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Volunteering among social work students: satisfaction, motives and benefits. When the emotional transcends the academic

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ABSTRACT

Volunteering is one way for social work students to access social intervention spaces. It has been shown to have positive impacts on both academic training and professional development. However, the data on volunteering participation indicate that Spain has a lower percentage of university student involvement than other countries, with increasing difficulties in attracting this group to volunteering. This article presents an empirical study of volunteering motives and benefits and their relationship with final levels of satisfaction among students. A survey was conducted among social work students ($N = 1.034$) from two Spanish universities, which produced a sub-sample ($N = 212$) that allowed for the analysis of correlations between volunteering satisfaction, motives and benefits. The results show that although motives are based on social conscience and commitment, the highest levels of satisfaction among students are linked to benefits in terms of emotional well-being rather than academic or professional development. These findings can help volunteer organizations to adjust or take into account these expectations when designing the profiles of positions and considering how to manage the participation of student social workers who are volunteering at their entities.

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Volunteering; social work students; motives; benefits; satisfaction

Introduction

Placements at social intervention institutions and settings are considered one of the key pillars of social work training (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Curl & Benner, 2017; MacDermott & Campbell, 2016). Although the number of hours, content and requirements of these placements will differ depending on the country and university, domestic and international social work education bodies maintain that fieldwork must be a specific feature of the training process (CSWE, 2015); Asociación Universitaria Española de Trabajo Social (AUETS 2022). References for this form of learning are the models of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), both of which emphasize its importance when designing academic curriculums (Cheung & Delavega, 2014; Robinson et al.,

2022). There is hence an argument to make fieldwork more influential in the training of future social workers, whether by incentivizing participation in volunteering, developing curricular and extracurricular placements at support institutions, or including service-learning dynamics as part of their academic training. This article focuses on the first of these strategies.

Most of the 37 Spanish universities offering social work qualifications (Spanish Ministry for Universities, 2023) foster learning by including fieldwork in their official course curriculums. These options range from 120 to 900 hours, although the majority of placements have a duration between 240 and 525 hours. They preferably take place during the final year of the degree (AUETS, 2022), as in other countries (Gaston & Kruger, 2014; Small et al., 2017).

A significant number of Spanish university providers of social work qualifications also promote social work education-focused service-learning experiences through teaching innovation initiatives and projects. These foster active student participation in real-life contexts as part of the formal academic learning process. This strategy, which has a long and well-established track record in other countries (Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Maccio, 2011; Schelbe et al., 2014), has come to prominence in Spain in recent years (Encina & Aranguren-Vigo, 2023; Mohedano-Menéndez et al., 2020) although its scope and impact have yet to be fully confirmed.

The other alternative developed by Spanish universities to encourage the acquisition of experiential knowledge has been volunteering. Both the Basic Law on the University System (*Ley Orgánica del Sistema Universitario*, 2023) and the State Law on Volunteering (*Ley Estatal del Voluntariado*) give Spanish universities the role of promoting volunteering. One study reported that 95% of universities in Spain have a volunteering programme or service Madrileña (2023). These programmes generally involve students participating in third-sector entities that have formal collaboration agreements with universities.

The same study Madrileña (2023) estimated that during academic year 2022–2023, 19460 Spanish university students volunteered on projects involving the collaboration of Spanish universities, mainly concerning groups at risk of social exclusion. Volunteers were mainly from the social and legal sciences (50%), including those studying for social work qualifications. This is consistent with data from other studies (Holdsworth, 2010). These data only covered participation in university volunteering programmes and did not record participation in other, non-university schemes.

In an attempt to calculate overall figures, in 2022 the Spanish Volunteering Platform (*Plataforma del Voluntariado de España*) (PVE) estimated that out of the 3.3 million people aged over 14 years who participated in volunteering activities, 15.3% (504,900 people) were aged between 14 and 24 (PVE, 2023. Cívico-Ariza et al. (2020) estimated, based on data from the 2019 PVE report, that 5.2% of volunteers in Spain were students, with between 45.5% and 53.2% of that group studying for first or second-cycle higher education qualifications.

