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RESULTS OF THE SURVEY ON THE RECOGNITION OF VOLUNTEERS' COMPETENCES BY EMPLOYERS

Name of the survey: Survey on the recognition of volunteers' competences by employers

Survey led from: 28 February 2015 to 30 April 2015

Target audience: Public consultation

Total number of responses: 131

The “GR-EAT” (2014-2016) project aims to propose a comprehensive tool for the implementation of recognition systems and contribute to the overall advocacy process towards the **recognition of non-formal and informal learning taking place within youth organisations**. Led by AEGEE-Europe, EUCIS-LLL is one of the six partners, along with Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Youth for Exchange and Understanding, World Organisation of the Scout Movement and La Ligue de l’enseignement.

The learning outcomes of volunteering¹ are seldom recognised by employers whereas they could greatly increase (young) persons’ chances in the labour market. In this context, EUCIS-LLL carried out **research among employers** in all types of sectors (public, private and non-for-profit) to find out about their **needs and expectations regarding the recognition of non-formal and informal learning**.

To better understand their expectations, data was gathered through desk research, interviews and meetings. A survey was also published to put light on employers’ perceptions of volunteering and on the tools/ways to better recognise the non-formal and informal learning taking place during this experience. Indeed, in order to develop tools to support a better recognition of non-formal and informal learning, it is crucial to understand the expectations and needs of employers taking into account different sectors.

The survey on recognition of competences gained in volunteering revealed that **employers usually value the fact that an applicant was active as a volunteer** in the final decision to hire a job applicant. This optimistic result is supported by the fact that half of the respondents are flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers by providing flexible hours and authorise absence leave. What is more, the survey shows that the **existing tools to support the validation process are mainly unknown**. It is crucial to broaden the understanding of these tools for employers and raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering for their businesses or organisations. Regarding volunteers, it is crucial to help them increase their employability skills and understanding about employers’ expectations.

¹ *Volunteering is defined as all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal, and is often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation, including youth work and community-based initiatives.*

The survey results presented in this document show the following key findings:

- Employers place a lot of emphasis on finding candidates with the right competences and **soft skills**, for example ‘a problem-solving attitude and resilience’, ‘a sense of initiative and pro-active attitude’ and ‘social and civic competences’ are particularly valued.
- Respondents agree with the fact that the **competences** of an applicant gained during a volunteering period can be **as valuable** to a company or organisation as the competences gained through formal learning (4.07/5). Additionally, they **value the fact that an applicant was active as a volunteer in the final decision to hire a job applicant compared to other aspects, such as diplomas (3.88/5)**.
- However, almost **40%** stated that **applicants struggle to explain the competences they have gained during a volunteering period**. Therefore, it is essential to **offer specific support to volunteers** in order to raise their awareness of the competences and skills they have acquired during their voluntary experience and their ability to present it to employers.
- What is more, **50%** of respondents stated that their organisations or companies are **flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers** by providing flexible working hours and authorising exceptional absence leave, supported by the fact that **44.55%** reported running a programme to encourage volunteering.
- On the other hand, it is important to note that despite the benefits of volunteering for both the employer and organisation or company, almost **42%** of employers from the for-profit sector **are not flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers**.
- **36%** of respondents have specific policies and procedures in place regarding validation or recognition of competences gained in non-formal and informal contexts, and **29%** of those who do not have any policy think that this might be an option for the future. Respondents representing companies have less specific policies and procedures in place than non-for-profit and public organisation.
- **46.15%** of employers expressed the **need for other certificates or a portfolio that evidences the competences gained** to assess volunteers’ competences and skills.
- **However very few respondents use or recognise competence frameworks and recognition tools** such as the Eight Key Competences Framework, the Common European Framework Reference of Languages and Youthpass. Out of the 138 respondents, only **100 answered and 31 skipped** the answer, which reveals the lack of knowledge concerning these tools.

