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## School Community Service as perceived by students in grades 9 and 12

### INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is aimed at developing social skills of students participating in secondary education providing a secondary school leaving certificate (Uzsalyné, 2015). The specific goals of the programme can be highly diverse depending on the school's profile and image. This transpired from a survey conducted by the Hungarian Educational Authority in 2017, where the teachers of the 119 respondent institutions placed the goals of the School Community Service (SCS) programme on a wide scale from career guidance through personality development to education to work. The Institute for Educational Research and Development (HIERD) of Eszterházy Károly University (EKU) has supported and coordinated SCS since its introduction in 2011. It is important that besides extending professional support, the Institute helps explore the efficiency of the SCS programme through research projects (Bodó, 2014; Bodó, Molnár and Uzsalyiné, 2015; Bodó, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

Precious few international research data are available about the effectiveness of mandatory community service on subsequent volunteerism. According to the findings of a comprehensive nationwide survey in Canada conducted in 2007 (Pancer et al., 2007), university students who had participated in mandatory programmes in high school were more willing to be involved in voluntary work compared to those who had not (51% as opposed to 43%). Conversely, according to the Hungarian survey of secondary school students, in the combined groups of those responding positively and those who are uncertain (63.9%), volunteering seems to have a greater support. To turn this group activity can be a goal for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive form of this paper will be published in Hungarian *Új Pedagógiai Szemle*. 67., No. 9–10., pp 41–71.

No survey of students had been conducted in Hungary since the practical introduction of school community service in 2012. Our project attempts to fill the gap. Students of grades 9 and 12 (the latter being the school leaving grade) were invited to reply our questions about community service by means of a self-admission-based online questionnaire administered in the second semester of the 2016/17 academic year. The Grade 9 questionnaire was fully completed by 2126 out of 5663 students, and the Grade 12 questionnaire was completed by 1424 out of 3274 students. Weighted databases were created with identical sample sizes based on the completed questionnaires of each of the two grades with populations that were representative nationwide in terms of sex and school type.

Volunteering has different traditions internationally, and it is not so strongly embedded in some countries as in the Anglo-Saxon world. In Hungarian society, the tradition of communism – often required – voluntary work known as ‘social work’ (‘*társadalmi munka*’ in Hungarian) is much stronger, which may help the introduction of the programme but is of little use when it comes to interpreting its educational aspect. According to the research conducted by *Hajnalka Fényes* in 2015, “a growing rate of university students is involved in volunteering but their numbers are still relatively small (6-7% is involved in voluntary work on a regular basis and 20% occasionally).” They tend to favour new types of volunteering (meaningful leisure activities, gaining experience, activities that can go on their CV); however, for many of them these benefits go hand in hand with a value-based intention to help. Volunteering plays an important role in networking, which is in line with the trends highlighted by international research.

## REFLECTION ON SCS EXPERIENCES FROM THE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

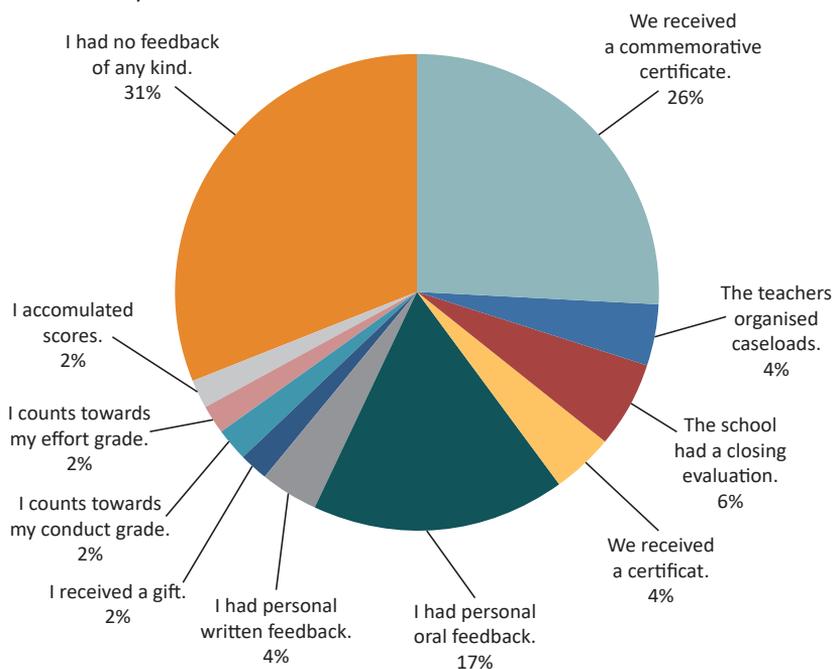
All of the international surveys point out that the conclusion of community service and reflection on the activities performed are key components of the programme and greatly contributes to students’ perception of their community work as a useful contribution (Celio, Durlack, Dymnicki 2011).