The current scenario hence involves a paradox: although Spanish students have a very positive view of volunteering, their participation levels remain very low compared to other nearby countries (Cívico-Ariza et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, students' expectations and the circumstances that facilitate their involvement in volunteering vary both among themselves and across different countries. Thus, in a recent report on youth volunteering in Spain (Botín, 2023) stated that 84% of volunteering entities were finding it difficult to

connect with members of generation Z and attract them to their social causes—a trend that is not confined to Spain (Grimm & Dietz, 2018; Norman & Lukman, 2020).

University volunteering literature review

There has been extensive research examining the relationship between universities and volunteering. Certain studies have focused on describing the relationship and measuring its impact on the university environment (Edwards et al., 2001; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). Others have concentrated on examining how students perceive volunteering (Gaston & Kruger, 2014; Paull et al., 2022), establishing different categories to analyze their motives (Batson & Ahmad, 2001; Giorgio, 2003; Peters, 2011) and proposing identification and measurement instruments (Vecina et al., 2009; Clary et al., 1998). Another key focal point for research in this field has been studying volunteers' satisfaction with their experiences and describing the potential benefits of volunteering (Barton et al., 2019; Darwen & Rannard, 2011; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). The scarce literature published in Spain on university volunteering has focused on analyzing the relationship between volunteering and university (Arias, 2011; Arias & Rincón, 2016), adjustment of instruments for measuring motives (Checa et al., 2023), analyzing motives (Valor & Rodríguez, 2011) and studying perceptions of volunteers (Cívico-Ariza et al., 2020).

In any event, the decision to become and remain a volunteer has been found to be positively associated with motives, benefits and volunteer satisfaction (Barraza, 2011; Clary et al., 1998; Vecina et al., 2021). This satisfaction is particularly linked to the expected and/or potential benefits of volunteering (Garner & Garner, 2010; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Vecina et al., 2009). In the specific case of university students, several studies have reflected the benefits that volunteering offers in terms of training, employment and personal development (Barton et al., 2019; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Peters 2011).

Given this context, the content and purpose of social work qualifications have a particularly close relationship to volunteering. Including volunteering in social work education and training could help to develop the values, knowledge and skills required for professional social work practice (Badham & Eadie, 2000). This has caused social work to be subject to research, albeit to a lesser extent than the attention paid to service-learning. Both Anderson and Braudy (2002) and Badham and Eadie (2000) focused on the gaps between training in social work and volunteering as a social work activity, asserting the capacity of the latter to have an impact on academic training. Other authors (Brozmanová & Stachon, 2014) have described the links between social work and volunteering and their evolution from a historical perspective. More recently, Curl and Benner (2017) have identified volunteering motives and benefits among social work students. They argue that volunteering has a positive influence on socialization for social work students, contributing to transformative applied learning and promoting the professional values that underpin social work. In turn, papers by Demirbilek et al. (2017) and Gaston and Kruger (2014) have focused on describing perceptions of volunteering among social work students at the University of Ankara (Turkey) and first-year undergraduates at the University of South Australia, respectively. The results in both cases showed a highly positive view of volunteering and its personal and academic benefits. The participation of social work students in international volunteering

programmes has also been analyzed (Lough et al., 2012), in addition to the perceptions that voluntary sector entities have of social work students (MacDermott and Campbell, 2016). Finally, there has only been one Spanish study of volunteering and social work (Salvador-Ferrer et al., 2020), which focused on analyzing the relationship between volunteering, emotional intelligence and resilience among social work students.

Research aims and hypotheses

The aim of this study is to contribute to the general knowledge of volunteering motives and benefits among social work students, and particularly to offer consistent empirical data on how motivational factors and benefits correlate with final levels of student satisfaction. In view of the limited existing literature, a further aim is to cover certain gaps in knowledge and provide data on the specific situation in Spain. The intention is to contribute to identifying the motivational aspects and benefits that are most likely to have an impact on attracting and retaining social work students for volunteering, within the current context of difficulties in recruiting young volunteers in Spain. Entities and institutions within the voluntary sector can then take this information into account when designing their (volunteering) proposals, adjusting them to student expectations and making volunteering more attractive to this group.

