

**VOLUNTEERING AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF STUDENTS AT
THE “1 DECEMBRIE 1918” UNIVERSITY OF ALBA IULIA: A
COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY OF OPEN-ENDED
RESPONSES (2024–2025)**

**VOLUNTARIATUL ȘI VIAȚA SOCIALĂ A STUDENȚILOR DE LA
UNIVERSITATEA „1 DECEMBRIE 1918” DIN ALBA IULIA: UN
STUDIU CALITATIV COMPARATIV AL RĂSPUNSURILOR
DESCHISE (2024–2025)**

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18228697

UDC: 378.18:364.467:316.35

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Rezumat: *Voluntariatul și calitatea relațională a vieții universitare sunt considerate, în general, factori care modelează dezvoltarea studenților; cu toate acestea, propriile interpretări ale studenților asupra acestor experiențe au fost rareori examinate în termeni calitativi și comparativi și aproape niciodată în contexte din Europa Centrală și de Est. Acest articol analizează două valuri de răspunsuri deschise la chestionar, formulate de studenți ai Universității „1 Decembrie 1918” din Alba Iulia, România, colectate în 2024 (n = 41) și 2025 (n = 43). Respondenții au reflectat asupra semnificației voluntariatului pentru dezvoltarea lor personală și asupra dimensiunilor sociale ale vieții studențești, cu accent pe relațiile cu colegii și profesorii, precum și pe prietenie. Pentru construirea unor teme centrate pe sens și pentru compararea relevanței acestora între cele două cohorte și între subgrupuri definite în funcție de ciclul de studii, anul de studiu și facultate, a fost utilizată o analiză tematică reflexivă, completată de analiza calitativă de conținut. Studenții înțeleg voluntariatul mai ales ca pe un proces de cultivare a competențelor transferabile, în special comunicarea și munca în echipă, alături de o semnificație altruistă și relațională autentică; în 2025, a devenit mai proeminent un registru mai disciplinat și orientat spre profesionalizare, împreună cu o perspectivă prospectivă în rândul studenților nou-veniți. Relatările despre viața socială au fost puternic pozitive, profesorii accesibili fiind la fel de relevanți precum colegii. Rezultatele sugerează că organizațiile studențești și voluntariatul funcționează ca o infrastructură conectivă, care leagă participarea de integrarea socială și de sentimentul de apartenență.*

Cuvinte cheie: *voluntariat; dezvoltare personală; viața socială studențească; sentiment de apartenență; integrare socială; învățământ superior*

Abstract: *Volunteering and the relational texture of university life are widely held to shape how students develop, yet students' own interpretations of these experiences have rarely been examined in qualitative and comparative terms, and almost never in Central and Eastern European settings. This article analyses two waves of open-ended survey responses from students of the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia in Romania, gathered in 2024 (n = 41) and 2025 (n = 43). Respondents reflected on what volunteering means for their personal development and on the social dimensions of their student life, with attention to relationships with colleagues and professors and to friendship. A reflexive thematic analysis, complemented by qualitative content analysis, was used to construct meaning-based themes and to compare their salience across the two cohorts and across subgroups defined by cycle of study, year of study and faculty. Students construe volunteering chiefly as the cultivation of transferable competences, above all communication and teamwork, alongside a genuine altruistic and relational meaning; in 2025 a more disciplined and professionalising register became more prominent, together with a prospective framing among newcomers. Accounts of social life were strongly positive, with accessible professors as salient as supportive peers. The findings suggest that student organisations and volunteering operate as connective infrastructure linking participation to social integration and belonging.*

Key words: : volunteering, personal development, student social life, sense of belonging, social integration, higher education

1. Introduction

Universities are not only places of instruction; they are dense social settings in which young adults acquire competences, form relationships, negotiate identities and rehearse the dispositions of civic life. Two facets of this experience have proven especially consequential, both for the individual student and for the institution: participation in volunteering, and the wider social life of the university. Each has long been credited with substantial developmental value (Astin, 1984; Wilson, 2000); yet the meanings that students themselves attach to volunteering and to their everyday social relationships have attracted far less sustained, qualitative attention than the outcomes those experiences are presumed to produce.