Based on the replies to the online questionnaire, schools can go a long way to strengthen this area. Most of the 1424 school-leaving respondents (31%) received no feedback whatsoever on their service. The rate is approximately the same as the rate of students who received no help at all. Reflection can be considered crucial for the processing of experiences.

Approximately a quarter (26%) of the students reported on their 50-hour service in the context of a general discussion, which often took place in the weekly class designated to the head master. Seventeen percent had oral personal feedback, and

4% each received written feedback or processed their experiences at case discussion sessions. Six percent reported that the school staged a closing evaluation. These figures indicate that a quarter of the students had an opportunity to reflect on their experience in the school, in a substantive fashion organised by the school. The findings of the questionnaire regarding preparation and reflection are similar to those of the technical inspection by the Educational Authority carried out in 2017.

**Figure 1** | School-leavers' questionnaire: "What feedback did you have at school about the community service?" (n=1424)

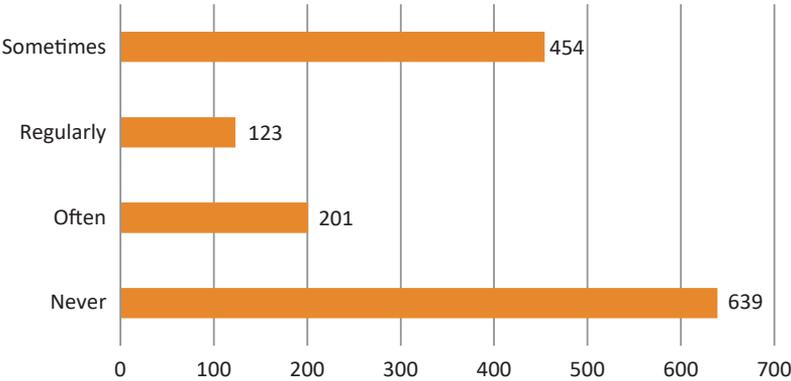


**Source:** EKU HIERD 2017

The results are also more positive regarding feedback from host institutions. Altogether 47% of the students received oral feedback and evaluation at the end of their service (in the form of a case discussion, closing meeting, or personal oral feedback). On the negative side, 16% of the students completed their SCS without any kind of reflection or feedback at all from the host institution. In the opinion of 53.3% of the students, the absence of reflection on their experiences did not hinder their activity at the host institution: 47.2% of male and 59.2% of female respondents reported this. On the other hand, 4.7% of the students felt they had significant difficulties due to a lack of reflection 6% of boys and 3.5% of girls).

The diagram in Figure 2 presenting the frequency of reflexive discussions highlights the shortcomings of closure. As can be seen, almost half of the students (45%) never participated in reflection sessions or discussions, and another 32% rarely shared their experiences. It is to be noted that there are other ways of processing experience but the most widespread method is oral reflections in groups. These findings are in contradiction to the statement of most students whereby they did not feel that the lack of reflection was a problem. This could be because students are not aware of the real aim of the School Community Service and don't know when the programme can really be considered successful.

**Figure 2** | School-leavers' questionnaire: Frequency of reflection sessions (N=1417)



Source: ECU HIERD 2017

In the absence of appropriate preparation the students are unclear about the actual goals of SCS. It is fortunate that a large number of the host institutions consider working with students to be an educational task. Lacking in human capacities, schools find it hard to spend time and effort on these parts of the programme (Bodó, 2016).