Based on the importance of volunteering motives and benefits in terms of recruiting and retaining university volunteers, this study examines how motives and benefits influence satisfaction with the volunteering experience among university students. The following hypotheses were proposed in this regard:

- (1) Satisfaction among social work students engaging in volunteering will be higher when there are more motives linked to the development of their academic CV and/or professional career.
- (2) Satisfaction among social work students engaging in volunteering will be positively related to benefits in terms of academic and professional competencies.
- (3) Satisfaction among social work students engaging in volunteering will correlate positively with benefits in terms of personal competencies.

Materials and methods

A quantitative approach based on a non-experimental design was used for this research. Information was taken from a sample by means of an ad hoc questionnaire and subsequently subject to statistical examination. The analysis focused on two sections of the survey that allowed for the description, analysis and determination of perceptions regarding volunteering satisfaction, motives and benefits among social work students.

Sample

The survey sample was made up of 1,034 social work university students from all academic years of the social work degree at the University of Valencia and Complutense University (Madrid) enrolled for academic year 2023/2024, which comprised 46.7% of the total number of enrolled students. These universities are two of the

Table 1. Universe and sample distribution by gender and academic year ($N = 1034$).

	Sample		Universe	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Gender				
Male	113	10.93%	2206	14.77%
Female	921	89.07%	12729	85.23%
Academic Year				
1	255	24.76%	3540	23.70%
2	279	27.09%	3330	22.30%
3	242	23.50%	3644	24.40%
4	254	24.66%	4421	29.60%
Total	1034	6.90%	14935	100%

Source: Author's own.

three largest on-site public universities (in terms of student numbers) in Spain, with 15% of the national total of social work students. Students were selected on a non-probabilistic (intentional) basis from among the students of each academic year at each university, according to their representativeness in terms of the national total. The data from the Spanish government's Comprehensive University Information System (*Sistema Integrado de Información Universitaria*) (SIIU) were used as the reference universe for purposes of adjusting sample quotas and ensuring representativeness. The SIIU describes the enrollment composition of social work students at on-site public universities, broken down by academic year. The universe and sample distribution were configured in accordance with Table 1:

A sub-sample was identified from the general sample for this study, made up of students who confirmed they had taken part in volunteering for at least six consecutive months at some point in the past ($N = 212$). These students were asked to assess the activity in terms of their satisfaction ($N = 119$), motives ($N = 205$) and benefits ($N = 117$).

Instruments

Information was collected using an ad hoc 29-question survey intended to identify the current status and characteristics of student volunteers at the universities offering a social work degree in Spain. The survey contained four sections: (1) sociodemographic identifying details: gender, academic year and university; (2) volunteering activities and features; (3) motives for volunteering; and (4) assessment of satisfaction and benefits from volunteering. The analysis focused on the latter two sections. The Volunteer Functions Inventory instrument (Clary et al., 1998) was used to prepare the questions on motives. This instrument establishes six motivations for volunteering (protective, values, career, social, understanding and enhancement) and measures them using Likert-type questions with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Students were also asked to score their final volunteering satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 10. Questions regarding the perceived benefits of volunteering distinguished between: (a) academic and professional benefits; and (b) personal development benefits. Questions were asked on variables corresponding to the contents of the degree competencies established by the Spanish Ministry of Education in the White Book for the Social

Work degree Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA) (2004). These variables were also assessed through Likert-type questions, with scores ranging from 1 (no benefit) to 5 (great benefit).

Process and data analysis

The students were informed that participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was conducted online and on-site in classrooms via the LimeSurvey application. The data were analyzed quantitatively using IBM SPSS v.28. Prior to analyzing the results, a test was carried out to assess the representativeness of the sample compared to social work students enrolled in on-site courses at public universities in Spain as a whole. In terms of results, descriptive data were obtained regarding the assessment of satisfaction levels, the motives of volunteers and the assessment of volunteering benefits. Subsequently, to confirm the proposed hypotheses, correlation analyses and dispersion graphs were produced regarding: (a) volunteering satisfaction and motives; (b) level of satisfaction and assessment of improvement in academic and professional competencies; and (c) level of satisfaction and assessment of improvement in personal competencies.