The case for taking volunteering seriously rests on a broad evidentiary base. Service participation during the undergraduate years has been associated with gains in academic development, life skills and civic responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998), and service-learning research has documented parallel benefits for personal and interpersonal development (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Functional accounts further show that the same activity can serve several psychological purposes at once, expressing values, satisfying a desire to understand, meeting social needs and advancing careers (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Clary et al., 1998). Within higher education, however, scholars have warned that the benefits ascribed to student volunteering are too often assumed rather than demonstrated, and that students' own motivations are more heterogeneous than celebratory

policy narratives allow (Handy et al., 2010; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

The social dimension of university life is the second strand. Classic models of student development and persistence hold that succeeding at university depends not only on academic integration but equally on integration into the institution's social world, the relationships students build with peers and staff and their sense of belonging to a community (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Subsequent qualitative work has shown that, for many students, compatible friendships and ordinary social support are decisive in whether they feel able to remain and flourish (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), and that a secure sense of belonging is a precondition for engagement, well-being and success (Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2012). The approach must be viewed taking into account the fact that these students have experienced social isolation during their adolescence, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, against the backdrop of educational transformations and the reconfiguration of the university experience in recent years, studies on the educational environment also highlight the need for a way of understanding in which studies construct meanings related to learning, relationships and social integration (Bugnariu, 2020). On the other hand, another study from 2024 presented the students' perspective and discussed social adaptation, moral-relational crisis, socialization and the effects of social transformations on the younger generation (Bara, 2024).

These two strands are usually pursued separately, yet there is good reason to read them together. Volunteering is itself an intensely social activity that embeds students in networks of peers, staff and community partners, and is therefore a plausible mechanism through which integration and belonging are produced; conversely, a hospitable social climate may be what disposes students to volunteer in the first place. Grasping this intersection calls for attention to students' own words, the categories and emphases through which they describe what volunteering does for them and how they experience the relational fabric of student life. It is this meaning-centred angle, rather than the measurement of predefined outcomes, that the present study foregrounds, drawing on open-ended written reflections gathered in two successive years so that durable themes can be told apart from shifts between cohorts. The remainder of the article reviews the relevant scholarship and states the research purpose, sets out the data and analytical procedure, presents the thematic findings for each question with year-on-year and subgroup comparisons, discusses their wider significance, and concludes with limitations and recommendations.

2. The degree of investigation of the problem currently, and purpose of research

2.1. Volunteering and student personal development

In the sociological literature, volunteering is understood as any activity in

which time is freely given to benefit another person, group or cause, situated within a broader family of helping behaviours (Wilson, 2000). Wilson's influential review, later extended in a wide-ranging research synthesis (Wilson, 2012), organised explanations of volunteering around individual motives, rational-choice reasoning and the social resources, ties and organisational memberships that make participation possible. Because the phenomenon resists any single explanatory frame, more recent theorising has proposed a "hybrid map" that brings together its dispositional, structural and cultural determinants (Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010a). A complementary tradition in social psychology developed a functional account, arguing that the same act may serve different functions for different individuals; the Volunteer Functions Inventory identifies six, values, understanding, social, career, protective and enhancement (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Clary et al., 1998). This perspective is especially apt for students, for whom volunteering may at once express altruistic commitments, satisfy curiosity, meet social needs and serve instrumental ends.

Empirically, the developmental yield of volunteering is well attested. Astin and Sax (1998), drawing on longitudinal data from thousands of undergraduates, found that service participation enhanced academic development, life skills and civic responsibility even after entry characteristics were controlled, while service-learning research links sustained engagement to personal and interpersonal growth, the application of knowledge and reflective practice (Eyler & Giles, 1999). More broadly, volunteering is theorised as a means of accruing social capital, the relational resource that converts individual participation into collective advantage (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997), and, in a Bourdieusian register, as a site for acquiring and converting social and cultural capital with downstream educational and labour-market effects (Bourdieu, 1986).

