

Voluntary work in the community: a guide to delivering an effective career development activity

Effective career guidance systems provide students with the opportunity to gain first hand experiences of what it is like to be in work. Through voluntary work in the community, schools can give students opportunity to undertake tasks under the supervision of a professional who is not a teacher in a workplace often in fields of strong career interest.

This Policy Brief:

- Summarises conclusions from studies of national longitudinal datasets on how teenage volunteering relates to employment outcomes in adulthood;
- Explores why positive benefits can be expected in light of theories of human, social and cultural capital accumulation;
- Draws on the OECD PISA study to present data on patterns of student volunteering;
- Provides advice for schools and education jurisdictions on how benefits can be optimised for students.

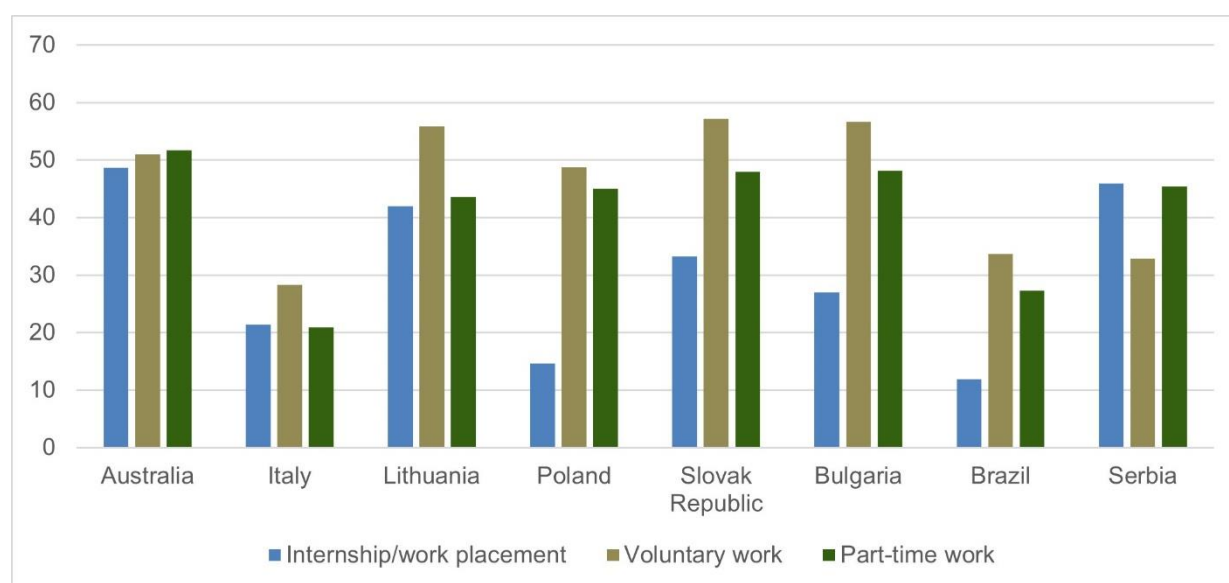
It is now widely agreed that the effective career development of secondary school students will include plentiful opportunity to engage with employers and people in work (Cedefop; ETF; European Commission; OECD; ILO; UNESCO, 2021^[1]). Within longitudinal studies, such engagement has been strongly related to improved employment outcomes for young people when they come to enter the labour market (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]; Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[3]; OECD, 2021^[4]; OECD, 2021^[5]). One important means by which students can engage with the world of work is through first-hand participation in workplaces undertaking tasks under supervision. As well as through part-time employment and short work placements (internships) organised by schools, such experiences can be gained through volunteering in the community. Through all three means, students are presented with opportunities for effective career development, exploring career options in authentic settings, building social networks of value, developing technical and social and emotional skills and gaining confidence in their understanding of work cultures and how they can be accessed. This paper reviews evidence from longitudinal studies on the relationships between teenage volunteering and employment outcomes in adulthood. It also explores the ways in which

students in different parts of the world are encouraged and enabled to volunteer and, in some countries, to make explicit use of their experiences to support their academic and career development. The paper is a companion piece to studies which look at student participation in work placements (internships) (OECD, 2025^[6]) and part-time employment (OECD, 2025^[7]).

What is Volunteering?

Volunteering is commonly defined as an activity which is unpaid and which benefits others (Walsh and Black, 2015^[8]). It can be voluntary or involuntary, formal or informal, within or outside of education. Many secondary schools around the world encourage volunteering in the community and in some it is mandatory for students. Volunteering might be undertaken as a form of civic engagement, service learning or community service or as an activity more explicitly engaged in as a form of career development (Kim and Morgül, 2017^[9]; O'Higgins, 2020^[10]; Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]). Regardless of the context, students often have opportunity through volunteering to gain first-hand experience of workplaces, undertaking tasks under the direction of a supervisor who is not a teacher within fields where people are paid to undertake comparable tasks (Ballard, Hoyt and Pachucki, 2019^[12]; Borgonovi, 2008^[13]; Chan, Ou and Reynolds, 2014^[14]; O'Higgins, 2020^[10]; Simonson, Vogel and Tesch-Römer, 2017^[15]; Walsh and Black, 2015^[8]). While student volunteering varies in terms of the activities undertaken and where they take place, a very common motivation for school-age volunteers is to develop skills, insights and networks of relevance to later employment (Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]). Consequently, it can be seen as a form of experience that has many similarities to part-time work and to school-mediated internships/work placements within general education (OECD, 2021^[4]). Data concerning the three forms of possible student workplace exposure are available from eight countries participating in the 2018 round of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In six of the countries, the most common way that students engage in workplace experiences is through voluntary work.