Results

Volunteering satisfaction and motives

The survey results produced an average assessment of 8.9 out of 10 ($N = 119$). In addition, practically all respondents believed that volunteering had a positive impact on their training as future professionals.

The most highly valued motives for student volunteering (Table 2) were related to learning and social values. The opportunity to learn through direct experience and to

Table 2. Assessment (from 1 to 7) of factors motivating volunteering and final satisfaction correlation coefficients.

Motive Factor	Average Score	Coef. Sign.
Volunteering means I can learn things through direct experience and acquire a new perspective on the causes of social problems (understanding)	6.4	0.20
I feel that it's important to help others and do something about suffering and inequality (values)	6.3	0.33
I'm concerned about people less fortunate than myself (values)	5.9	0.15
I can explore my own strong points as a professional and get to know myself and/or those I'm going to work with better (understanding)	5.9	0.23
Volunteering can help me explore my professional options and make professional contacts (career)	5.6	0.16
Volunteering makes me feel better about myself and improves my self-esteem (enhancement or personal growth)	5.4	0.25
Volunteering improves my CV and will help me achieve professional success (career)	5.2	-0.01
Volunteering improves my emotional wellbeing and helps me feel less alone (protective)	4.9	0.42
Volunteering is a way to make new friends (enhancement or personal growth)	4.5	0.31
My friends and acquaintances are volunteers, value serving the community and encouraged me to take part (social)	4.5	0.09
Volunteering is an important activity for the people I know the best (social)	4.3	0.20
Volunteering helps me get over my personal problems (protective)	4.3	0.28

Source: Author's own, based on volunteering survey. $N = 205$.

gain a new perspective on the causes of social problems was the highest-scoring motive (6.4). This need for practical understanding was added to a strong social conscience, sense of responsibility and desire to tackle situations of social inequality (6.3). Other high-scoring motives were concern for those less fortunate (5.9) and commitment to altruism and social justice (5.9).

High scores were also obtained for the assessment of motivational factors related to exploring professional options and making professional contacts (5.6) and volunteering being perceived as a means to improve CVs and help achieve professional success (5.2). The results indicated that students also found motivation in personal wellbeing, considering that volunteering contributed to improving their self-esteem (5.4) and reducing feelings of loneliness (4.9). This suggests that students are looking for personal and emotional benefits when they volunteer. Finally, the lowest scores were recorded for reasons related to the social and protective dimensions. Some social connections arising from volunteering were identified, covering both friendship (4.5) and social influence (4.3), while volunteering as a way to overcome personal problems received an average score of 4.3.

The correlation between final satisfaction level and the various motivational factors was examined to confirm the validity of hypothesis 1. A significant correlation was observed between general satisfaction and emotional satisfaction levels (0.42). This suggests that the more positive the volunteers' assessment of the emotional impact of their volunteering, the greater their general satisfaction. Lower correlation factors were found for activism or social conscience (0.33) and making new friends (0.31). Insignificant correlations were obtained for items related to overcoming personal problems (0.28) and personal satisfaction (0.25). In contrast, there was a null or negative correlation for volunteers improving their CV (−0.01), suggesting an absence of any appreciable relationship between the score given to this factor and student satisfaction.

Satisfaction and academic/professional benefits

Students with experience of volunteering offered a very positive assessment of its range of academic and professional benefits ($N = 117$), with an average score of 4.4 out of 5.

The highest-scoring items were obtained for personal and relationship-based competencies (Table 3). Participants placed emphasis on their ability to be responsible and safely complete their tasks (4.7), but above all they gave very high scores for the

Table 3. Assessment (from 1 to 5) of academic/professional benefits and final satisfaction correlation coefficients.