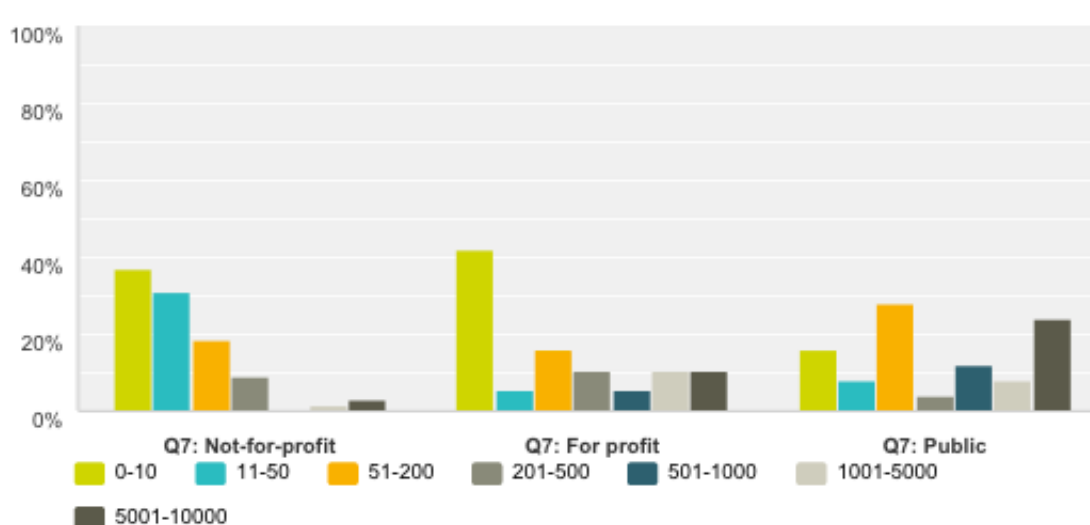
The survey reveals three important mismatches:

- The mismatch between the value given to volunteering and the capacity of employers to assess the learning outcomes gained in that context;
- The mismatch between the lack of knowledge and use of existing recognition tools and the need expressed by employers for such tools;
- The mismatch as regards the competences gained by volunteers through non-formal and informal learning and their own capacity to express them to employers.

The final project GR-EAT outcome will be to develop guidelines for youth organisations and produce policy recommendations to improve the recognition of volunteering. We have conducted an online survey that collected 131 responses.

1. Profile of survey respondents

Graph 1 – Size of interviewed companies and organisations



The respondents of our survey are non-for-profit organisations (**60%**), for-profit companies (**20%**) and administrations and institutions (**20%**). They represent mainly small companies and organisations and **47%** of them have offices at local/regional level, against **28%** at national level, **10%** at European level and **17%** at international level. Half of the respondents are in charge of recruitment (**48%**), **43%** are Directors/CEO or Deputy Directors/Deputy CEO and **9%** are Heads of Human Resources. The survey has the capacity to identify patterns of skill demands from different sectors and the following results are meant to identify the needs of employers for each type of organisation interviewed.

2. The three competences gained during a volunteering period that are most relevant for the labour market

Table 1

Answer Choices	Responses (%)
Digital competences	11.40
Capacity to learn (“learning to learn”)	42.11
Social and civic competences	47.37
Intercultural and interpersonal skills	45.61
Sense of initiative and pro-active attitude (entrepreneurial mindset)	55.26
Problem-solving attitude	57.02
Cultural awareness and expression	11.40
Mathematical competences and basic competences in science & technology	3.51
Networking and public relations skills	16.67
Communication in the mother tongue	3.51
Communication in foreign languages	19.30

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning² provided a European reference framework covering **eight key competences** (defined as “knowledge, skills and attitudes” by the European Commission) which encompass a broad agenda for education and training at all stages of life³. In this context, we asked employers to select among a list of eleven competences, including the eight defined by the European Commission, what three skills gained by individuals during a volunteering period are the most relevant for the labour market. According to the respondents, the three competences are: **Problem-solving attitude and resilience (57.02%), Sense of initiative and pro-active attitude (55.26%), Social and civic competences (47.37%)**. These are shortly followed by intercultural and interpersonal skills and capacity to learn, representing respectively **45.61%** and **42.11%** (see Table 1).