Research on higher education has nonetheless struck a more cautious note. Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) argued that, despite a strong policy consensus, the gains attributed to student volunteering are frequently presumed rather than evidenced, and that uncritical "win-win-win" framings obscure the complexity of students' experiences; subsequent work showed that the value students derive depends on how volunteering is organised and on their own sense of choice and control (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014). Motivations, moreover, are mixed and contextually patterned. Examining whether student volunteering is essentially "résumé building," Handy et al. (2010) found career and employability motives to be prominent yet far from exhaustive, with marked cross-national variation, while comparative analyses tie such variation to the social and cultural origins of each country's non-profit sector (Hustinx et al., 2010b). Closer study of student motivations likewise reveals a blend of value-driven, learning-oriented and career-oriented reasoning, shaped by background factors such as ethnicity and

religiosity (Holdsworth, 2010). Taken together, this scholarship indicates that the developmental meaning of volunteering is neither self-evident nor uniform, and is best approached through students' own articulations.

2.2. Student social life and integration in higher education

The salience of the social dimension of university life is a long-standing theme. Tinto's interactionist model, first synthesised in 1975 and elaborated in 1993, holds that persistence depends on the degree to which students become integrated into both the academic and the social systems of the institution, with weak social integration a principal risk for withdrawal (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Astin's (1984) theory of involvement makes a parallel claim: learning and development are a function of the physical and psychological energy students invest in their studies, including time on campus, participation in organisations and frequency of contact with peers and staff. Both frameworks treat social participation not as an ornament to study but as constitutive of the developmental work of higher education, a position reinforced by large-scale syntheses of how participation shapes student outcomes (Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon, & May, 2011).

Qualitative inquiry has deepened these models by privileging students' own perspectives. Wilcox et al. (2005) contended that understanding retention requires weighting integration into the social world of the university as heavily as the academic, demonstrating that forming compatible friendships and securing everyday support were central to first-year students' decisions to stay. Such findings foreground two sets of relationships that recur throughout the field: horizontal ties among peers, classmates, colleagues and friends, and vertical ties between students and academic staff. The quality of student-staff interaction in particular has been linked to engagement and to a felt sense of support, while peer networks furnish both practical assistance and emotional companionship across the transitions of student life (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Wilcox et al., 2005).

2.3. Relationships, belonging, and well-being in university life

Beneath the literature on integration lies the premise that belonging is a fundamental human motivation: people are powerfully driven to form and sustain lasting, positive attachments, and the thwarting of this need carries costs for well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Transposed to education, the insight has generated a substantial body of work. Goodenow (1993) showed that belonging is related to motivation and achievement, establishing it as an educationally consequential construct rather than an affective by-product, and experimental research has since demonstrated that belonging operates partly through uncertainty: brief interventions that ease doubts about one's social fit can improve engagement and attainment, especially for students at risk of feeling out of place (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

In higher education specifically, Strayhorn (2019) offers the most systematic theorisation, defining sense of belonging as perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness and the experience of mattering, of being accepted, respected and valued by peers, faculty and staff. Belonging in this account is a condition for adjustment, achievement and persistence, and its absence manifests as alienation and marginality. Empirical studies converge on the mechanism: the quality of students' interaction with teachers and peers shapes their sense of belonging, which in turn supports study success (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010). The national What Works? programme reached a kindred conclusion, placing engagement and belonging at the centre of retention and success and identifying isolation and a failure to "fit in" as drivers of withdrawal (Thomas, 2012). Belonging thus serves as a conceptual bridge between the everyday relationships students describe and the developmental outcomes with which universities are concerned (Strayhorn, 2019; Wilcox et al., 2005).

2.4. Research gaps and the purpose of the present study

Three gaps follow from this review. First, although volunteering and the social life of the university are each well theorised, they are seldom examined in relation to one another, despite strong grounds for treating organised participation as an engine of integration and belonging; the literature on involvement and engagement treats participation in student organisations as social engagement (Astin, 1984; Stuart et al., 2011; Thomas, 2012), and the volunteering literature recognises the social and relational functions of the act (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Wilson, 2000), yet the connection between students' voluntary engagement and their relational experience of university life remains under-explored. Second, much of the influential evidence is quantitative or outcome-focused, and scholars have explicitly questioned whether the presumed benefits hold once students' own meanings are taken seriously (Handy et al., 2010; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010), which calls for qualitative, student-centred analysis. Third, the field is dominated by Anglophone and North American settings, with limited attention to Central and Eastern European universities and few designs capable of distinguishing stable themes from year-on-year shifts.

