

VOLUNTEER MISSIONS FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The European Union is focusing on digital transformation through various mechanisms. One of the new framework programs – Horizon Europe (2021-2027) with a budget of over 100 billion euros – aims to precisely support the digital transformation and, along with investment in supercomputers, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity, will stimulate skills development. The digital transformation has opened new opportunities for access to information for people with special needs in Bulgaria. At the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) – Bulgaria, at the Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage (FLSCH) for ten years, part of the curriculum is the elective course “Access to Information for People with Special Needs” (AIPSN). It is an opportunity to expand the skills of future professionals to work with a wide group of users.

In recent years, there have been more and more occasions for reasoning volunteering as a social phenomenon and assessing its practical dimensions, starting with the motivation of volunteers, and reaching to all aspects of the benefits for society.

An element of the training in the elective course “Access to Information for People with Special Needs” is the inclusion of students in various volunteer missions, that also contribute to the enrichment of information resources for people with visual difficulties. This happens thanks to the platform Bemyguide.org, created to help people with visual difficulties in the perception of various phenomena, objects, people, through text descriptions of photographs and videos.

The goal of this paper is to reveal the possibilities for enriching the information resources for people with visual impairments in Bulgaria by involving students in the volunteer initiative of the Bemyguide.org platform. The current research is based on an analysis of the results of the learning process with undergraduate students in the period 2016-2020. The achievements of the students' activities as volunteers in the Bemyguide.org platform is statistically summarized and an overview of the issues and achievements of defended diploma theses on this topic. Conclusions are reached about the effectiveness and prospects of this pedagogical approach for fostering empathy and commitment of the future library and information professionals to the opportunities for enrichment of information resources for people with visual impairments in Bulgaria.

The opportunities and benefits of volunteering for students are multifaceted. The new approaches for the inclusion of volunteering in the content of the elective course “AIPSN” contributes to the enrichment of traditional education in the specialties preparing library professionals in Bulgaria. This is a good practice that can be multiplied and to be of an interest for the international audience.

Keywords: digital transformation, ULSIT, access to information for people with special needs, volunteer missions, Bemyguide.org

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the countries of the European Union have been facing the challenge of implementing the Europe 2020 program. This requires the mobilization and involvement of millions of European citizens, including voluntary work, in order to implement national programs, especially in areas such as education, healthcare, social activities, protection of vulnerable social

groups, mutual assistance in risk situations (Review, 2014).

Today, the European Union is focusing on digital transformation through various mechanisms. One of the new framework programs, Horizon Europe (2021-2027), with a budget of over 100 billion euros, aims to support digital transformation and, along with investment in supercomputers, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity, also stimulates skills development.

With a proposed budget of 100 billion euros over seven years, Horizon Europe is the largest EU's largest R&I framework programme ever. By coupling research and innovation, Horizon is helping with its emphasis on excellent science, industrial leadership and tackling societal challenges. The goal is to ensure Europe produces world-class science, removes barriers to innovation and makes it easier for the public and private sectors to work together in delivering innovation. The EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation will be complemented by further measures to complete and further develop the European Research Area. These measures will aim at breaking down barriers to create a genuine single market for knowledge, research, and innovation.

Digital Europe Programme (9,2 billion euros) will boost frontline investments in high-performance computing and data, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and advanced digital skills. Digital transformation and outreach are still one of the key principles of Horizon Europe Implementation.

In the IDC Worldwide Semi-annual Digital Transformation Guide, experts highlighted that the worldwide spending on technologies and services that enable digital transformation would reach 1,97 trillion dollars in 2022. It's also expected that this spending would double between now and 2021. By 2022, the total amount spent on digitalization globally would surpass 2,1 trillion dollars. IDC also predicts that digital transformation spending would grow steadily, and achieve a five-year compound annual growth rate of 16,7% between 2017 and 2022. The World Economic Forum suggests the value of digital transformation for both society and industry could reach 100 trillion dollars by 2025.

Business leaders, national and European policy makers, and individuals all have a role to play in accelerating Europe's digital transformation. Individuals need to develop their skills and embrace the flexibility and new opportunities that digitization offers them (https://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=IDC_P32575).