The three types of organisations interviewed (non-for-profit, for-profit and public) agreed that the three competences gained during a volunteering period are most relevant for the labour market, however, the order of appeal is different depending on the type of company or organisation. For-profit organisations think that the **sense of initiative** is the most relevant competence, whereas non-for-profit and public organisations think that the most relevant competence is respectively **Intercultural and interpersonal skills** and **problem-solving attitude** (see Graph 2).

According to the European Commissions’ definition⁴, **sense of initiative** involves ‘*creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives. The individual is aware of the context of his/her work and is able to seize opportunity that arise*’. One of the respondents of our survey from the **for-profit sector** stated that the **sense of initiative**, which is the ability to turn ideas into action, **is the most important competence** because it requires lateral thinking and confidence. He added that pro-active people are constantly moving forward, looking to the future and making things happen. Therefore, **it is an added value for companies**.

Furthermore, being a **confident problem-solver** seems particularly important to one’s success in the labour market. Defining problems, generating alternatives, evaluating alternatives, and implementing solutions are the fundamental steps to being a problem-solver. Besides, it is often linked to decision-making skills, another key skill in the workplace.

Intercultural and interpersonal skills are described under the EU definition of “*social and civic competences*” that refer to personal, interpersonal and intercultural competence and all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life. Employers from the non-for-profit sector particularly expressed appreciation for this competence.

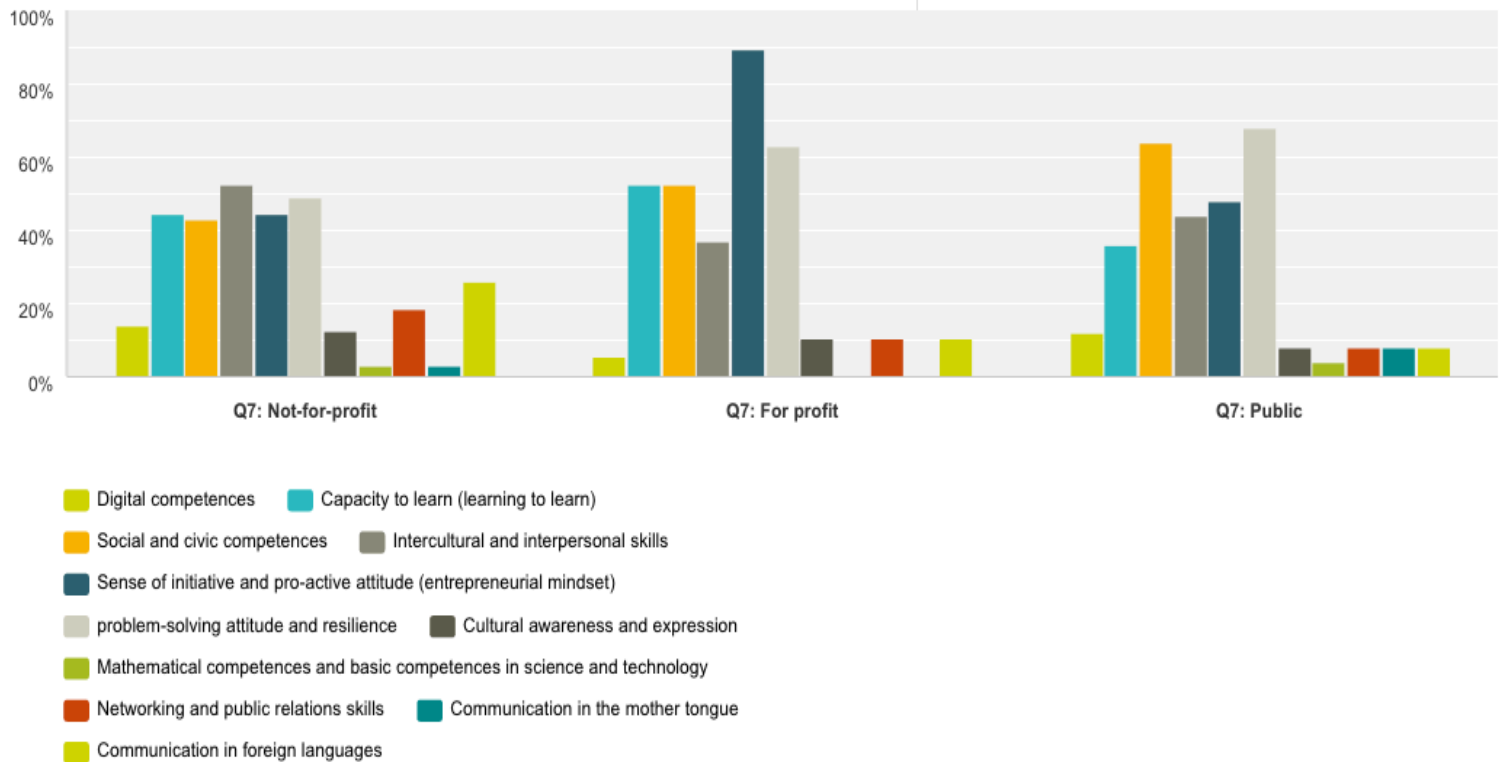
The following graph shows the most relevant competences gained by people during a voluntary period **according to each category of interviewees**.

² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962>

³ The eight key competences for lifelong learning are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment.

⁴ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV:c11090>

Graph 2 – Most relevant competences gained during a volunteering period by category



The most relevant competences gained during a volunteering period correspond to the ones that have been identified in the 2013 Cedefop research “Piloting a European employer survey on skill needs”⁵, except for digital skills. The Cedefop study implies that employers increasingly require validation of **digital literacy skills**, so much so that employability can depend on it. However, our survey shows that only **11.4%** of the respondents consider digital competences as a skill gained during a volunteering period as most relevant. The conclusion we can draw is that **most employers presume that persons already encompass those competences** and therefore, **digital literacy became a basic skill**. Another explanation is that, for many, volunteering implies working in the field and not on a desk; reflecting a partial image of the voluntary sector and of the activities performed by volunteers.

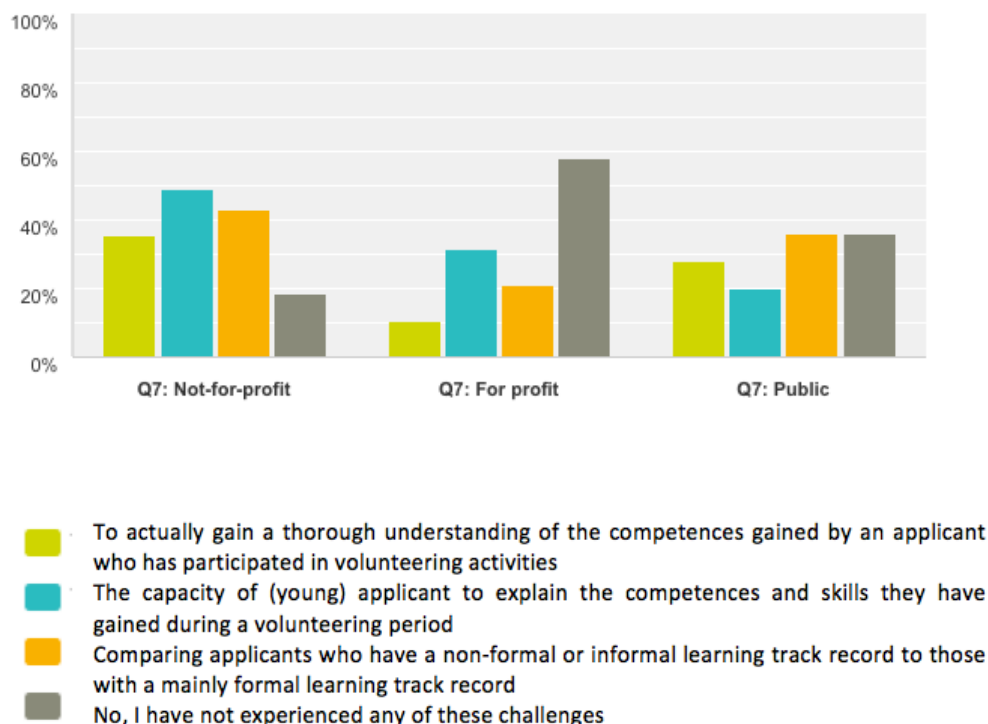
Although the Internet is part of daily life for many of us, some parts of the population are still excluded from media literacy in a digital environment and we are facing a shortage of employees with digital skills across the EU⁶. Therefore, it is crucial that policy-makers anticipate and analyse skill requirements and address digital skills at the highest political level. A respondent of our survey from the for-profit sector agreed and explained that **digital literacy improves employability** because it is a skill demanded by many employers when they first evaluate a job application. Additionally, it will be looked upon favourably due to it enabling the acquisition of other important life skills.