Figure 1. Percentage of students participating in internships, voluntary work and part-time work from available countries, PISA 2018.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 database

Is school-age volunteering linked with better ultimate employment outcomes for young people?

An important means of assessing the long-term impacts of teenage volunteering on career development is to follow representative samples of young people through their school years into adulthood. Within longitudinal studies, students (and often their parents and schools) complete questionnaires typically at age 15. As students grow older, they complete further surveys. Commonly up to the age of 25, young people provide details of their labour market experiences, including whether they are in education, employment or training or not, how much they are earning if in work and how they are satisfied with their jobs and careers. Studies use a range of statistical controls to ensure that results are due to other social or demographic characteristics which can be commonly linked to better employment outcomes such as academic achievement, gender, social background and migrant status.

Table 1 summarises the findings of eight longitudinal studies from five countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and United States) which look for evidence of employment impacts linked to teenage volunteering experiences. In all the studies review the experiences of some 75 000 young people (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]; OECD, 2021^[4]). Seven of the studies find evidence of statistically significant associations between school-age volunteering and some form of better ultimate employment outcomes.

Table 1. Studies exploring associations between teenage volunteer work and employment outcomes in adulthood

Study	Findings
Australia: Sikora and Green (2020 ^[11]), Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth, 9353 respondents surveyed between ages 15 (2006) and 25 (2015): "Outside study or work, how often do you do voluntary work?"	Volunteering in adolescence is linked with higher status employment in adulthood.
Australia: Covacevich et al. (2021 ^[2]), Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth, 2 933 respondents surveyed between ages 15 (2009) and 25 (2019): "On average, how many hours do you spend each week on the following? (When answering include time at the weekend too) - Doing unpaid or voluntary work"	Volunteering in adolescence is linked with higher earnings (8%) and with greater work satisfaction in adulthood.
Canada: Covacevich et al. (2021 ^[2]), Youth in Transition Survey, 10 927 respondents surveyed between ages 15 (2000) and 30 (2015): "Think about unpaid volunteer activities you may have done THIS YEAR for groups or organisations such as charities, schools, religious organisations or community associations. As an unpaid volunteer, in the past 12 months, about how often did you.... (7 items possible), A: Never this year, 1-3 times this year, 4-10, 1-3 times a month, every week"	Volunteering in adolescence is linked with higher earnings (4%) in adulthood, but has no association with NEET rates or work career satisfaction. Students who agreed that their main motivation for volunteering was to improve job opportunities were also less likely to be NEET, and earn more in adulthood.
Germany: Covacevich et al. (2021 ^[2]), National Educational Panel Survey, 5 589 respondents surveyed between ages 14-16 (2010) and 23-25 (2018): "We have compiled a list of different clubs or groups. Do you participate in any of them? [including] Voluntary aid organisations, religious youth groups, political associations and cultural activities."	Teenagers who volunteered or were part of a group or club outside of school are less likely to be NEET as adults. No associations found with earnings or career satisfaction.
United Kingdom: Covacevich et al. (2021 ^[2]), British Cohort Study, 4 547 respondents surveyed at ages 16 (1986) and 26 (1996): "Have you ever taken part in any of the following spare time activities: helping old people, nature conservation, helping single parents, or other voluntary activities in the community"	Volunteering in adolescence is linked with lower NEET rates and higher life satisfaction in adulthood with greater positive effects identified with regard to more intensive participation in volunteering. No association found with earnings.
United States: Covacevich et al. (2021 ^[2]), Educational Longitudinal Study, 13 250 respondents surveyed at ages 15 (2002) and 25 (2012): "In which of the following work-based learning experiences have you participated during high school? - Community service (volunteer work arranged by your school to support your local community). How often do you volunteer or perform community service?"	No associations found between volunteering in adolescence and earnings or career satisfaction in adulthood.
United States: Ballard et al. (2019 ^[12]), National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, 9 471 respondents surveyed at ages 11-20 (in 1994-95) and 24-32: "During the last 12 months did you perform any unpaid volunteer or community service work?"	Volunteering in adolescence is linked with higher household income and personal earnings.

United States: Kim & Morgul, (2017^[9]), National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, 17 720 respondents between ages of 11-20 (in 1994-95) and 24-32: “At any time during your adolescence, when you were between 12 and 18 years old, did you regularly participate in volunteer or community service work? Don't count things like washing cars or selling candy to raise money.” (Asked at 17-26).

Volunteering in adolescence is linked with higher earnings whether or not participation was voluntary or required.