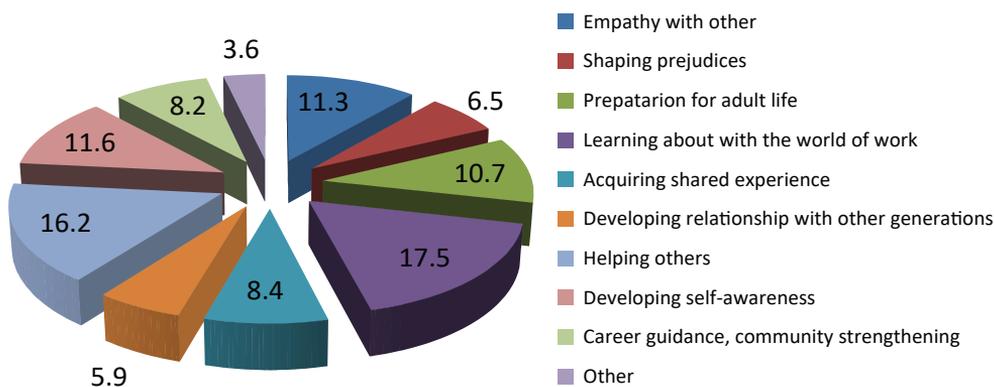
International research and best practices show that preparation and reflection are inseparable components of a successful programme (Celio, Durlak, Dymnicki, 2011); therefore, in addition to students, teachers, coordinators and host institution coordinators and mentors should also be prepared professionally for tasks awaiting them. Efficient collaboration of heads of institutions, teachers and parents, coordinators, hosts and students is paramount in a programme of this kind. This requires the socialisation of the programme besides professional preparation.

## 2. THE GOALS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE FROM THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

The goal of community service, also known as service-learning in the literature (Sigmon, 1994) is to enhance social and civic awareness and participation as well as social sensitisation of young people (Astin, Sax, 1998; Mabry, 1998), and to educate them to volunteering. Community service provides an opportunity for young people who have not had direct contacts with disadvantaged persons and members of other social groups to become aware of a desire to help.

Based on the Hungarian experience, we supposed that students were not really clear about the actual goal of community service. We asked the school leaving respondents to select from a list of ten the three goals they considered to be the main mission of community service, and to rank them by priority.

**Figure 3** | First ranked goals of community service as perceived by 12th-grader respondents (n=1424)



Source: EKU HIERD 2017

Figure 3 shows that students see entry into the labour market and familiarisation with the world of work to be the main goal of community service (17.5%). This is followed by an altruistic view: helping those who need it (16.2%). A large proportion of the respondent population ranked shared experience (11.3%) and development of self-awareness (11.6%) as the main goal. Only a few percent of students considered preparation for adulthood, promotion of community building, career guidance, alleviating discrimination and building relations with other generations as possible community service goals.

On the whole, it would seem necessary to give students more accurate information on the goals and benefits of community service. The dominant motivation for

students is gaining experience and less weight is given to a value-based approach. In-depth familiarisation with the goals would promote better tailored choices, thereby enhancing motivation and contributing to more positive attitudes regarding community service.

## 9<sup>th</sup> AND 12<sup>th</sup>-GRADERS' ATTITUDE TO SCS

We had formulated the following hypothesis: “the majority of students have a positive attitude and are looking forward to SCS before they start the programme.”

Our hypothesis was underpinned by the findings of the 9<sup>th</sup>-graders' questionnaire. The replies clearly indicate that students are thinking about community service as 77% discuss it with their parents and 59% with their class mates before they even start. It is very positive that the 2017 survey found an increase in the rate of discussion within the family compared to the previous year, and discussing community service with class mates also increased considerably. There are fewer and fewer families where SCS is not talked about, so very few students enter secondary education without at least some idea about it.