The digital transformation has opened new opportunities for access to information for people with special needs in Bulgaria. At the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT), at the Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage (FLSCH) for ten years, part of the curriculum in the Bachelor's degree in "Library and Information Management" is the elective course "Access to Information for People with Special Needs" (AISPN). It is an opportunity to expand the skills of future professionals to work with a wide group of users. An element of the training in this discipline is the inclusion of students in various volunteer missions, that also contributes to enrich the available digital information resources for people with visual impairments.

METHODOLOGY

The current research is based on an analysis of the results of the learning process with bachelor students in the period 2016-2020. The achievements of the students' activities as volunteers in the Bemyguide.org platform are statistically summarized and an overview of the issues and achievements of defended diploma theses on this topic. Conclusions are reached about the effectiveness and prospects of this pedagogical approach for fostering empathy and commitment of the future library and information professionals to the opportunities for enrichment of information resources for people with visual impairments in Bulgaria.

VOLUNTEERING AS A METHODOLOGY IN THE ACADEMIC LEARNING PROCESS

Volunteering in Bulgaria

Volunteering is a current research problem with variable readings in the modern social sciences and humanities. Regardless of the context, volunteering is an adaptive phenomenon and is able to benefit– public sectors, communities, groups, individuals (Todorova, Kr., 2013, p. 75). It is a fundamental and irreplaceable part of the civil society initiatives and is an important part of the activities in any modern society. Through it citizens make a significant contribution to social and economic development. This contribution has been highlighted many times through various initiatives, aimed at promoting volunteering internationally.

The attitudes of the society towards volunteer initiatives and activities in Bulgaria still differ from those of the countries with traditions in this area. On the one hand, this leads to a misunderstanding of volunteering as a philosophy, and on the other hand, to difficulties in achieving its goals (Volunteering activity, 2015). It is necessary to work for changing the attitude of the society towards volunteering in order to achieve its effective promotion.

Volunteering in Bulgaria is one of the sectors for which there is no official statistical information, except for sporadic sociological surveys and analyses of the non-governmental sector in the country. The data on the number of young volunteers in the country is based on nationally representative longitudinal sociological surveys, as well as information from the non-governmental sector in the country (Review, 2014).

In Bulgaria, the development of volunteering is based on the traditional sense of community in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Systematic development of the legislation in order to regulate voluntary activities and voluntary work in Bulgaria began to be established after the end of World War II. It is mainly characterized by the imposition of the state as a regulator of the widest possible range of activities that can be carried out voluntarily. The lack of certain legal mechanisms for regulating “voluntary activities” is also justified by the fact that voluntary activities in their pure form were not carried out until the beginning of the democratic transformations. The performance of voluntary work was primarily related to activities assigned by state bodies and organizations in order to support the implementation of state functions. Only in some cases is allowed voluntary activity of private, although of public importance activities (Legal Framework, 2002).

According to a study conducted on the initiative of the European Commission, in 2010 nearly 100 million Europeans participated in voluntary activities. According to Eurobarometer data, by 2018 only 12% of people in Bulgaria regularly participate in voluntary activities, which ranks our country in the penultimate place in the EU, compared to the EU average of 24%. Volunteers in Bulgaria are most often young people between 15-30 years old, engaged in activities such as cultural and sport events, environmental protection activities, charity campaigns, and more.

In the legal system of the country there is no legal definition for volunteering or for providing work and services without any interest in financial gain. Therefore, the status of volunteers, as well as their rights and obligations, are not established by law or officially recognized. The existing legal framework for volunteering is only partial and far from well developed (Moving borders, 2018). The main reasons why countries should revise their laws or adopt separate legislation, dedicated to volunteering is to promote volunteering, to define the rights and obligations of volunteers, to protect volunteers and to remove legal obstacles.