The purpose of this study is to examine, through qualitative analysis of students' open-ended responses, how students at a Romanian regional university construe the developmental significance of volunteering and the social character of their university life, and how these construals vary across the 2024 and 2025 cohorts and across academic subgroups. Four objectives give this purpose effect: to identify the themes through which students articulate the meaning of volunteering for their personal development; to characterise how they describe their social relationships and sense of belonging; to explore connections between these two dimensions; and to compare the patterns observed across years and

subgroups. In so doing, the study brings student voice to bear, in an under-represented national context and through a comparative lens, on the intersection of volunteering and social integration that the literature implies but has rarely tested directly.

3. Methods applied

3.1. Research design, data source and participants

The study employs a qualitative, comparative cross-sectional design based on the secondary analysis of two waves of open-ended survey responses. The analytical approach combines reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with elements of qualitative content analysis, allowing both the inductive construction of meaning-based themes and the cautious quantification of their prevalence. The interest is interpretive, how students construe volunteering and university social life, rather than the testing of pre-specified hypotheses; comparison proceeds diachronically, between the 2024 and 2025 cohorts, and synchronically, across subgroups defined by cycle of study, year of study and faculty.

The data derive from two exports of an institutional online registration form at the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia. After cleaning, the analytical samples comprised 41 respondents in 2024 and 43 in 2025. One 2024 record was removed because the respondent declined consent; all others consented, and every direct identifier was excluded from analysis. Both open-ended items were answered by every retained respondent in both waves, although response length varied from a single phrase to a full paragraph. Two 2024 responses were written in English and analysed in the original; all illustrative excerpts are reported in anonymised, translated form, tagged only by year and subgroup. As Table 1 shows, both waves are dominated by the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences and by second-year Bachelor students; the most consequential change between waves is the growth of the Master’s segment, concentrated in Economic Sciences, alongside a larger third-year presence in 2025.

3.2. Variables used in the analysis

Both files record a timestamp, a consent item, faculty of enrolment, a field of study, year of study, the two target open-ended items, a further open-ended item on motivation, and contact details; the 2025 file additionally contains an explicit educational-level item. The two open-ended items constitute the analytical material. Faculty serves as the principal indicator of disciplinary field, being recorded consistently in both years. Cycle of study is derived uniformly from the year-of-study field, because the dedicated cycle item exists only in 2025 while the 2024 specialisation field was completed inconsistently. Year of study is used as recorded, and the free-text specialisation field is used only illustratively. No gender, age, residence or socio-economic variables are present

in either file, an absence acknowledged below as a limitation.

Table 1: Composition of the analytical samples, by year

Characteristic	2024 (n = 41)	2025 (n = 43)
Cycle — Bachelor	38	33
Cycle — Master	3	10
Year of study — Year 1	11	15
Year of study — Year 2	26	18
Year of study — Year 3	3	10
Year of study — Year 4	1	0
Faculty — Law & Social Sciences	20	24
Faculty — Informatics & Engineering	7	7
Faculty — Economic Sciences	6	8
Faculty — History, Letters & Educational Sciences	5	3
Faculty — Orthodox Theology	3	1

Source: author's analysis of the survey data (2024, 2025). Cycle is derived from the year-of-study field; one 2025 respondent recording dual enrolment is classified as Master; counts exclude the non-consenting 2024 case.