Explaining the long-term benefits of student volunteering

While young people state that they volunteer for a range of reasons, including to have fun and the desire to support their communities, a very common motivation is the desire to improve their employment prospects (O'Higgins, 2020^[10]; Ockenden and Stuart, 2014^[17]; Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]; Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]; Walsh and Black, 2015^[8]). Studies show that young people strongly believe that volunteering will be helpful in securing employment (Ockenden and Stuart, 2014^[17]; Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]). Analysis of longitudinal datasets, as discussed above, reveals that they are right to do so. By the age of 18-19, one quarter of 3 208 students surveyed within the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth agreed that volunteering had helped them to get a job (Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]); see also, (The National Youth Agency, 2008^[18]). A recent OECD survey of 1 015 young adults aged 19-26 in Madrid (Spain) found the great majority of respondents who recalled volunteering while in secondary school felt that the experience had been useful in planning and preparing for life after completion of secondary education with 33% of the sample saying that it had proved ‘very useful’ (Mann and Diaz, 2024^[19]). Further studies which explore benefits for young adults who had recently completed secondary education find that volunteering substantially increases the chances of finding employment for youth NEETs (O'Higgins, 2020^[10]) and supports long-term wage boosts (Shantz, Banerjee and Lamb, 2018^[20]). Teenage volunteering is also associated notably with greater likelihood of volunteering in adulthood (Chan, Ou and Reynolds, 2014^[14]; Moorfoot et al., 2015^[21]; Shantz, Banerjee and Lamb, 2018^[20]) which has in turn been associated with skills development, better employment prospects and income boosts (Hackl, Halla and Pruckner, 2007^[22]; O'Higgins, 2020^[10]; OECD, 2015^[23]).

Volunteering in the community can be conceived as a form of work-based experience, comparable to internships and part-time employment. In all three roles, students typically (but not always) expect to undertake tasks under supervision from non-teachers in workplace environments. While longitudinal research on the long-term links between internships (undertaken within general education rather than vocational education and training) is limited with relatively few studies available for analysis, that on part-time employment is extensive with more than 30 studies available (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]; OECD, 2025^[7]). As is the case with available studies relating to volunteering, reviews of the long-term consequences of teenage part-time working show consistently strong relations between such workplace exposure and better ultimate outcomes in adult employment.

The research literature identifies a range of likely reasons why young people can typically be expected to gain long-term benefits from their teenage experiences as volunteers. Looked at from the perspective of labour force entry, three primary rationales can be drawn upon to explain advantages that follow workplace experiences (Tomlinson, 2013^[24]). Firstly, young people can be seen to enhance their human capital through work-based volunteering, gaining work-related experience, technical and social and emotional employability skills. Secondly, volunteering provides young people with the opportunity to gain new personal contacts and engage with social networks of ultimate value to employment (social capital). Finally, attitudes and expectations may change in relation to career development as students often become more confident in their understanding of workplace cultures and potential progression routes into them, a form of cultural capital (OECD, 2021^[4]; Tomlinson, 2013^[24]). Through such means, young people can be seen to enhance the signals about their suitability for employment that will ultimately be received by recruiters, going beyond educational credentials (Heller and Kessler, 2024^[25]; O'Higgins, 2020^[10]; Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]; Shantz, Banerjee and Lamb, 2018^[20]).

In terms of human capital development, skills development is commonly reported by young volunteers (Meinhard et al., 2006^[26]). Half of the participants, aged 18-19, surveyed in 2009 within the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth agreed that their volunteering had given them new skills that could be applied directly to a job with 15% stating that it had provided ‘a lot’ of relevant skills (Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]). The 2022 Young People in Scotland survey collected information from 1 533 students aged 11-18 in 52 secondary schools and included a strong focus on volunteering. Nearly half (46%) of the students who had volunteered stated that they had learnt new skills through their volunteering with 10% agreeing they had improved their job prospects (Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]). In Scotland, organisations considering hosting teenage volunteers are explicitly advised by government agencies to highlight opportunities for skill development as they are found in surveys to be “of the utmost importance to young volunteers” (Scottish Government, 2021^[27]).

Qualitative, cross-sectional student surveys highlight a range of technical and social and emotional skills related to employability that many students (and their supervisors and teachers) feel that they have developed through volunteering experiences. Among the skills most commonly referenced are communication, teamwork, relationship management and self-management (Ballard, Hoyt and Pachucki, 2019^[12]; Chan, Ou and Reynolds, 2014^[14]; Celio, Durlak and Dymnicki, 2011^[28]; Kim and Morgül, 2017^[9]; Meinhard et al., 2006^[26]; The National Youth Agency, 2008^[18]; OECD, 2024^[29]; O’Higgins, 2020^[10]; Ockenden and Stuart, 2014^[17]; Ozawa, 2010^[30]); (Walsh and Black, 2015^[8]), competencies that underpin success in employment through the more effective deployment of knowledge and capabilities. Through work-based experiences, potential exists for students to build (and evidence) emergent forms of such human capital (Heller and Kessler, 2024^[25]; Tomlinson, 2013^[24]). Through work-based experiences, students have opportunity to apply their classroom learning in the real world, receiving feedback on their performance from professionals working in a field of interest. Moreover, they have chance to develop and demonstrate work-related competencies that are not typically developed within schools, such as using equipment used within workplaces and the development of social and emotional skills related to career progression. Analysis of PISA 2018 data shows that students with a history of volunteering are significantly more likely to demonstrate confidence that they can be personally effective in common workplace situations even after statistical controls are applied for gender, economic, social and cultural status, migrant background and academic proficiency on the PISA assessments. Teenage volunteers are more likely than comparable peers without experience of volunteering to agree that:

- I can deal with unusual situations.
- I can change my behaviour to meet the needs of new situations.
- I can adapt to different situations even when under stress or pressure.
- I can adapt easily to a new culture.
- When encountering difficult situations with other people, I can think of a way to resolve the situation.
- I am capable of overcoming my difficulties in interacting with people from other cultures (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[3]).