The right of volunteer activities is an inseparable part of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association, enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, respectively reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (Legal Framework, 2002). In 2006 a bill of Law on Volunteering was developed and proposed in implementation of the

European Parliament's legislative resolution of 26 November 2009 on the proposal for a Council decision declaring 2011 the European Year of Volunteering (2011 (COM(2009)0254–C7–0054/2009– 2009/0072(CNS)). The initiative is of the Bulgarian Centre for Not-For-Profit Law (BCNL) and a number of non-profit organizations, including the Bulgarian Red Cross, the National Alliance for Volunteer Action (NAVA), YMCA – Gabrovo, Caritas – Bulgaria, Green Balkans, CVS – Bulgaria, Blulink and the Peace Corps, etc. In the bill, volunteering is defined as: “activity carried out voluntarily, without payment in non-profit organizations or government agencies”. There is a legal possibility for the state to support and encourage voluntary activities through tax, financial, economic and other reliefs, that will be subject to regulation in special laws. The types of volunteering are regulated. A definition is given for short-term, long-term and corporate volunteering (Moving borders, 2018). There is no one universal way to regulate volunteering, mainly because of the nature of volunteering initiatives, but also because of the different goals that countries seek to achieve through legislation (Comparative Analysis, 2006).

Governments around the world are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the legal framework for promoting and encouraging volunteering. Legislative reforms have been introduced in many European countries in order to create a favourable environment for the development of volunteering. According to S. Petrova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy: “There is a great need for the adoption of a law that would regulate volunteering as a public phenomenon and establish a clear legal status of organized volunteering in Bulgaria. This will outline the legal framework for volunteer activities and create legal certainty for volunteers and volunteer organizations. This legislative measure is necessary and long-awaited to promote volunteering in Bulgaria. The lack of such a law determines the low interest and participation in volunteer campaigns and actions of citizens, as well as creates difficulties for institutions that work with volunteers.” (It is needed, 2018).

R. Veneva-Paucheva shares: “There is a great need for the adoption of a law that would regulate volunteering as a public phenomenon and establish a clear legal status of organized volunteering in Bulgaria. The adoption of a law or other normative document will outline the legal framework for volunteer activities and create legal certainty for volunteers and volunteer organizations. This legislative measure is necessary and long-awaited to promote volunteering in Bulgaria. The existence of a regulation in the field of volunteer work, which is very diverse in terms of activities, participants and problems, will guarantee the quality of this work. This is important for both volunteers and volunteer organizations.” (Volunteering, 2018). According to Katerina Hadji-Mitseva, “Separate country analyses show that the unfavourable regulations may pose serious obstacles to volunteering, as many national laws hinder or do not support volunteering. Regulatory is only part of the broader social and institutional context that determines the spread of volunteering in a certain country. The level of volunteering depends on many other factors, such as the economic and political situation, the image and level of development of the third sector, the established traditions of volunteering, the labour market. The experience of countries across Europe shows that the legal framework becomes an important factor when different regulations or the lack of legal protection create obstacles and barriers to volunteering. Therefore, the new trend, especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, is not only to achieve public recognition of volunteering, but to create a legal environment that encourages it.” (Comparative Analysis, 2006, p. 2).

The effective functioning of volunteering requires the participation and support of the state, through the creation of appropriate infrastructure at the local and national level, as well as state-funded schemes to support volunteering. The need to rethink the existing legislation is based on the fact that the number of volunteers is already increasing in many countries and, accordingly, the need for adequate protection of these people, similar to those employed, is growing. Separate country analyses show that the unfavourable regulations can pose serious obstacles to

volunteering, as many national laws hinder or do not support volunteering. The Bulgarian government must take into account the fact that volunteering is an initiative of citizens who, based on their free will, want to be an active part of the community in order to alleviate local problems and contribute to the achievement of various social and humanitarian goals. That's why, these processes should be evaluated and facilitated through government policies so that both informal and formal volunteering initiatives can thrive and help create a better society for all (Comparative Analysis, 2006). In regulating volunteering, governments must set clear policies and goals that they want to achieve and, in accordance with them, determine the type of volunteer activities they wish to regulate. Local traditions of volunteering must be taken into account when determining the appropriate approach. Otherwise, laws can be an obstacle to spontaneous initiatives, creating a burden for small organizations and to play a deterrent effect to the general culture of volunteering, giving one form of volunteering an advantage over another (Review, 2014).

