external friends	1.081**	0.033
Learning achievement	1.070**	0.177***
Arts and social sciences ⁷	0.873	-0.021

⁵ Concerning the country of the institution the reference group was Serbia.

⁶ The social capital indexes are based on statements, which measured several areas of the relationship; the higher level of the index shows relationship that is more complex.

⁷ Concerning the field of study, the reference group was the "other" category.

	Dependent variable	
	volunteering	group membership index
	Exp(B), sign. (Wald stat.)	Beta (sign.)
Business and economics	0.426**	-0.009
Sciences, computer science, engineering	0.807	0.009
Pedagogy	0.761	-0.017
Paid work	2.602***	0.100**
	Nagelkerke R-squared = 0.221	Adj. R-squared = 0.152

The significance levels are marked thus: *** for significance below 0.000, ** for significance between 0.001 and 0.01, * for significance between 0.01 and 0.05.

The likelihood of volunteering is higher for students who live in Romania, attend church more often, and have closer ties with faculty and friends but have a relatively distant relationship with their parents. Those with better academic performance are also more willing to do volunteer work. Compared to the control group, students in business and economics programs are less likely to engage in volunteering. At the same time, paid employment increases the likelihood of volunteer work.

Voluntary group membership is more frequent among male students, regular church attendees, and those who have a good relationship with instructors but have a less close relationship with their parents. Voluntary group membership is also more common among those with better academic performance, paid employees, and students in Ukraine, while it is significantly less frequent among Hungarian students.

Overall, participation in both activities is increased by frequent church attendance, a close relationship with faculty, good academic performance, paid employment, as well as a relatively distant relationship with parents.

Discussion

Our first hypothesis (H1) has been corroborated: volunteering and voluntary group memberships have gradually increased among higher education students in the investigated region, although the participation rates still lag behind Western

European levels. The rise is explained, in addition to the development of democracy and civil society, by the fact that 2016 was the first year when universities in Hungary admitted students who had already completed compulsory school community service in secondary school, which can have positive impact on subsequent willingness to do volunteer work. In addition, volunteering may have been increased by a shift in the motivations behind it (see Bocsi et al., 2017). While in the past, students did not consider it important to include their voluntary activities in their curriculum vitae, today there might be a growing share of career-building volunteers in the examined region, and employers take such activities increasingly into account in job interviews. In addition, as volunteering grows among family members and friends, it can also motivate students to volunteer.

Our second hypothesis (H2) has been partially corroborated. The likelihood of volunteering is higher among Romanian residents, frequent church attendees, those who have a close relationship with faculty and external friends but have a relatively distant relationship with their parents, students with good academic performance, and paid employees. However, gender, settlement type, parental educational attainment, and the financial situation of the family and student exert no effect on volunteering, contrary to the prediction of the literature. In other words, higher cultural and financial capital does not seem to increase the likelihood of volunteering. Based on our findings, volunteering has a status-compensating effect as those from unfavourable backgrounds are also involved, and their possibly poorer academic performance might be compensated by the sense of achievement associated with volunteer work. Our presumption with respect to the field of study and the willingness to do volunteer work cannot be upheld either, although the analysis shows a lower likelihood of volunteering among students of economics and business.

Our third (H3) hypothesis has also been partially corroborated. Findings reveal that group memberships are more common among men (not women), frequent church attendees, and those who have a good relationship with faculty but have a relatively distant one with their parents. As with volunteering, better academic performance and paid student employment are positively correlated with group membership. However, participation in voluntary groups is unaffected by the parents' educational attainment or financial status (as with volunteering). Closer peer relationships have no significant effect, either. The explanation may lie in the fact that organizations are not related to universities, while university communities are linked to the campus, which is not volunteering-focused but enables the emergence of leisure and educational communities. The reason that group membership is more common in the Ukrainian sample and less so in Hungary

may be that the proportion of students in a minority situation, which increases the involvement in voluntary groups, is the highest in the Ukrainian sample and the lowest in the Hungarian one. Another explanation could be that in Ukraine, since the Orange Revolution, there has been an upswing in civic movements (organizational membership, volunteering, donations, etc.) as a reaction to the improper functioning of the state, whereby people compensate deficiencies through greater civic engagement (Worschech, 2017).

Conclusions

We have seen that young people's civic engagement and volunteering in Central-Eastern Europe is relatively low, although positive changes have occurred (which we have addressed in our first hypothesis). We have shown as well, that volunteering has a positive impact on its participants, target group, and environment. We propose that higher education institutions in Eastern European regions should rely on the potential in students' volunteering formally, that is, in an organized way or by awarding it with credits. Our data clearly show that in Romania, where volunteer work has been recognized as a form of internship since 2014, the rate of volunteering has increased significantly. Institutions could employ a dedicated professional to coordinate volunteering and "discuss" experiences. The activities offered to students in that way may also provide them with knowledge and with a variety of soft skills, which are less "transferable" by higher education institutions. In addition, it is important for policymakers of education and higher education institutions to take into account our findings on subgroups of students, which display lower civic engagement so that promoting volunteering and organizational participation among them becomes a priority.

Acknowledgements

Project no. 123847 has been implemented with the support provided from the National Research, Development, and Innovation Fund of Hungary, financed under the K_17 funding scheme.

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