The online questionnaire addressed the question whether students talked with their parents and brothers or sisters about the school community service. Among the Budapest respondents 23.8% said they shared their thoughts with their parents, who thought the mandatory service was an important initiative. These replies highlight the fact that the more adequate assistance students receive the more they share their experience within their environment. Their positive experience makes a favourable impression on those surrounding them, and shapes their opinion in a positive direction.

In both years surveyed, somewhat more than two-thirds of the 9<sup>th</sup>-grader respondents replied you could learn a lot from community service (70% and 78% respectively). Positive expectations were reported by 67% in their reply to the question “What is your attitude to community service?” Only 18% stated they had not heard of the programme.

Students' preliminary interest is supported by the fact that 77-78% said they had a precise idea of which area they wanted to discharge their 50-hour community service duties. This indicates that the majority of students look upon this extracurricular obligation with interest rather than a nuisance. Admittedly, the questionnaire could not explore what they discussed in the family and among their peers about this topic and how – this would require a survey based on interviews.

In the light of the above, it is interesting to examine how useful students think the community service activity would be for them. In 2016, 43% thought it would

be very useful, 51% expected it would be somewhat useful, and 6% thought it would not be useful at all.

When asked to what extent community service had met their expectations, 29.3% of the secondary school-leaving boys and 22.6% of the girls replied it had been far below their expectations. Only 14% of the boys and 15.4% of the girls reported their experience had fully met their expectations.

Students' interest should be converted to keenness and effective action. This is not an easy task – in fact it is a major challenge. Why students seriously looking forward to SCS thought it would not be useful is something that deserves some consideration.

The questionnaires of the 9<sup>th</sup>-graders indicated that students tend to discuss SCS among themselves before they start it. Unfortunately, discussions do not continue throughout the service, as revealed by the 2017 monitoring experience. No tradition has been established to share “good examples”, good practices or just experience. Obviously this also explains why students don't expect or see the usefulness of SCS. The findings of the monitoring survey confirmed that where schools and host institutions regarded SCS as an educational process and pay attention to preparation and reflection larger numbers of students look upon their SCS as a positive experience of real value. Dissemination of knowledge by these students in the form of sharing experience and reporting on their service could be the method promoting a positive image about the usefulness of SCS as an educational process.

In the questionnaire designed for school leavers we sought to find out what impressions and experiences students gained during the four years available to discharge the service. Respondents had to rate the usefulness and enjoyable nature of the programme. The findings deserve some thoughts: 47% of the respondents considered what they had done useful but sadly, 30% thought it was almost useless. It is common knowledge that experience is most useful if the activity leading to is enjoyable. Unfortunately, the answers reveal that 30% found the service an enjoyable experience and another 30% did not, and thought SCS was uninteresting.

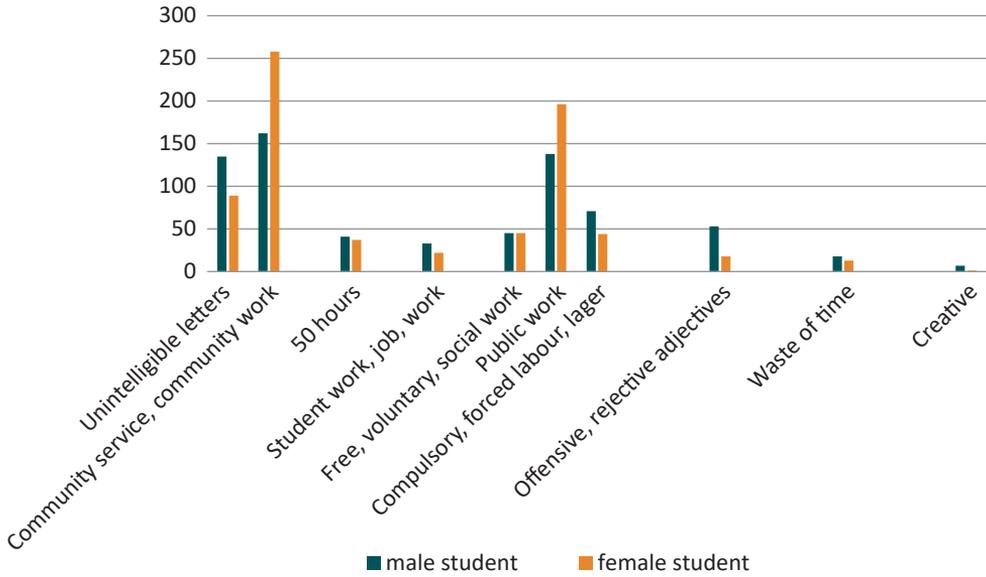
## STUDENTS' TERMINOLOGY REFERRING TO SCS