Access to Information for People with Special Needs Academic Course and digital transformation via volunteer initiative of Bemyguide.org

Today, volunteering is an important component of the democratic society and knowing and understanding it benefits all members of society. The Universal Declaration on Volunteering, adopted in January 2001, states: "Volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society. It brings to life the noblest aspirations of humankind the pursuit of peace, freedom, opportunity, safety and justice for all people." (Universal Declaration, 2001, p. 1). The Declaration emphasizes that volunteering is a way to preserve and strengthen human values, to realize the rights and obligations of citizens, for personal growth through awareness of human potential. This declaration supports "the right of every woman, man and child to associate freely and to volunteer regardless of their cultural and ethnic origin, religion, age, gender and physical, social and economic position. All people in the world should have the right to freely offer their time, talent and energy to others and to their communities through individual and collective action, without expectation of financial reward." (Universal Declaration, 2001, p. 1).

Today in many countries around the world, volunteering is a daily social practice, and a number of studies confirm the growing trend of volunteering in all countries around the world. Unfortunately, there are very few examples from the Bulgarian academic reality that talk about volunteering and stimulate students' interest in participating in such initiatives.

At the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) at the Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage (FLSCH) for ten years, part of the curriculum in the Bachelor's degree in "Library and Information Management" is the elective course "Access to Information for People with Special Needs" (AISPAN). The course, developed by T. Todorova and S. Eftimova, provides the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge of the future professionals on access to information and education for people with special needs. It helps to expand the skills of future professionals to work with different groups of users.

As part of the auditory and extracurricular activities of students mastering the discipline is the presentation of the specifics of the phenomenon – volunteering. As a component of the methodology of training at AISPAN, students participate in targeted voluntary and charitable initiatives selected by teachers, through which they develop skills and creative potential in support of people with special needs. Five years of experience in the application of this pedagogical approach shows positive results. Students enrich the acquired theoretical knowledge with observations from practice, upgrade their skills, develop creative thinking, take an active citizen position. They consider their role as future information specialists, sensitive to the specific information needs of different groups of users.

Here we focus on one of the volunteer initiatives, in which students from the specialty "Library and

Information Management" (LIM) take part, related to the enrichment of information resources for people with visual impairments. Learners create content for the Bemyguide.org platform. Bemyguide.org's mission is to support the perception of various phenomena, people and objects by people with visual impairments through textual descriptions of photographs and video images. "Describe an interesting image, person or object to the blind" – is the main call for cooperation on the platform Bemyguide.org. The main goal is to show the blind the world through the eyes of sighted volunteers. The site collects and publishes text descriptions of various images, photos and videos (Todorova, T., & Eftimova, 2017).

The 21st century is a time of radical development of information and communication technologies (ICT), but access to information is not the same for different groups in modern society. Digital isolation is a complex problem we face. According to T. Todorova, in recent decades' access to information for people with disabilities is influenced and determined by three main trends: globalization, information revolution and respect for their human rights – the inadmissible but obvious exclusion from the opportunity to benefit from the assets of the unobstructed knowledge exchange. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 314 million people (data in the publication are as of 2011 – b.a.) among the population of our planet are blind or with partially impaired vision. Many of them not only do not participate in the information society, but even basic educational materials and literature are not available to them (Todorova, T., 2011, p. 123). Although the digital transformation has opened new opportunities for access to information for people with special needs in Bulgaria, in many respects the necessary conditions have not been created. There are also aspects of access to certain information that require additional activities, adaptation, editing and improvements.

New technologies allow information to be transformed and reach a wider range of users. Text files or books can be provided in the form of an audio file, through speech synthesizers and e-readers, as well as through many other technological methods. In this form, the presented information is used by people with visual impairments. The information deficit is being overcome and the opportunities for access to information are being expanded (Damyanova & Eftimova, 2020).

