

Service learning via tourism volunteering at university: skill-transformation and SDGs alignment through rite of passage approach

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how university students experience a skill transformation process aligned with the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This transformation occurs through their participation in a service-learning programme alongside an international volunteering project. The theoretical framework for understanding this skill transformation process is based on the “rite of passage”.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative methodology is adopted by conducting 23 online surveys with volunteers (virtual and onsite) and five with coordinators across the rite of passage phases. Volunteering was carried out in five Mayan indigenous communities in Mexico as part of an international cooperation project with the goals of supporting community-based tourism development and strengthening volunteers’ skills in accordance with the SDGs.

The research is the outcome of the international cooperation projects called “Tourism as an instrument of development in the Mayan indigenous communities in the north of Quintana Roo, Mexico” supported by the Rey Juan Carlos University (*Vicerrectorado de Extensión Universitaria – Servicio de Cooperación al Desarrollo y Voluntariado*) with the Universidad of the Caribbean (Cancún, Mexico) and a local Mexican women’s association called CIAM-Cancún (*Centro Integral de Atención a la Mujer, Mexico*). The authors are grateful to all the volunteers, experts and, especially, the members of the 5 participating indigenous communities (Nuevo Durango, Cenote Esmeralda, Campamento Hidalgo, San Juan de Dios y El Naranjal) for opening their doors to us and allowing us to work with them.

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Findings – Results show that international volunteering programmes for university students significantly enhance their interpersonal and professional skills, demonstrating strong potential for implementing the SDGs. These programmes provide learning and education opportunities for both volunteers and local communities. Volunteers gain a broader perspective on gender equality and cultural barriers. Additionally, volunteering supports sustainable tourism, economic worth and collaboration among institutions. Both volunteers' personal characteristics (educational level and sociocultural context), as well as their sociocultural context, influenced the perception of the skill transformation process and learning about the SDGs. Finally, a new educational university programme in volunteering aligned with SDGs is proposed.

Practical implications – This research examines the practical ramifications of incorporating volunteer programmes into university courses. Universities must include these initiatives in their educational systems as a means of enhancing student learning.

Social implications – A new educational university programme in volunteering aligned with SDGs is proposed. This study suggests a shift in university mindset, as well as increased funding for training and adherence to the SDGs.

Originality/value – This study pioneers the rite of passage framework in an international volunteer tourism project facilitated by universities, emphasizing volunteering as a valuable tool for SDG implementation, considering the interrelationships between objectives.

Keywords Service learning, Volunteer students, Rite of passage, Skills, Educational programme, SDGs (sustainable development goals)

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Tourism graduates frequently lack a comprehensive knowledge of sustainability, and educators in the field are encouraged to emphasize the concept and consequences of sustainability more explicitly due to a “global call” (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). The harmonization of higher education programme curricula with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and sustainability is a pivotal driver for developing the abilities of forthcoming hospitality practitioners to tackle sustainable issues in their professional and personal spheres (Brundiens *et al.*, 2021; Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021; Holdsworth and Sandri, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for hospitality programmes to give prominence to education on sustainability and incorporate SDGs into their curricula. This measure would equip the graduates with the required proficiency to tackle sustainability issues in the tourism industry. The focus on sustainability will enable the development of graduates who are not only industry-ready but also globally conscious individuals (Alisha *et al.*, 2017).

This study presents the outcomes of involving university students in service learning by means of volunteering projects related to tourism. Service learning is an organized educational programme that engages students in community service to accomplish educational objectives and comprehend their civic responsibilities in society (Bowen *et al.*, 2009). In contrast, volunteering entails identifying and addressing community needs without any explicit educational objectives (Phillips, 2013). The research presented here uses a service-learning approach combined with volunteering to attain educational objectives for university-level tourism students. The results demonstrate how volunteer programmes in tourism support the process of skill transformation among university students.

There is an extensive academic literature on volunteering and tourism, which focuses on the impact of volunteering on the host community, volunteer project norms and procedures (Thompson, 2022), volunteer motivation (Fuentes-Moraleda *et al.*, 2016) and the effects of the programme on volunteers (Coghlan and Fennell, 2009; Magrizos *et al.*, 2021). Other research has examined volunteering programmes involving university students (Ruhanen, 2008; Palacios, 2010; Pongponrat, 2021). However, there has been insufficient focus on volunteer programmes for international students sponsored by universities, despite the essential role

that universities must play in achieving the UN's 2030 Agenda to fulfil these aims (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021). A literature review highlights the deficiency of research studies concentrating on how volunteer programmes facilitate the attainment of these goals (Lockstone-Binney and Ong, 2021).