A further range of studies finds significant evidence of teenage volunteering being associated with improved educational outcomes, credentialising human capital formation (Ballard, Hoyt and Pachucki, 2019^[12]; Chan, Ou and Reynolds, 2014^[14]; Kim and Morgül, 2017^[9]; Moorfoot et al., 2015^[21]; The National Youth Agency, 2008^[18]; Sikora and Green, 2020^[11]). Volunteering is associated moreover with increases in student self-esteem, personal agency and confidence and fewer behaviour problems in school (Ballard, Hoyt and Pachucki, 2019^[12]; Chan, Ou and Reynolds, 2014^[14]; Kim and Morgül, 2017^[9]; The National Youth Agency, 2008^[18]; O’Higgins, 2020^[10]; Simonson, Vogel and Tesch-Römer, 2017^[15]; Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]), all perspectives which are associated with more productive engagement in education. It is common too for students who volunteer to report improved health and well-being (feeling appreciated, feeling happier, improved mental and physical health, increased trust in others, feeling less isolated and lonely) (Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]).

Studies also show that teenage volunteering is linked with forms of teenage career thinking that are linked with better ultimate employment outcomes (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]; OECD, 2024^[31]). The 2018 PISA round asked students in 21 countries about their experiences of volunteering. On average, 48% of students stated that they had previously volunteered (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[3]). Analysis shows that such students are less likely to be uncertain about their career plans, more ambitious in them and more likely to be aligned in their occupational and education plans, all forms of thinking that are associated in longitudinal data with employment boosts (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]; OECD, 2024^[31]; ^[32]). In a similar fashion, Denault et al. (2019^[33]) explore the experiences of secondary school students in Francophone Canada and find that career indecision falls among students who engage in volunteering. Of relevance to career exploration, qualitative studies highlight the potential of volunteering to provide students with a broader array of workplace opportunities, both in terms of the type of workplace and the nature of the task undertaken, than is possible typically within part-time teenage employment (The National Youth Agency, 2008^[18]). In PISA 2018, 24% of students in Costa Rica agreed that they had undertaken volunteer work in a profession which they wish to have in the future.

In environments where students undertake tasks within a workplace under supervision, opportunities emerge to meet and interact with people who can be well placed to provide career-related support of value (OECD, 2021^[4]). Volunteering facilitates the creation of social networks as students must interact with their colleagues, supervisors and potentially users of services (Kim and Morgül, 2017^[9]; O'Higgins, 2020^[10]; Ockenden and Stuart, 2014^[17]; Simonson, Vogel and Tesch-Römer, 2017^[15]; Walsh and Black, 2015^[8]). Ozawa (2010^[30]) for examples finds that typically one third or more of young volunteers surveyed in Japan, Korea and Canada agree that their volunteering had provided 'opportunities for networking for future employment.' In terms of career development, such contacts can be seen to enhance the social capital of students, providing greater access to trusted sources of information and advice linked to professional fields of possible interest and as sources of active support in provision of references, recommendations and employment after secondary school (OECD, 2021^[4]).

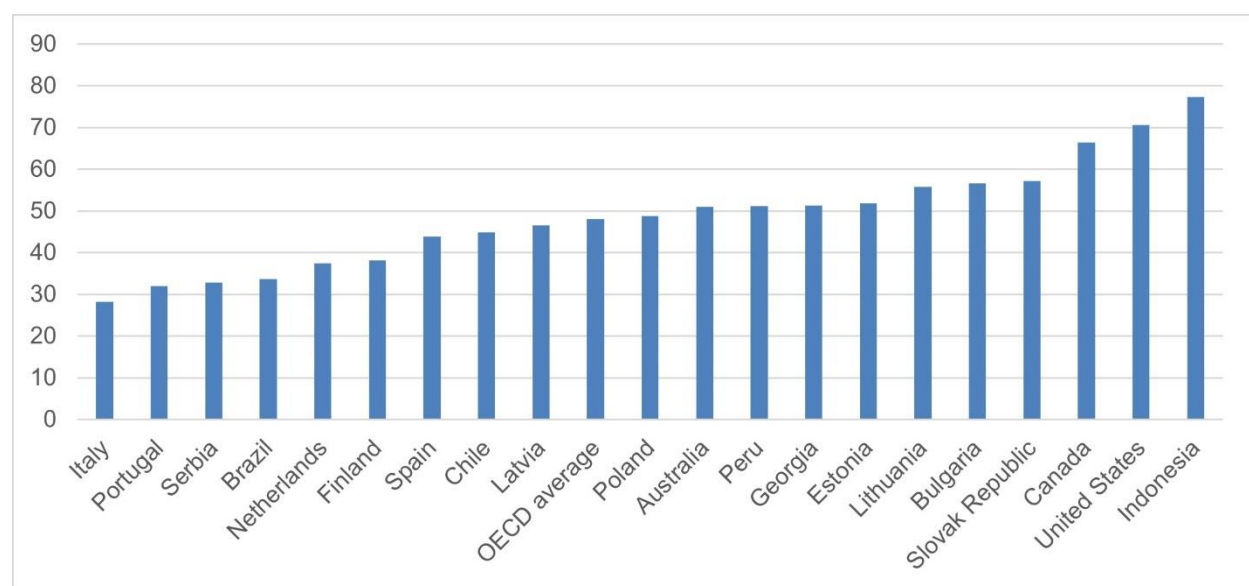
Does it make a difference if volunteering is mandatory?