In their research, representatives of blind people commented that: "... there are still no technologies that allow photographs to be perceived through hearing. No program can describe images and videos. If there is a photo on a page, the speech synthesizer pronounces it as "photo", "picture", a set of letters and numbers or is just silent. I.e., only a friend, relative, acquaintance, volunteer... in general, only another person can describe visual information to a blind person. Often friends or relatives are busy or for some reason we do not want to turn to them. Then help from volunteers is needed... (The Blind and the Internet, 2015).

Despite progress and the technological revolution, there is still some information that does not reach every user. Here again comes the role of the individual to provide a new reading of the acquired and perceived knowledge. This happens through the combination of technologies and personal perception of the world (Damyanova & Eftimova, 2020).

In the academic year 2016/2017, within the training in the course "Access to Information for People with Special Needs" students were assigned the task to conduct a study of volunteer initiatives addressed to people with special needs; to join an initiative at their own will and to describe in a course project the activities, observations and achievements (Eftimova, 2018). The task was met with interest by students. As a result of the positive results and the interest generated, four fourth-year students choose the topic of their diploma theses to be related to the volunteer initiative on the "Be my guide" website. Thus, until the defence of their diploma theses in July 2017, descriptions were uploaded, representing 35% of all descriptions created on the site so far.

Graduates from the next class of 2015/2019 are also involved in this initiative. Two students created 85 descriptions, 30 of which were descriptions of illustrations to children's works.

The 2016/2020 class also contributes to this noble initiative. Two graduates made a total of 179 descriptions. We highlight the achievement of the student I. Damyanova, who together with descriptions of illustrations for children, creates a unique series of descriptions of the letters of the Bulgarian alphabet, of the numbers and illustrations to the book "We, the Sparrows", a work for children, anniversary edition, dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the birth of the writer Yordan Radichkov. After graduating, I. Damyanova continued her volunteer work. She created descriptions of almost all of Vadim Lazarkevich's illustrations to Ran Bosilek's Patilantsi stories. This is one of the unforgettable creative tandems that created one of the most emblematic editions for children in Bulgarian children's literature (Mincheva, K., Eftimova, S. & Mukanova, P., 2017).

Another graduate, N. Platnarova, created descriptions of paintings by Bulgarian and world authors for the category "Art". The concept on which it is based is the creation of descriptions that recreate the works in detail. Along with this, the aim is to "tell" not only the seemingly visible objects, but also the whole idea and emotion that the artist has invested in the work.

In summary, the contribution of the "Library and Information Management" students to the volunteer initiative of the Bemyguide.org platform numbers over 480 descriptions, which is 50% of the content of the site (Table №1). This is a good trend, showing sustainability and giving hope that more and more young people, with the help and guidance of their teachers, will comprehend and discover the boundless possibilities of volunteering for change for the better. Because volunteering is a tool for self- development or discovering additional talents and skills, as well as a path to humanity.

Table 1. Diploma thesis topics and number of descriptions for the Bemyguide.org platform.

Diploma thesis topics	Year	Number of descriptions
Opportunities for creating an information-supporting environment (following the example of www.bemyguide.org)	2017	68
Good practices in working with people with visual impairments (Creating an information package based on volunteer work)	2017	88
Adaption and creation an information flow for children with visual impairments	2017	35
Working practices in the information service of persons with visual impairments	2017	14
Creating information resources suitable for children with visual impairments	2019	30
Opportunities for creating an information-supporting environment	2019	55
Enrichment of the information environment for children with visual impairments	2020	129
Art for the visually impaired: Descriptions of selected paintings for the site Bemyguide.org	2020	60
	TOTAL:	479

The participation of students as volunteers in the creation of text descriptions has great potential for enriching the available information resources for people with visual impairments in Bulgaria. It is also an important moment in their training as information specialists, called to ensure equal access to knowledge and information for all citizens.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, there have been more and more reasons to consider volunteering as a social phenomenon and to assess its practical dimensions, starting with the motivation of volunteers and reaching all aspects of the benefits for society.

The opportunities and benefits of volunteering for students are multifaceted. The new methodological approaches for the inclusion of volunteering in the content of the elective course "AIPSN" contributes to the enrichment of traditional education in the specialties training librarians in Bulgaria. This is a good practice that may be multiplied and to be of an interest for the international audience.

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