3.3. Analytical strategy and coding procedure

Each item was analysed separately and then compared across waves and subgroups, following the reflexive sequence of familiarisation, initial coding, the collation of codes into categories, their aggregation into higher-order themes, and review against the full corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding proceeded at the level of the response fragment, so that a single multi-clause answer could be assigned to several codes; the proportions reported below therefore sum to more than one hundred per cent within each item. Two inductive coding frames were developed. For the first question, fragments were coded according to the kind of value or development attributed to volunteering, with categories clustering into a competence-and-skills family (generic competence; communication; teamwork; organisation and time management; leadership; practical experience), a relational-and-civic family (sociability; altruism and community contribution; empathy; new perspectives) and a self-and-disposition family (responsibility; self-confidence; personality and values; adaptability; stepping out of the comfort zone), with a separate code for prospective, not-yet-volunteered framing. For the second question, categories captured relations with professors and with colleagues, friendship, mutual support, a warm atmosphere, academic guidance, belonging, integration and the transition from school, involvement in organisations and volunteering, international or Erasmus exposure, and negative or limited social life, with a residual brief-positive code. Theme prevalence is

reported as counts and percentages of respondents and treated as a descriptive indicator only: given the small, non-probability samples, the figures characterise emphasis and flag movement rather than supporting statistical inference. Because the 2025 sample contains more Master’s and senior students, the analysis deliberately checks whether any year-on-year shift also appears within the dominant Bachelor segment, so as to separate genuine attitudinal change from artefacts of composition.

4. Results obtained and discussions

4.1. The meaning of volunteering for personal development

Across both waves, students construe volunteering predominantly as the cultivation of transferable competence. Generic skill and knowledge acquisition is the most frequent theme in each year, and within the competence family communication and teamwork are the most often named capacities. A second, clearly relational register is also strong: a substantial minority frame volunteering as a means of meeting new people and of contributing to the community, with empathy recurring as the affective hinge between self-development and concern for others. Table 2 reports the distribution.

Table 2: Prevalence of themes in responses on the meaning of volunteering, by year (% of respondents)

Theme	2024 (n = 41)	2025 (n = 43)	Trend
Skill / competence acquisition (generic)	24 (59%)	23 (53%)	stable
Communication skills	17 (41%)	11 (26%)	lower
Teamwork	12 (29%)	13 (30%)	stable
Altruism / community contribution	10 (24%)	11 (26%)	stable
Sociability / new contacts	12 (29%)	7 (16%)	lower
Organisation / time management	4 (10%)	11 (26%)	higher
Empathy	7 (17%)	5 (12%)	lower
Responsibility	1 (2%)	10 (23%)	higher
Professional development / career	4 (10%)	7 (16%)	higher
Practical experience / theory to practice	2 (5%)	6 (14%)	higher
New perspectives / understanding society	3 (7%)	2 (5%)	stable
Leadership	2 (5%)	4 (9%)	higher
Self-confidence	3 (7%)	2 (5%)	lower
Stepping out of the comfort zone	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	stable
Not yet volunteered / prospective	0 (0%)	7 (16%)	new

Source: author’s analysis of the survey data (2024, 2025). Codes are not mutually exclusive; columns do not sum to 100%.

The prominence of the competence register, anchored in communication and teamwork, indicates that students assimilate volunteering to a capital-building logic, valuing it as a setting in which to cultivate dispositions transferable to academic, professional and civic life, a reading consistent with the functional and developmental traditions (Astin & Sax, 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999). The relational themes show that this instrumental understanding coexists with a genuinely pro-social one, in which volunteering is a means both of connection and of contribution. The themes that rise in 2025, responsibility, organisation, practical experience and career, share a more disciplined, work-oriented character; the sharp increase in references to responsibility, from a single mention to nearly a quarter of respondents, is the clearest marker of this reorientation. A new prospective framing also appears in 2025, voiced by students who had not yet volunteered but anticipated doing so, which tempers any reading of the corpus as uniformly experienced. Two excerpts illustrate the dominant and the emergent registers respectively:

“Volunteer actions are essential for my personal development, because they help me develop communication, organisation and teamwork skills. They also push me out of my comfort zone, to meet new people and learn from their experiences” (2024, Bachelor, Year 2, Law and Social Sciences).

“Volunteering contributes significantly to professional development, offering practical experience, teamwork skills and networking opportunities, which can complement formal education and increase one’s attractiveness on the labour market” (2025, Bachelor, Year 3, Law and Social Sciences).