⁵ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5536>

⁶ ‘Yet skills development does not come about as fast as technological development, which is why we are faced with a paradoxical situation: although almost 24 million Europeans are currently without a job, companies have a hard time finding skilled digital technology experts. As a result, **there could be up to 825,000 unfilled vacancies for ICT professionals by 2020**. Moreover, there is a need for digital skills for nearly all jobs where digital technology complements existing tasks. In the near future 90% of jobs - in careers such as engineering, accountancy, nursing, medicine, art, architecture, and many more - will require some level of digital skills’.

3. Challenges

Graph 3 – Challenges in recognising the learning acquired during a long-volunteering experience according to each type of organisations interviewed



Moreover, we asked employers if they experienced any challenges in recognising the learning acquired during a long-term volunteering experience (see Graph 3). Among a short list of the most common challenges in this area, respondents were asked to choose at least one challenge they may have experienced: **38.60%** of them stated that **applicants struggle to explain the competences and skills they have gained during a volunteering period** (this is the most frequent response given by non-for-profit organisations) and **36.84%** explained that it is **challenging to compare applicants who have a non-formal or informal learning track record to those with a mainly formal learning track record** (this is the most frequent response given by public organisations). This shows that it is essential to **offer specific support to volunteers** in order to raise their awareness of the competences and skills they have acquired during their voluntary experience and their ability to present it to employers.

One of the respondents suggests that it is better to think in terms of **developing potentialities** rather than knowledge, skills and competences as the use of these terms - often on an interchangeable basis - and in multiple contexts results in considerable conceptual confusion.

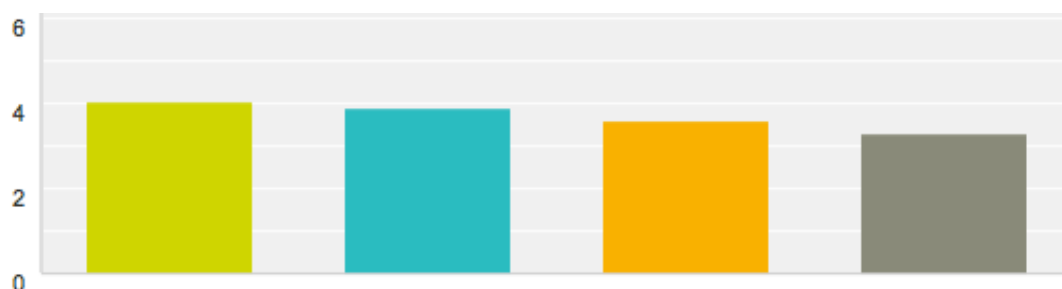
Finally, our survey displays how **60%** of respondents from the **for-profit sector** stated that they have not experienced any of challenges listed (**20%** of the respondents from the non-for-profit sector stated the same and **40%** of the respondents from the public sector also stated that they have not experienced any of these challenges).

The conclusion we can draw from this is that most of the **private organisations have more strategic human resources management and tools** to evaluate applicants compared to the other types of organisations, which can explain the lack of issues during selection processes and therefore the very high percentage of the last option. Another explanation is that for-profit companies may be ignorant to the skills gained through volunteering, due to a lack of understanding, and therefore do not appreciate them as much when compared to other attributes, for example “hard facts” like studies and professional experience, so do not consider it in their selection criteria for business employees.