Variable Description	Average Score	Coef. Sign.
Responsibility	4.7	0.33
Teamwork	4.6	0.32
Ability to interact with people, families, groups and/or communities	4.5	0.39
Skills to create and maintain positive and empathetic professional relationships involving mutual recognition	4.4	0.46
Acquisition of direct experience	4.3	0.30
Handling and resolving ethical dilemmas	4.0	0.27
Critical reflection on social work issues	4.0	0.14
Ability to diagnose, evaluate and take decisions on human issues	3.8	0.35
Understanding of networks, resources and connections in communities and regions	3.8	0.18

Source: Author's own, based on volunteering survey. $N = 117$.

development of relationship-based competencies: teamwork (4.6), interaction with other people (4.5) and relationship skills (4.4). In contrast, more formally academic competencies received lower scores: understanding of networks (3.8), diagnostic ability (3.8), critical reflection (4.0).

The correlation analysis for the different variables included under academic and/or professional benefits and higher final satisfaction scores produced findings similar to those outlined above. They demonstrate a consistent interpretation whereby interpersonal skills (0.46) and relationship-based skills and the ability to interact (0.39) emerge as the most influential factors in terms of final satisfaction, with the most robust correlations (Table 3).

In contrast, less significant coefficients were obtained for the competencies most closely related to academic or professional development. Diagnostic ability (0.35), personal responsibility (0.33), teamwork (0.32), acquisition of experience (0.30) and resolution of ethical dilemmas (0.27) were positively associated with satisfaction, albeit to a moderate extent. In contrast, the findings showed understanding of networks (0.18) and critical reflection (0.14) to be the least influential in terms of the assessment of final satisfaction.

Satisfaction and benefits in terms of personal competencies

The average score given by the 117 students who provided an overall assessment of the benefits in terms of personal development competencies was a very positive 4.6 out of 5, suggesting that volunteering had a highly significant impact on their personal development competencies.

The highest-scoring personal development competencies were cooperative work (4.4), communication (4.3) and emotional wellbeing (4.2). In contrast, lower scores were reported for benefits closer to professional development: developing the ability to create new ideas (3.9) and finding creative solutions (3.8).

A correlation analysis of satisfaction levels and assessment of personal competencies was conducted to confirm the validity of hypothesis 3. This showed the strongest coefficients to exist with competencies linked to emotional development. The ability to manage emotions and stressful situations and be resilient (4.4) and communication skills (4.4) were significantly correlated to final satisfaction. The ability to engage in cooperative work (4.1) was also aligned with these competencies, underlining the positive influence of social relationships and collaboration on personal satisfaction. In contrast, innovation (0.36), entrepreneurial spirit (0.30) and critical understanding of social problems (0.26), factors less related to emotional development, contributed to satisfaction with volunteering to a far lesser degree.

Discussion

The findings of this research are in line with those of other studies of university volunteering (Barton et al., 2019; Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010) and social work student volunteering (Curl & Benner, 2017; Demirbilek et al., 2017; Gaston & Kruger, 2014). Volunteers report very high levels of satisfaction, and this also coincides with the observations of other reports from volunteer organizations in Spain regarding satisfaction among university volunteers (Ferraces et al., 2023) and volunteers in general (de Voluntariado de España, 2023).

However, as noted by Vecina et al. (2021), although the majority of volunteering is altruistic, students consciously or unconsciously obtain a large variety of subjective benefits. The scientific literature has corroborated the position that volunteering among university students has very positive effects on both their academic training and professional development as well as their emotional development (Illeris, 2003; Peters, 2011; Vecina et al., 2021). The findings of this research were also in line with those of other studies focusing on social work students (Demirbilek et al., 2017; Salvador-Ferrer et al., 2019), along the lines that students volunteer for motives related to social conscience but also to develop their personal and professional skills. Our study also indicated that although personal and social commitment represented a significant element of the motives for volunteering, its benefits arose in two main areas: professional and academic development, and particularly personal development.

