

RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF LEARNING ACQUIRED THROUGH VOLUNTEERING IN CROATIAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Co-financed by the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the Croatian Centre for the Development of Volunteering and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy.

1. Background and Purpose

Between May and July 2025, the Croatian Volunteer Development Centre carried out a survey with the aim of gathering data on existing practices, challenges and needs related to the inclusion of volunteering in the educational process, with particular emphasis on civic education and service learning. The responses obtained, together with feedback collected through regional consultations with relevant stakeholders, will serve as the basis for the preparation of a national report and recommendations for improving the validation of learning through volunteering.

The questionnaire was intended for teachers and other professional staff members of educational institutions in Croatia, and consisted of 25 questions divided into five thematic sections. All responses were anonymous.

The survey was conducted as part of the *Volunteering & Equality strand* of the *Volunteering, Equality, Rights and Action (VERA) 2025* project. The project was funded by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) under the European Union programme *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)*.

2. Sample and Methodology

The survey was conducted on a non-representative sample of 144 respondents, of whom 124 completed the questionnaire in full. The questionnaire included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. More than half of the respondents are employed in secondary schools (52.08%), almost 32% in primary schools, and just over 10% in universities.

3. Key Findings

Volunteering in educational institutions

- **65%** of institutions engage pupils/students in volunteering.
- On average, around **50 pupils/students per institution** volunteer (ranging from 2 to 1000).
- Activities are mainly humanitarian (78%), support for children and young people (64%), and elderly persons (46%).
- Volunteering is predominantly part of **extracurricular activities (59%)**, less often integrated into curricula.

Recognition and validation of learning

- **53%** of respondents are aware of the existence of the *Certificate of Competences Acquired through Volunteering*, but only **25%** apply it in practice.
- **43%** of institutions do not validate learning through volunteering at all.
- When validated, the most frequently recognised competences are social and civic competences (80%), followed by communication, initiative and cultural awareness (45%).

Civic education and service learning

- Civic education is most often taught as a **cross-curricular topic (68%)**, rarely as a stand-alone subject.
- Service learning is implemented in fewer than **30% of institutions**.

- Barriers include lack of time within curricula (64%), insufficient teacher training (44%), and low staff motivation (38%).

Collaboration with community organisations

- **59%** of institutions cooperate with external organisations, mainly through short-term volunteering actions.
- Recognised benefits include development of civic competences (74%), higher student motivation (69%), and building long-term partnerships (61%).
- Barriers include lack of time and institutional capacity (67%), limited resources (58%), and insufficient information about good practices (32%).

4. Challenges Identified

- Volunteering remains largely humanitarian and extracurricular, with limited thematic scope.
- Lack of systemic recognition of volunteering as part of the educational process.
- Weak integration of non-formal learning outcomes into formal education.
- Absence of clear assessment criteria and limited awareness of existing tools.
- Insufficient institutional support and limited resources for teachers and schools.

5. Conclusion

The survey results indicate that volunteering plays an important, yet still insufficiently recognised and systematically validated role within educational institutions in Croatia. It is most commonly implemented through extracurricular activities and humanitarian actions, with occasional collaboration with community organisations. Despite the recognised benefits of volunteering – particularly in fostering civic competences and motivating students – its educational potential remains only partially utilised.

Although more than half of respondents are aware of the *Certificate of Competences Acquired through Volunteering*, its application in practice is limited, and a large proportion of institutions do not validate learning through volunteering in any way. Key barriers – such as lack of time, curriculum overload, the absence of clear criteria for assessment, and insufficient awareness of existing tools and resources – all point to the need for more systemic solutions that connect volunteering with formal education. Respondents clearly recognise the benefits of volunteering and cooperation with the local community, especially in relation to developing civic competences and increasing student motivation. However, realising this potential requires stronger institutional support in the form of clear guidelines, training opportunities, curricular space, and backing from relevant authorities.

Civic education is most often delivered as a cross-curricular theme, while service learning is present in only a small number of institutions, frequently thanks to the individual initiative of teachers. Collaboration with civil society organisations is mainly realised through short-term volunteering activities, while the inclusion of the community in education through civic education or service learning remains rare.

All of this highlights the need for better integration of volunteering into the education system, the development of a framework for recognising non-formal learning outcomes acquired through

volunteering, and more systematic cooperation between educational institutions and civil society. Such measures would contribute to improving the quality of formal education, while at the same time fostering active citizenship, democratic culture, solidarity and greater engagement of young people in their communities.