Contrastingly, having a **volunteering experience is very much appreciated in the non-for-profit sector**. As one interview explained, it illustrates that the candidate already knows the sector. The survey also shows that only **20%** of employers from this sector have no difficulties in assessing such competences. It is thus important to support volunteers to better showcase their competences even to employers from the third sector. In Belgium, for example, the associative sector represents **12%** of the total employment and **5.5%** of the GDP (bi-annual review, National Bank of Belgium).

4. Employers’ opinion regarding volunteering

Graph 4 – to what extent do employers agree with the following statements?



- The competences of an applicant gained during a volunteering period can be as valuable to a company / organisation as the competences gained through formal learning (diplomas, work experience)
- Do you value the fact that an applicant was active as a volunteer in the final decision to hire a (young) job applicant compared to other aspects (diploma, work experience...)
- The importance given to competences gained during a volunteering period for the final decision to hire a young applicant is dependent on the job profile
- My organisation/company is flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers by providing flexible working hours and/or exceptional absence leave authorisation

The survey is optimistic for volunteers: *Graph 4* shows that respondents agree with the fact that the **competences** of an applicant gained during a volunteering period can be **as valuable** to a company or organisation as the competences gained through formal learning (4.07/5) and respondents answered that they **value the fact that an applicant was active as**

a volunteer in the final decision to hire a young job applicant compared to other aspects, such as diplomas (3.88/5).

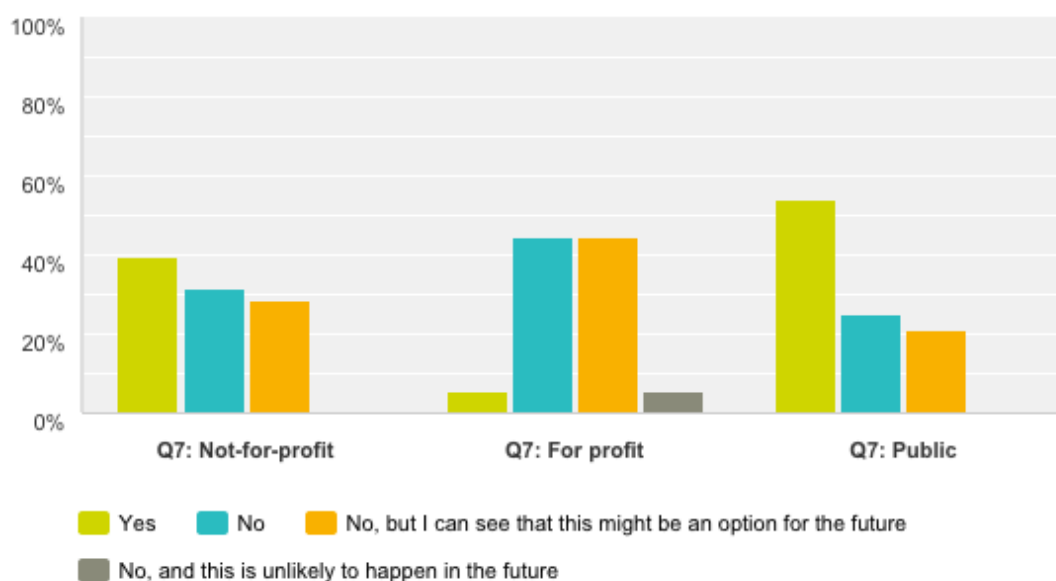
It is even more relevant for the non-for-profit and public sectors: **one out of every two** employers coming from these sectors agrees with these statements, whereas **one out of four** employers coming from the non-for-profit sector shares these ideas. These numbers are optimistic because volunteering can be a method of empowerment and raising self-esteem for individuals, and can make volunteering more attractive, especially to persons keen to enhance that learning and raise their human capital potential.

One of the respondents from the non-for-profit sector stated that **“volunteering is a skill invaluable in creating a work ethic, so competences gained through volunteering are extremely important”**.

Another respondent stated that she does not see a need for formal evidence of the skills achieved through volunteering. What can make the difference during recruitment is the **capacity of the candidates to give examples of how they exercised given competences in practice** during their volunteering experience and their capacity to talk about these in a convincing and sophisticated manner.

