

Volunteering and the academic life

Volunteering can be a really good tool for developing skills much needed in the professional world. It is clear how it is a great tool to help a community, raise awareness, transmit knowledge, empower the locals... – the list goes on and on. But its professional side can be easily overlooked and taken for granted, and one of its benefits is how it helps to create new skills and strengthen others.

I have always been a library rat and I always knew I wanted to pursue an academic life, so you might wonder how volunteering in topics focused on hands-on and physical work can help to achieve that. Personally, I started volunteering years ago; it was not in something related to heritage, but with kids. However, it was not until two years ago when I volunteered for the first time with European Heritage Volunteers that I became aware of how it could help my professional and personal development. After years of being at university doing research project after research project, internship after internship, presentation after presentation, I was really tired of academia. Sometimes it felt like a really closed world where you are not able to develop certain skills or have certain experiences.

And then, European Heritage Volunteers came into my life. Apart from the incredible experience of being surrounded by professional partners,

work instructors and volunteers from all over the world, and learning many different handcrafts and techniques, it helped me to know me better: what I was interested in, my own limits, my own strengths and weaknesses, my objectives in life, and many, many more things. I mean, now after two years of learning to build a dry stone wall, to plaster a wall, to restore wooden windows or helping in the reconstruction of a roof, I might be even able to make my own house. But jokes aside, it is also really motivating to be surrounded with people who are so invested and passionate about their work, and so willing to teach you about it. And also volunteers who are ready to learn about all of these handcrafts, of the place and of its history.

Two years ago, I was not sure if I had the necessary skills to be a group coordinator; I doubted if I would be able to work with such a big and multicultural group of people. But now and thanks to this experience, I have no doubts about my skills and I feel more confident than ever. I strengthened some skills I already had from my studies, like working with others, working in a big interdisciplinary and multicultural team, critical and practical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. But I also learnt about group dynamics and facilitation skills that I didn't have before. At the same time, I was aware of some skills

I had beforehand, but I had completely overlooked within myself, like cultural awareness, openness, flexibility, and a lot of organisational skills such as time management, multi-tasking, and prioritising. Personally, volunteering gave me soft skills and tools that I consider essential to success on my PhD.

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