In some schools in some education jurisdictions including Korea, Singapore, the Canadian province of Ontario and many US states (Canada, Volunteer^[34]; Kwan and Wray-Lake, 2023^[35]; Ozawa, 2010^[30]), students are *required* to undertake voluntary service. In jurisdictions where for some students volunteering is mandatory, but for others it is a choice, researchers have the opportunity to explore whether the long-term employment benefits commonly associated with volunteering can be better explained by processes of development which take place within the volunteering experience or whether positive outcomes can at least in some part be explained by a form of selection bias. Is it that students who choose to volunteer exhibit some forms of social or psychological advantage that is difficult in statistical controls to identify, but which influence both greater teenage civic engagement and later employment success? In a rare study by Kim and Morgül (2017^[9]), the employment outcomes of teenagers who either chose to volunteer or were required to do so were assessed. The study found that both groups enjoyed similar levels greater educational success and earnings in adult employment than comparable peers who did not volunteer, even after controlling for characteristics shared by siblings. From a further perspective, Flanagan et al. (2014^[36]) draw on data from several thousand US students enrolled in lower and upper secondary education to find no strong difference in declared reports of bridging and bonding forms of social capital between those students who chose to volunteer and those who had been mandated to engage in community service. Both groups exhibited stronger resources of social capital than peers who had not taken part in any form of community involvement.

How common is volunteering among students?

In 2018, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) provided participating jurisdictions with opportunity to opt into the Financial Literacy Questionnaire which included a question on volunteering. Representative samples of students aged 15 to 16 in 20 jurisdictions were asked if they had ‘undertaken voluntary work’ during the previous 12 months. Volunteer experiences may or may not have taken place through schools attended by students. As set out in **Figure 2**, the proportions of students responding that they had done so varies substantially between jurisdictions from a high of 77% in Indonesia to a low of 28% in Italy. Questions concerning volunteering were not asked in the PISA 2022 study or in earlier studies.

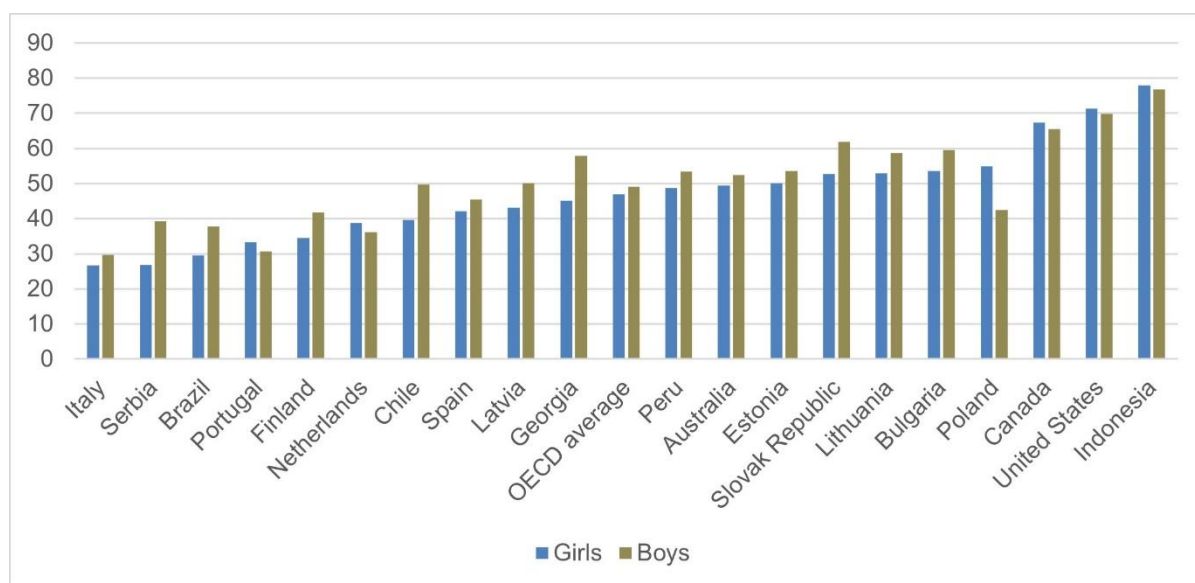
Figure 2. Percentage of students agreeing that they had undertaken voluntary work in the previous 12 months. PISA 2018



Source: OECD PISA 2018 data

Breaking down the data by the characteristics of students, on average across the OECD volunteering is slightly more common among boys than girls with clear national variations (**Figure 3**). This gendered pattern is also found in PISA data that explore student participation in internships and part-time working. Across OECD countries, girls are less likely than boys to gain first-hand experience of completing tasks under supervision within workplaces (OECD, 2021^[4]).