What is more, **50%** of the respondents stated that their organisations or companies are **flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers** by providing flexible working hours and authorising exceptional absence leave, supported by the fact that **44.55%** reported running a programme to encourage volunteering. However, it is important to note that despite the benefits of volunteering for both the employer and organisation or company, almost **42%** of employers from for-profit sector **are not flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers**. Therefore, it is crucial to increase employers’ awareness of the benefits of volunteering for their businesses.

Graph 5 – Specific policy/procedure in place regarding the validation or recognition of competences gained in NFIL



Another point that was raised is that **36%** of respondents have a specific policy and procedures in place regarding validation or recognition of competences gained in non-formal and informal contexts, and **29%** of those who do not have any policy think that this might be an option for the future. For each category, our survey shows that respondents from for-profit organisations have less specific policies and procedures in place regarding the validation or recognition of competences gained in NFIL than non-for-profit and public organisation, but **45%** of for-profit who do not have any procedure in place think that it might be an option for the future (see Graph 5).

Some respondents shared examples of policy or procedures in place regarding validation: a respondent working for the autonomous community of Murcia (Spain) gave us the example of the **National Catalogue of professional Qualifications (CNCP)**⁷. It is an instrument of the National System for Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training, which lists the professional qualifications according to the appropriate competences for the professional exercise.

Another respondent working for the European Association of Education in France listed the **ELICIT Portfolio of the European Citizen**⁸, which contains a passport/biography with personal details, a personal logbook in which people can write about their experience as a European Citizen and about their learning achievements (self-assessment tool) as well as a file to collect and show examples or evidence of what they have done (texts, videos, etc). This procedure is focused on citizenship and describes in detail one's achievements and objectives for future development.

What is more, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland have developed an award and use it as a mechanism for establishing to what extent people have the prerequisite **Motivation and Vocation Attributes (MVA)**⁹ – In Ireland the GAA is the dominant organisation for Sports Volunteering accounting for **42%** of Sports Volunteers in Ireland.

Finally, the network of French student associations aiming at promoting student associative life and projects led by young people ANIMAFAC uses **“Volunteering for skills”**¹⁰ which aims to help young volunteers in the identification of skills developed during a volunteering period. The portfolio developed by ANIMAFAC works as a self-assessment tool and four main transversal skills were identified: communication, administration, team management and interpersonal skills and project management.

5. Competences frameworks and recognition tools are mainly unknown

Contrastingly to the previous positive research outcomes, **few respondents use or recognise competence frameworks and recognition tools** such as the Eight Key Competences Framework, the Common European Framework Reference of Languages, Mozilla OpenBadges and Youthpass. Out of the 131 respondents, only **100 answered and 31 skipped** the answer, which shows the little knowledge concerning these tools. This was confirmed by the phone interviews. If some of them are quite known, others are not used at all, which is why there is a need to clarify and make them understandable to everyone.

⁷ http://www.mecd.gob.es/educa/incual/ice_catalogoWeb.html

⁸ <http://www.elicitizen.eu/>

⁹ <http://www.gaa.ie/>

¹⁰ <http://www.animafac.net/>

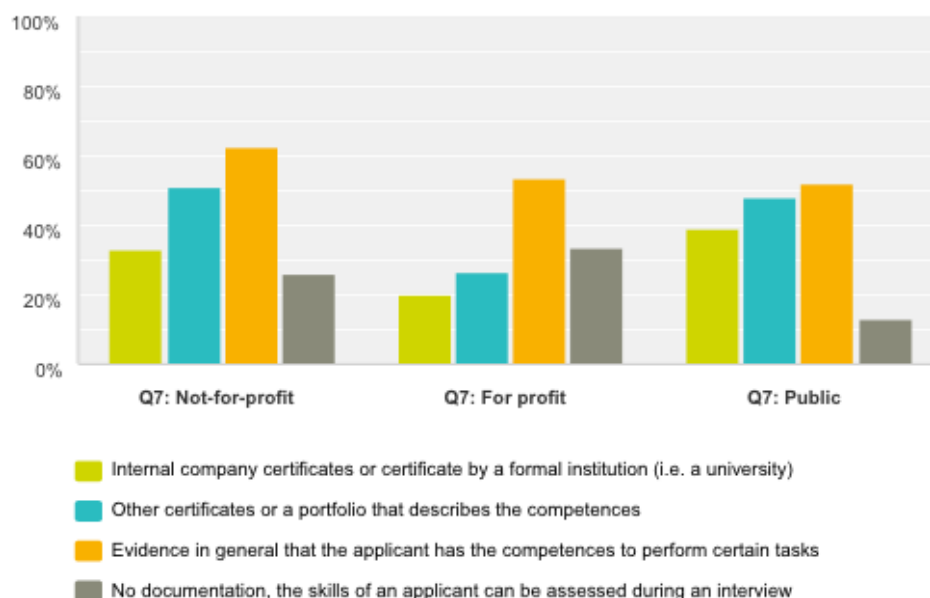
The results are the following:

- **Eight Key Competences as defined by the European Commission:** 25.8% of respondents are familiar with this tool, 74.15% are not familiar with this tool and 29% of them could potentially use them;
- **Common European Framework for Reference of Languages:** this tool is quite famous among respondents compared to others: 40% are familiar with it and 60% are not. Amongst the latter 60%, 18% could potentially use them;
- **Youthpass:** this tool is the most famous amongst respondents: 42% use or recognise it, even if 58% are not familiar with it. Among the 58%, only 13.5% could potentially use them.
- **Mozilla OpenBadges:** the survey shows this tool is the less known amongst respondents. Only 5.5% use it or recognise it and 94.4% are not familiar with it at all. Among the 94.4%, only 12% could potentially use them.

Lastly, the survey shows that employers need evidence that the applicant has the competences to perform certain tasks, in order to recognise the competences gained during a volunteering period (58.65%) against 25.96% of them who say they do not need documentation since the skills of an applicant can be assessed during an interview.

6. Employers' needs to recognise the competences of volunteers

Graph 6 – What would you need in order to recognise the competences gained during a volunteering period?



This leaves us with **46.15% of employers interviewed who expressed the need for other certificates or a portfolio that evidences the competences gained to assess volunteers' competences and skills**. A respondent from Maastricht University clearly explained that a portfolio is always helpful to support an interview.

Unfortunately, as shown above, a high majority of respondents do not know such certificates may be delivered using the competence frameworks and recognition tools. Hence, the conclusion we draw is that **dissemination campaigns on the existence of these tools** should be launched in order to implement the programmes, facilitating recognition and reversing a disadvantageous trend for volunteers, but also employers who value these competences.

Showing certificates is often the only thing that seems to matter to individuals and employers. Therefore, broadening the understanding of these tools is needed. The use of self-assessment tools serves as an important validation to equip people in effectively negotiating with employers. However, the tools not only aim to validate learning skills but also to increase overall self-confidence of volunteers. It is crucial to understand that, as a respondent stressed, the most important element is the **guidance that is taking place around those tools** in order to create such awareness. Most of the time, funding goes to defining the tools and not to such activities, which impedes their usefulness and thus greatly limits their use.

7. Conclusions

Employers place a lot of emphasis on finding candidates with the right set of skills and competencies that are compatible their organisations. Depending on the career sector one chooses to work in, there could be very specific skills and knowledge needed to do the work effectively. However, complementing these with soft skills is essential for success in the work place. Candidates often ignore these, but they are the things recruitment professionals want to see evidence of.

The survey on recognition of competences gained in volunteering revealed that employers usually value the fact that an applicant was active as a volunteer in the final decision to hire a job applicant. This optimistic result is supported by the fact that half of the respondents are flexible in allowing employees to take an active role as volunteers by providing flexible hours and authorise absence leave. But, notably, these results should be treated with caution and it is crucial to move from theory to practice.

What is more, the survey shows that the existing tools to support the validation process are mainly unknown. It is crucial to broaden the understanding of these tools for employers and raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering for their businesses or organisations. Regarding volunteers, it is valuable to help them increase their employability skills and understanding about employers' expectations, to aid them in expressing the competences gained from their experiences to the best of their ability, to achieve their full potential in the future

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