The 2025 turn towards a professionalising vocabulary is partly, but not wholly, a compositional effect. The career theme is proportionally more common among Master’s respondents in 2025 (four of ten) than among Bachelors (three of thirty-three), and the Master’s segment itself grew between waves; yet the increases in responsibility and organisation are visible within the Bachelor segment as well, indicating a genuine attitudinal movement rather than a mere artefact of sampling. The prospective stance is, in turn, concentrated among first-year students and absent among postgraduates, a coherent seniority gradient consistent with developmental accounts in which the form and meaning of engagement evolve as students progress (Astin, 1984). Disciplinary inflections, though resting on small cells, are intelligible: respondents in Economics and Informatics more often invoke organisational and leadership language, while the few Theology respondents foreground the communitarian and altruistic meaning of service. These instrumental accents echo evidence that career and employability motives figure prominently, though not exclusively, in student volunteering (Handy et al., 2010; Holdsworth, 2010; Stuart et al., 2011).

4.2. The social dimensions of student life

Responses on student social life are markedly positive and relationally dense. In both waves the two most frequent themes by a wide margin are accessible relations with professors and good relations with colleagues, each named by roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents, with a warm atmosphere, friendship and mutual support forming a strong second tier. Table 3 reports the distribution.

Table 3: Prevalence of themes in responses on the social dimensions of student life, by year (% of respondents)

Theme	2024 (n = 41)	2025 (n = 43)	Trend
Accessible relations with professors	30 (73%)	27 (63%)	lower
Positive relations with colleagues	29 (71%)	27 (63%)	lower
Warm / open / friendly atmosphere	19 (46%)	19 (44%)	stable
Friendships formed	21 (51%)	16 (37%)	lower
Mutual support & collaboration	14 (34%)	16 (37%)	higher
Academic guidance / learning support	10 (24%)	7 (16%)	lower
Involvement in organisations / volunteering	6 (15%)	6 (14%)	stable
Brief / minimal positive	6 (15%)	6 (14%)	stable
Belonging / community / “second home”	4 (10%)	6 (14%)	higher
Integration / transition from school	2 (5%)	6 (14%)	higher
International / Erasmus / diversity	5 (12%)	2 (5%)	lower
Negative / limited social life	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	new

Source: author’s analysis of the survey data (2024, 2025). Codes are not mutually exclusive; columns do not sum to 100%.

The salience of the professor relationship is striking and cuts against the stereotype of the remote academic: staff are described as open, understanding and available, less as gatekeepers than as approachable guides. The equally prominent colleague relationship, together with friendship and mutual support, depicts a horizontally cohesive peer environment in which collaboration on coursework and examinations shades readily into friendship, while the recurring image of a warm atmosphere offers a summary appraisal of the environment. Smaller themes locate this sociability within institutional structures: involvement in student organisations and volunteering appears in both waves and connects the two questionnaire items, belonging expresses the affective endpoint of integration, and the transition from school marks the entry into a new social world. The portrait is highly stable across years, with the relational core holding at similar levels; friendship is somewhat less prominent in 2025, plausibly because the larger postgraduate and senior contingent frames relationships in

more functional terms, while belonging and the transition from school become a little more visible. The first negative cases also appear in 2025 and are analytically valuable as deviant instances confirming that the prevailing positivity is not universal. Two excerpts capture the relational density and the rare dissenting note:

“Student life is closely tied to relationships with colleagues, professors and friends. Colleagues bring support and collaboration, professors offer guidance and motivation, and friends provide emotional balance” (2025, Bachelor, Year 3, Law and Social Sciences).

“Unfortunately, rather limited” (2025, Master’s, Year 2, Law and Social Sciences).

Subgroup patterns are coherent. Bachelor respondents more often use the vocabulary of friendship and belonging, whereas the larger Master’s segment frames relationships functionally, as collaboration, guidance and networking, and supplies both the most institutionally embedded account and the single most negative one. The transition theme is carried mainly by first- and second-year students contrasting university with school, while senior students describe consolidated relationships and leadership roles. The international and Erasmus theme clusters among Informatics and History and Letters respondents, reflecting their involvement in mobility schemes and student organisations, whereas Law and Social Sciences, the largest group, supplies the bulk of the standard relational accounts.