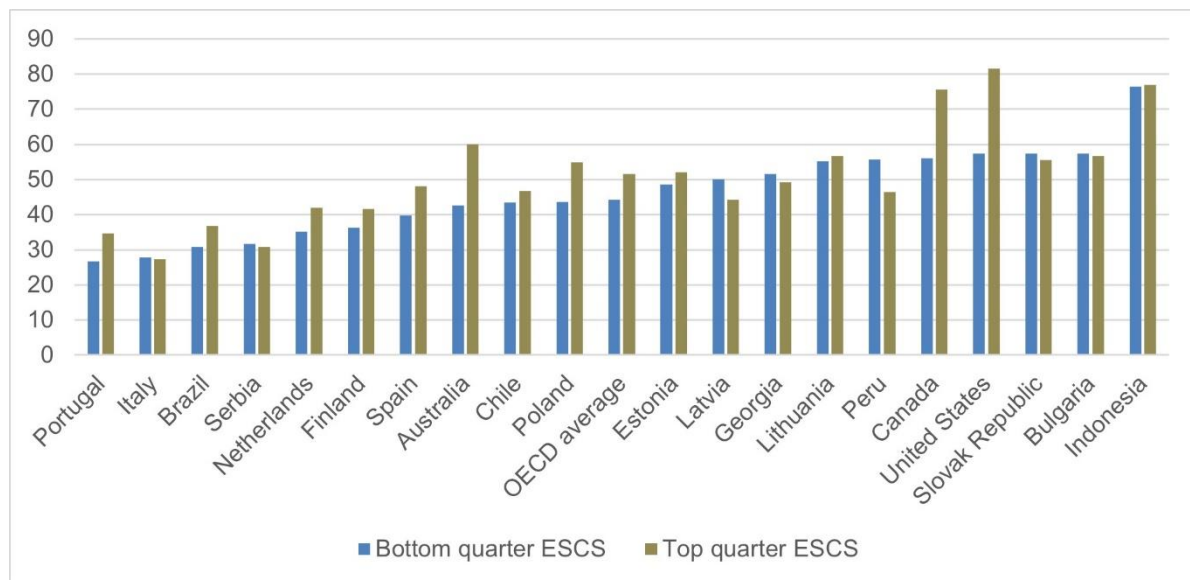
Figure 3. Percentage of students by gender agreeing that they had undertaken voluntary work during the previous 12 months. PISA 2018.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 database

Voluntary work also tends to be undertaken by students from more socially advantaged backgrounds. Based on a formula that draws on parental occupation, education level and household belongings, PISA places students within four quartiles according to economic, social and cultural status. **Figure 4** compares responses from the most socially advantaged quartile to most socially disadvantaged quartile. On average across OECD countries for which data are available, students from the former group are 8 percentage points more likely than their peers from the most disadvantaged group to engage in volunteering (52% to 44%). Such a trend is particularly strong in Australia, Canada and the United States. As students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than their more privileged peers to have easy access to career-related information, experiences and other resources through their family networks (OECD, 2024^[37]), patterns of teenage volunteering in such countries might be expected to enhance, rather than reduce, inequities in career progression.

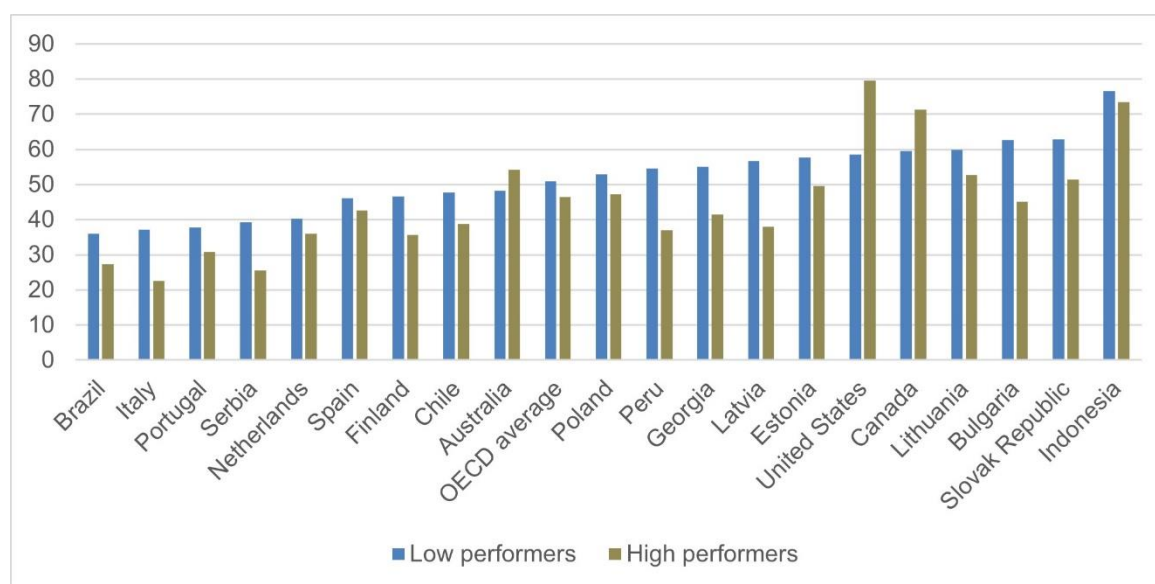
Figure 4. Percentage of students by economic, social and cultural status agreeing that they had undertaken voluntary work during the previous 12 months. PISA 2018.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 database