As regards the former, in terms of motives and benefits linked to improved employability and formal academic training, the study produced diverging results with regard to the two proposed hypotheses. The first hypothesis—that students would be more satisfied with their volunteering if their motives were more closely related to academic or professional factors—must be rejected, at least in part. We will hence follow the distinction proposed by Stone and Lewis (2012) among several types of skills that influence the improvement of formal academic training: employability, soft skills (those improving professional training), knowledge (theoretical/conceptual) and technical skills (career-specific). With respect to the first of these skills, this study indicated that motives and benefits linked to improved employability or CV did not play a significant role as has been proposed in other studies (Barton et al., 2019; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2008). In fact, one such factor—volunteering improving one's CV—was the only element that produced a negative result in the analysis of correlations between final satisfaction levels and volunteering motives (Table 3).

The second component—soft skills, such as teamwork, responsibility and ability to interact—also failed to obtain high scores in terms of being a motive for volunteering. However, while not forming a prior motive for volunteering, soft skills were very positively assessed as benefits discovered during the activity. These results are consistent with the published literature. Specifically, studies by Peters (2011) on communication sciences students and Curl and Benner (2017) on social work students indicated that volunteering helped students to better understand social problems. Benefits were also confirmed in terms of improved teamwork skills, in line with the findings of other authors (Gaston & Kruger, 2014; Peric, 2011; Small et al., 2017). Learning through direct experience merits a separate mention: as noted in studies involving social work student volunteers (Curl & Benner, 2017; Gaston & Kruger, 2014; MacDermott & Campbell, 2016; Mumm, 2006), this was the highest-scoring motivational factor in the survey. In this regard, the second hypothesis subject to analysis—that student satisfaction would be linked to benefits obtained in terms of professional competencies—is partly confirmed, since although formal academic competencies (critical reflection, knowledge of resources, resolution of ethical dilemmas) obtained low correlation coefficients, soft skills (relationships, interaction, responsibility) returned significantly positive coefficients.

Most of the scientific literature states that university students who volunteer gain an improved understanding of the theoretical concepts and content they encounter in the classroom (Celio et al., 2011; Curl & Benner, 2017; Gaston & Kruger, 2014; Peters, 2011).

However, in our study, technical and knowledge-based skills (related to theory) received low scores as motives for volunteering (Table 1). Nor did they obtain significant coefficients in the correlation analyses examining satisfaction and the assessment of benefits in terms of various academic and professional competencies (Table 3). This might all suggest that in the context of social work study in Spain, it is difficult to apply theory content to volunteering practice. This has also been noted in studies from other countries (Collingwood et al., 2008; Fisher & Somerton, 2000). It may be worth considering whether this discrepancy between the findings of this study and the scientific literature in general is caused by the fact that, at least in Spain, volunteering activities are not subject to any academic oversight of the kind applied in curricular placements or service-learning activities, or by supervisory shortfalls at volunteering organizations.

On the other hand, the results reinforced those reported in other papers (MacDermott & Campbell, 2016), along the lines that volunteering was useful for development skills in social work, facilitated access to model professionals and consolidated professional identity. The real-life examples provided by volunteering contribute to students developing their initial views on social problems and their causes, and help them to better understand themselves as future professionals (Anderson & Braudy, 2002; Curl & Benner, 2017; Maccio, 2011; Schelbe et al., 2014).

Finally, with regard to personal motives and benefits, the correlation analysis of final satisfaction and the reasons for volunteering showed that students ranked personal—and particularly emotional—benefits above academic and professional ones. A similar result was obtained for the correlation analysis of satisfaction and assessment of benefits in terms of personal competencies, with emotional wellbeing obtaining the highest coefficient among the personal competencies (Table 4). In other words, although a majority of students had altruistic motives for volunteering, they emphasized personal, emotional benefits. As a result, these results support the third hypothesis of the study, which contradicts the findings of previous studies (Curl & Benner, 2017; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020) that emphasized academic/professional motives and benefits. Although we know that volunteering occurs due to multiple motives, several studies (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Vecina et al., 2021) have noted a change in the motives of volunteer students, who are tending to prioritize their own well being over that of the community. This change

Table 4. Assessment (from 1 to 5) of benefits in terms of personal development competencies and final satisfaction correlation coefficients.