5. Discussion

Read together, the two analyses tell a consistent story. A durable core persists across both waves: volunteering is construed as transferable-competence building, anchored in communication and teamwork and coexisting with a genuine altruistic-relational meaning, while student social life is experienced as warm and relationally dense, defined above all by accessible professors and supportive colleagues. These cores resonate with the functional and developmental traditions in the volunteering literature (Astin & Sax, 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999) and with the integration and belonging traditions in higher-education scholarship (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Wilcox et al., 2005); their persistence across cohorts suggests they reflect a relatively settled student culture rather than transient sentiment.

Against this backdrop, the principal change is a subtle reorientation in how volunteering is understood, away from a predominantly expressive and sociable register and towards a more disciplined and professionalising one in which responsibility, organisation and labour-market relevance are foregrounded. This inflection accords with evidence that career and employability considerations are

prominent, if not exhaustive, among student volunteers (Handy et al., 2010; Holdsworth, 2010; Stuart et al., 2011) and with theorisations that treat volunteering as a hybrid phenomenon answering to several logics at once (Hustinx et al., 2010a). It also lends qualitative weight to the caution that the meaning of student volunteering is contingent rather than self-evident (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). That the shift is partly attributable to a larger postgraduate cohort, yet also discernible within the Bachelor segment, suggests a developmental gradient in which engagement matures from the relational towards the instrumental as students advance, consistent with involvement theory (Astin, 1984).

The study's most distinctive contribution concerns the intersection of the two domains. Across both questions, student organisations and volunteering recur as the connective infrastructure that links participation to social integration and belonging: organised activity is repeatedly described as the means by which newcomers form relationships and by which more advanced students assume responsibility and leadership. This provides qualitative, student-voiced support for the long-theorised but seldom directly examined link between participation and integration (Astin, 1984; Stuart et al., 2011; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1993), and it specifies a plausible mechanism: belonging is built through interaction, and organised participation multiplies the interactions, with peers and with staff, through which it is built (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2007). The handful of negative accounts is a useful corrective, reminding us that integration is not automatic and that, for some students, the social promise of university life goes unrealised.

6. Conclusions

This comparative qualitative study examined how students at the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia understand the developmental significance of volunteering and the social character of their university life, drawing on open-ended responses from two successive cohorts. The analysis portrays a student body that consistently values volunteering as a vehicle for personal and social development and that experiences university life as warm, supportive and relationally rich, with accessible academic staff a recurring and notable feature. Against this stable backdrop, the comparison between 2024 and 2025 revealed a coherent reorientation in how volunteering is construed, from an expressive and sociable register towards a more responsible and professionalising one, together with the appearance of newcomers framing volunteering prospectively and of a small number of students for whom social life is less rewarding. These shifts are partly bound up with the changing composition of the samples, yet are not reducible to it, and they are consistent with a developmental trajectory in which engagement matures as students progress.

The study's principal contribution is to bring student voice to bear, in an under-represented national context and through a year-on-year comparative lens, on the intersection of volunteering and social integration that the literature implies but has rarely tested. Its findings should nevertheless be read as interpretive and indicative rather than generalisable. The data come from a voluntary registration form, so respondents are self-selected and plausibly more favourably disposed than the wider student body; the samples are small, unbalanced and non-probability in nature, skewed towards one faculty and towards second-year Bachelor students; the two waves are not compositionally equivalent, which complicates direct comparison and was addressed analytically rather than statistically; and key socio-demographic variables, including gender, age and socio-economic status, are absent from the datasets. Response depth also varied, and reporting in English required the translation of Romanian responses.

Several recommendations follow. Larger, more balanced and ideally probability-based samples would permit more secure comparison across subgroups and years, and the inclusion of socio-demographic variables alongside validated measures of volunteer motivation (Clary et al., 1998) and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) would enable mixed-methods triangulation. Longitudinal designs that follow the same students across their studies would test directly the developmental maturation suggested here, while comparative work across Romanian and other Central and Eastern European institutions would establish how far these patterns are institution-specific or regionally shared. For practice, the connective role that students themselves assign to organised participation suggests that widening and supporting access to volunteering and student organisations, and attending to the minority for whom social life remains limited, may be among the more effective means of fostering integration, belonging and development within the university.

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