A special question addressed the terms students use to denote SCS among themselves: *“What do you call community service when you are talking among yourselves at school?”*

The replies show that 2.2% call SCS a waste of time, 5% use offensive, pejorative adjectives; 8.1% call it compulsory, forced labour or lager; 23.4% public work; 6.3% call it free work or voluntary work; 3.9% named it student work, job or simply work; 5.5% call it fifty hours; 29.5% think of it as community service or community work;

and 15.7% refused to answer. Girls put community service as their first choice (258) but also a large number called it public work (196). The third most favoured term, lagging far behind, was volunteering. Boys chose the same top two terms, but the third most frequent term used by boys was compulsory, forced labour or lager.

**Figure 4** | Terms students use for SCS among themselves, grade 12 (n=1424)



Source: ECU HIERD 2017

As regards the terms used by schools, 29.8% apply the expression school community service, 24.4% use public work, and 8.9% call it compulsory or forced labour. As for Church schools, 30.1% call it community service, 15.7% public work, and 8% free work or voluntary work. Foundation operated schools respondents termed it public work, and less call it community service. Community work or community service are used by 30.9% of grammar schools, followed by public work used by 22.9%, then compulsory, far behind, by 8.5%. Vocational grammar schools use the term community service most frequently (29.9%) followed by public work (24.4%) and compulsory (7.9%). Vocational secondary schools use public work most frequently.

If compulsory and other pejorative labels are added to public work, the proportion of users of these negative terms exceed the proportion of those who use community service, which is approximately one-third in most groups. Radical changes are needed in this area.

## OUTCOMES OF SCS

The aim of community service is to achieve that only those students should leave secondary school as “mature” that are prepared to do something for their community and are aware of the social reality around them.

As regards skills development, the answer occurring in the largest proportion was *development of communication skills* (19%). *My skills to cooperate with others have strengthened*, and *I pay more attention to others* came second and third, with 10% and 9% respectively, i.e. these two skills combined achieved the same rate as the development of communication skills. Taking these three most preferred answers, it can be stated that a large proportion of students experienced the personality changes that are in line with the original intent of community service, as witnessed by these replies.

Cross tabulation where replies to open questions were coded *positive opinion*, *negative opinion*, *opinion formulating a problem*, and *opinion containing both positive and negative elements* revealed 48.4% students reporting an unequivocally positive and 31.7% a negative opinion. Problems were raised by 11.7%, and 8.3% included both positive and negative elements in their answers. Looking at rates by sex, boys describing a positive opinion contributed 44.7%, and over half, 51.8% of girls were of a similar opinion. As regards the opposite end, 36.7% of boys expressed a negative opinion compared to 26.9% girls. This indicates that young ladies “dig” community service more than young gentlemen.

**Table 1** | Answers of 12<sup>th</sup>-graders to an open question: **Please evaluate community service in a few sentences.** (n=1269)

	Institutions by operator		
	State	Church	Foundation
Positive opinion, numbers and percentages	474 47.5%	123 58.3%	25 41.0%
Negative opinion, numbers and percentages	313 31.4%	60 28.4%	26 42.6%
Problem raising opinion, numbers and percentages	129 12.9%	12 5.7%	4 6.6%
Positive and negative elements in the opinion, numbers and percentages	81 8,1%	16 7,6%	6 9,8%
Total:	997 78.6%	211 16.6%	61 4.8%