Variable Description	Average Score	Coef. Sign.
Cooperative work (ability to work with others, exchange information and engage in activities with shared goals)	4.4	0.41
Communication (ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions, whether verbally, in writing or non-verbally, in an appropriate way and in keeping with the context of the relationship)	4.3	0.44
Emotional wellbeing (ability to manage and regulate emotions, cope with stressful situations and be resilient).	4.2	0.44
Citizenship (critical understanding of social phenomena and problems, active participation in response initiatives)	4.2	0.26
Innovation (ability to create and implement new ideas or solutions to problems).	3.9	0.36
Entrepreneurial spirit (ability to identify, find and implement creative solutions to problems)	3.8	0.30

Source: Author's own, based on volunteering survey. $N = 117$.

would be a consequence of a modernization and individualization process (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003) that is leading to a student preference for experiential factors that enrich their personal and emotional development. For Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), this in no way means the triumph of individualism and breakdown of the meaning of volunteering. Rather, they view it as an indicator that should lead to recognition of the importance of introducing changes to the construction of the volunteer-organization relationship, involving the incorporation of more flexible, detached and interested forms of participation. Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) consider that this situation also reflects the growing importance of ‘experience economies’, with students needing to develop their personal capital in a world in which qualifications are no longer sufficient to secure advantages in the labor market.

Implications

Implications: The research findings suggest that volunteering offers significant benefits for enhancing the learning experience of social work students. They can considerably improve their academic competencies, including their ability to critically reflect, their ability to navigate ethical dilemmas, and their understanding of the resources, networks, and areas where social intervention takes place (Collingwood et al., 2008; Curl & Benner, 2017; MacDermott & Campbell, 2016). The most significant advantage is that it enhances the competencies and skills that are essential for the student’s personal and relational development, which are crucial for the practice of the profession. These abilities encompass direct experience, collaboration, responsibility, and interaction with individuals, groups, families, and communities. All of these might improve their emotional well-being and strengthen their professional training, thereby increasing their resilience in professional social intervention environments, as reported by other studies (Badham & Eadie, 2000; Schelbe et al., 2014; Sewell et al., 2021).

The results indicate that universities and lecturers that train future social workers should actively encourage and facilitate the involvement of their students in volunteer endeavors. The academic and personal improvements that students obtained by the students lead us to consider that universities should strengthen their volunteering programmes, through actions that bring third sector organizations closer to students’ expectations and by implementing academic measures that encourage and reward their participation (validation of hours, inclusion in the curriculum, academic recognition, etc.). Lastly, the findings also suggest that third sector organizations should adapt the conditions under which volunteering is offered and carried out, taking into account the fact that students are increasingly more attracted by the benefits for their personal development and well-being rather than the strictly academic ones.

Limitations

This study was subject to certain limitations, although the general sample was extensive and its margin of error was acceptable (Table 1). The findings with the sub-samples used in the correlation analysis make further research advisable to corroborate these results for all social work university students in Spain. Another notable limitation concerned the design

of the survey on satisfaction and benefits. As stated by Holdsworth and Quinn (2010), most studies on volunteering among university students have tended to emphasize instrumental and individual benefits, excluding or undervaluing the potential community-related motives and benefits from involvement with the groups and communities in which they are volunteering. In this regard and in line with the majority of research, this study focused on individual motives and benefits. This might partly explain the high scores given to personal motives and benefits compared to social ones. It would be useful to include this other type of benefit in the design of future research, so as to offer a more complete overview of the benefits that social work university students obtain when they volunteer. Furthermore, it is important to take into account that while Spain has a robust university scholarship program designed to compensate for students' socioeconomic circumstances, the increasing expenses of living in recent times and the academic requirements of university studies may be impacting the characteristics of university volunteers and their expectations about the satisfaction and advantages they expect from their volunteer work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the criteria of the research ethics committees of both universities. The authors state that participants were informed in advance of the content and purpose of the research. Participation in the online survey was voluntary and consent was obtained before the survey began. No form of coercion was used in the selection or completion of the survey. The survey was anonymous and confidential. Participants were not asked for any personal information that could identify them, other than their gender and the year in which they enrolled.

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