A further notable pattern within teenage volunteering as captured by PISA 2018 is that it tends to be more common for lower performing students on PISA's assessments in reading, mathematics and science undertake voluntary work (**Figure 5**). The opposite however is strongly the case in Canada and the United States. Analysis of PISA data also shows that students who are native (rather than foreign) born and who live in rural (rather than urban) communities have a stronger tendency on average to volunteer. The PISA study does not ask students how many hours they volunteered over the preceding 12 months. In a Scottish survey of secondary school students however, a majority of respondents reported volunteering for no more than 5 hours a month (Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]).

Figure 5. Percentage of students by academic proficiency agreeing that they had undertaken voluntary work during the previous 12 months. PISA 2018.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 database

Note: High Performers are defined as students achieving at least Level 4 proficiency in one core subject while maintaining at least Level 2 proficiency in the other two and Low Performers as students scoring below Level 2 proficiency in any of the PISA assessments in reading, mathematics and science.

How can schools enable effective engagement in volunteering?

To enable effective volunteering for career development, it is important that schools make it easy for students to volunteer within the community, preferably in fields of career interest, and that preparation and reflection exercises optimise the chance for students to gain value from the experience. In some jurisdictions, volunteering has become a mandatory requirement within secondary education (Kwan and Wray-Lake, 2023^[35]; Ozawa, 2010^[30]). As Ockenden and Stuart (2014^[17]) stress, an advantage of mandatory volunteering is that it can better enable the participation of students who might lack the confidence to otherwise engage. Importantly, volunteering should be seen explicitly as a form of workplace experience alongside internships and part-time working, providing potential means of enabling career exploration within workplaces of interest.

In the Canadian province of Ontario, secondary school students between the ages of 14 and 18 are expected to complete at least 40 hours of 'community involvement activities (volunteering).' The province makes it clear that career development is an important objective. Students are advised that volunteering can help them to develop 'transferable skills' and to 'explore different sectors and careers' as well as

learning about their roles as citizens and gaining awareness of how they can support and strengthen their communities (Government of Ontario^[38]). In New Brunswick, volunteering is built into the province's career education framework from elementary school with students from lower secondary education expected to be able to explain 'how volunteering can help me to make career pathway decisions' (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023^[39]).

In many US high schools, Service or Community Learning has long been a requirement for graduation (Celio, Durlak and Dymnicki, 2011^[28]; Metz and Youniss, 2005^[40]). In the District of Columbia, this requirement is rising from 75 hours to 100 hours (District of Columbia Public Schools^[41]). In Maryland, Service Learning is defined as "a teaching method that combines meaningful service to the community with curriculum-based learning." It is expected that students will "improve their academic skills by applying what they learn in school to the real world", reflecting on their experiences to reinforce links between voluntary service and learning (Office of Family and Community Engagement, 2020^[42]). Students between the ages of 13 and 18 are expected to complete at least 75 hours of Service Learning which includes planning and reflecting on activities within classroom study, as well as undertaking them. While it is not necessary to complete tasks in workplaces under supervision to meet the expectation and the programme is not explicitly designed as a form of career development, students typically undertake voluntary work within the workplaces of nonprofit organisations. Common examples of Service Learning projects include working in a library, a child day-care centre or in an administrative role for a charity or political campaign (Office of Family and Community Engagement, 2020^[42]).

Make it easy to find relevant volunteering experiences

Not all youth volunteering is organised by schools, but schools play an important role in enabling volunteering. A Scottish survey of secondary school students found for example that 24% of students who engaged in volunteering did so due to the influence of their teachers (Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]). Whether volunteering is mandatory or optional, an important factor in enabling career development is the availability of opportunities that provide students with scope to explore careers of interest. As Kwan (2023^[35]) finds from their study of volunteering in Singapore where it is mandatory, greater student engagement in the selection of voluntary activities increases intrinsic motivations to engage more deeply within activities. In Scotland, survey data show that two in five young people would volunteer more if they could find something that they were interested in (Volunteer Scotland, 2022^[16]). In Ontario, volunteering opportunities are advertised on school noticeboards and intranet sites (Government of Ontario^[38]; Meinhard et al., 2006^[26]). In some countries such as the United States (Kids that do good^[43]) and Hong Kong (Hong Kong Jockey Club Charitable Trust^[44]), dedicated websites collect together volunteering opportunities to which secondary school students can apply. Many schools in New Zealand create a Student Volunteer Army club and/or select a student ambassador to encourage and enable students to identify and engage in volunteering opportunities (Student Volunteer Army, 2024^[45]). In the United States, schools are often helped by state-level authorities to identify Service Learning projects which address community issues and align with subject curricula (Office of Family and Community Engagement, 2020^[42]). Schools can use their own networks, including parents and teacher contacts, to identify organisations in the community which would be well placed to receive volunteers. As volunteers will be undertaking tasks within an organisation, schools may also have responsibilities to ensure that workplaces have appropriate policies in place to ensure student safety and well-being.