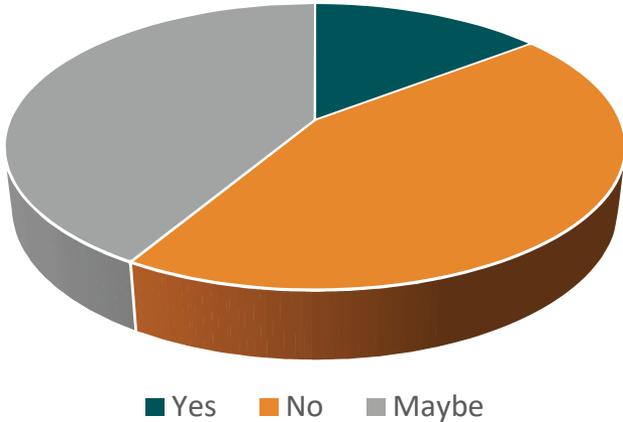
Source: EKV HIERD 2017

Even more significant is the difference in positive and negative opinions in terms of breakdown by school operator. In state schools the averages are 47.5 % and 31.4% respectively, while in foundation schools are more negative with 41% as opposed to 42.6%, and students in Church operated schools had a clearly positive opinion on community service, with 58.3% as opposed to 28.4% on the negative side. Many Church schools, mainly those operated by the religious orders, have made charity work mandatory for students for years. These institutions only needed minimal adaptation of their systems to meet the statutory requirements of community service. The dominant negative opinion put forth by foundation operated schools may be due to a shortage of capacities, uncertain funding, and the extra time spent on mentoring students (Bodó, 2016).

A real positive achievement is that some students continue with the service even after they have discharged to mandatory 50 hours, or at least express a willingness to engage in similar activities in the future. This was addressed by the question “Do you think you will do volunteer work after secondary school?”

A clear *no* was the reply of 36, 09%. Unequivocal *yes* was replied by 18.75%. At a glance this may not seem too many but looking at the 45.15% replying *perhaps*, i.e. those who left the option of future volunteering open, the picture is not so bad even in international comparison (Handy et al., 2010).

**Figure 5** | 12th-graders’ questionnaire: “Do you think you will do volunteering after graduation from secondary school?” (n=1424)



Source: ECU HIERD 2017

Looking at the cross tabulation, girls are considerably more inclined to do volunteer service compared to boys. The rate of girls answering yes is 59% as opposed to 41% boys, and their rate is higher among those who replied *perhaps*,

58% as opposed to 42% boys. Consequently, almost twice as many boys replied *no* than girls, 38% as opposed to 62%.

The rates in the cross tabulations by school operator are the same as in the case of the previous question. It is mainly Church school students that are most willing to participate in volunteering after their mandatory SCS, and students in foundation schools reported the least willingness to be involved in voluntary work after their secondary studies.

On the whole, it can be stated that in the case of a large proportion of students the basic goals of community service are currently not achieved. Instances of negative experience should be diminished. It is important to support schools in areas where they perform poorly. In this respect we have a great responsibility.

## SUMMARY

The implementation of School Community Service (SCS) presents a mixed picture nationwide. The majority of Hungarian students looking forward to community service at the beginning of their secondary studies but most of their expectations are not met. The majority of SCS programme do not prepare students adequately and reflection is also insufficient: schools struggling with human resource problems find it hard to spend effort on these important components of the programme. A more active preparation and reflection are imperative in the interest of improving effectiveness.

Students have no clear ideas about the goals of the community service programme and mainly consider SCS as an opportunity to enter the labour market. Their expectations and terminology use don't reflect the educational goals of the programme. They use haphazard terms for SCS relying on their own impressions, although some of the features of the new type of volunteering also appear.

Students in Church schools rate the programme more positively than state school students, and they are the ones who said they would be willing to do volunteering in largest numbers. On the whole, 18.75% of students think they will engage in voluntary work after graduating from secondary school. Girls are more willing to engage in such activities than boys.

Based on these findings, it is paramount to provide training and information to all stakeholders of SCS (students, teachers, parents, and host institutions) so that in possession of appropriate knowledge they become more motivated.

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