Schools have a role moreover in helping students to think critically about the workplace experiences which will be of greatest value to them in their career exploration and/or post-secondary progression into continuing study, training or employment (Kwan and Wray-Lake, 2023^[35]; OECD, 2021^[5]). PISA indicates that many schools play such roles, as students enrolled in schools with greater levels of career guidance provision are much more likely to volunteer (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[3]). In Ontario, schools appoint volunteering supervisors who work with guidance counsellors to help some students plan their 40 hours of voluntary work which might take place in different settings over a number of years. Parents and guardians

are encouraged to help their children select activities and must sign a record of volunteer number of hours completed (Government of Ontario^[38]). Student reflection can be encouraged through completing records of activities and follow up classroom-based reflective activities (The National Youth Agency, 2008^[18]).

An expanded notion of work

Schools can help students to understand and present volunteering experiences in ways which respond to the interests of potential employers and tertiary institutions. Over recent years, a growing focus in the research literature on equity and career progression has been on an ‘expanded notion of work’. As Wong (2015^[46]) notes, young people commonly engage in activities whereby they undertake tasks and responsibilities that are relevant to the world of work, but which are unpaid. These include domestic activities, leisure pursuits, social activism and voluntary work in organisational settings. Understanding the potential value of such activities to possible employers enables young people to present a broader, richer insight into their character, skills and experience than is often displayed in CVs or within applications. In Hong Kong, the CLAP youth development programme supported by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charitable Trust explicitly broadens the definition of work and emphasises the importance of unpaid work in helping “young people to develop their capacity for career and life development... [encouraging] participation in various paid and unpaid work experiences that reflect their interests, as well as the exploration of pathways at their own pace” (CLAP@JC^[47]). Consequently, it acts as an intermediary organisation, connecting students with volunteer opportunities (Hong Kong Jockey Club Charitable Trust^[44]). Through CV360, an online resource, young people in Hong Kong are actively encouraged to reflect on the full breadth of their experiences relevant to potential future employment, including voluntary work, as they create a CV which presents a more comprehensive description of their interests, experiences, competencies and values than is often traditional (OECD^[48]).

Conclusion

Longitudinal studies demonstrate that young people who engage directly with workplaces as teenagers can commonly expect to enjoy better employment outcomes as young adults than comparable peers. By undertaking tasks under supervision in authentic workplaces, students gain opportunity to build human, social and cultural capital relevant to their career development and ultimate transitions into employment. Teenagers engage in such work-based career learning through part-time work, internships and most commonly through voluntary work. Around the world, many schools encourage or require students to volunteer in their communities. While this is not always undertaken as an explicit form of career development, opportunities for career development are considerable. As volunteers, students may have access to workplace opportunities which do not typically employ teenage part-time workers and may offer scope for longer term engagement than is the case in internships which, when delivered within general education, are commonly limited to one or two weeks. Schools can locate volunteering within strategies designed to help students actively explore their career ambitions. For full value to be gained from the experience, students must be supported to think critically about voluntary work and the opportunities for development presented by it whether or not it is enabled by their school. The wider benefits that can be expected to relate to teenage volunteering in terms of student maturation, confidence, well-being and engagement in education and community engagement, provide strong rationales for schools to enable such provision, notably in circumstances where student part-time working and cultures of school-managed internships are limited.

The bottom line: volunteering is a valuable resource for teenage career development and needs to be seen as such.

Teenage volunteering in the community is clearly linked with better ultimate employment outcomes in longitudinal studies. Qualitative studies highlight ways in which it can be seen to enhance the human, social and cultural capital of young people as they progress through education and approach transitions into post-secondary education, training and work. Schools can help students to access voluntary work that is linked to their career interests and help them to understand how the benefits of such experiences can be effectively utilised within transitions.

Career Readiness

This document was prepared by the Career Readiness team at the OECD.

The OECD Career Readiness project provides policy makers and practitioners with evidenced guidance on how schools can best prepare young people for employment. The project makes particular use of the results from PISA, analysis of national longitudinal datasets and insights from practice within jurisdictions.



For more information, visit: <https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness>

Contact: Anthony Mann, project leader, Anthony.Mann@oecd.org

Key papers include:

OECD (2025), "Internships for secondary school students in general education", *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

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The team also manages the **OECD Observatory on Digital technologies in Career guidance for Youth**: <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/odicy.html>

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This Education Policy Perspective has been authorised by Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD.

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