To fill this gap, this paper presents the results of students' perceptions of their skill transformation aligned with the SDGs. These students participated in a collaborative volunteering project involving two public universities (Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, Spain and University of the Caribbean Cancún, Mexico) and a local non-profit organization called CIAM-Cancún (Centro Integral de Atención a la Mujer, Mexico). The project had two objectives. Firstly, it had an educational objective linked to participants' skill transformation process aligned with SDGs. Secondly, it focused on host community empowerment in terms of developing local and sustainable tourism products. To gain insight into the volunteers' perception of transformation during the programme, this paper uses van Genneep's (1960) concept of a "rite of passage".

The paper makes a fourfold contribution. Firstly, it examines university students' perceptions of transformation resulting from their involvement as volunteers in a community-based tourism project. Secondly, it applies the rite of passage framework to analyse the transformation process in volunteers. Thirdly, the study assesses how the skill-transformation process (both interpersonal and professional) aligns with the SDGs. Finally, the paper proposes a specific educational programme structure that outlines a volunteering process for university students. The findings from this research can be valuable for other institutions looking to further integrate service-learning programmes and volunteer initiatives into their curricula.

The research proposes the following research questions:

- RQ1. Does the rite of passage facilitate skill transformation in students participating in service-learning programmes through volunteering?
- RQ2. How do volunteers and project coordinators perceive the improvement of interpersonal and professional skills in volunteers after participating in tourism-related volunteering?
- RQ3. Are there differences in the skill-transformation process based on volunteer characteristics such as location (onsite or virtual), nationality and academic level (undergraduate or master's students)?
- RQ4. How does volunteering contribute to the achievement of SDGs within the context of an educational project?
- RQ5. Do educational programmes that incorporate volunteering processes effectively support volunteers' skill transformation?

Theoretical framework

Rite of passage and service-learning programmes for student volunteers

Rites of passage, as described by van Genneep (1960), refer to the transition from one life stage to another and/or from one occupation to another (Falassi, 1987). Elements such as "space, community, temporality, and mobility" are closely associated with liminality and the rite of passage (Tsoni, 2016). This intense period leads to a transformation in individuals, providing insight into their origins and future direction (Söderlund and Borg, 2018). This progression comprises three phases of varying duration and complexity (Turner, 1982), depending on the demands of the new relational systems (Chapple and Coon, 1942):

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- *Separation*, during which the individual is detached from their current status and readied for the transition from one place or status to another. In the context of this study, this phase commences when student volunteers depart from their home/country in preparation for their journey to the indigenous community where the project is taking place.
 - *Transition/Liminal period*, during which individuals adapt and undergo changes to assume new roles. This phase delves into the interaction between *communitas*, volunteer experiences, engagement and affective commitment. The term “*communitas*” is used to describe a loosely structured group of individuals forming a “generalized social bond” at a “moment outside of ordinary time”, fostering introspection, social transformation and environmental engagement (Turner, 1969). In this study, the liminal phase is particularly pertinent as volunteers reside within the community, forging strong emotional connections with its members.
 - *Incorporation*, where the volunteer is reintegrated into society. According to Schouten (1991), individuals can respond in three ways: with inaction, rejection or by incorporating the possible self into a revised self-concept. Typically, studies that use the rite of passage framework reveal positive outcomes in the transformations people undergo.

Berdychovsky *et al.* (2013) contend that the changes experienced by tourists during the liminal phase are often temporary, and upon returning to their everyday lives, they revert to their “usual” selves. However, Lee *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that international experiences, such as international volunteering, promote liminality and *communitas*, leading to a lasting sense of social identity.

While the rite of passage has been applied in various tourism typologies (Noy and Cohen, 2005; Selänniemi, 2012; Rogerson and Harmer, 2015; Korstanje, 2022; Zhang and Zhang, 2022), it has not yet been used in service-learning programmes for student volunteers (Grabowski *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, there is limited research beyond the educational field. Turner’s (1982) rite of passage framework provides a structure that facilitates the examination of service-learning programmes for student volunteers as a transformative process (Tomazos and Butler, 2010; Magrizos *et al.*, 2021). Volunteering enables individuals to undergo socio-psychological transformations through the interactions that occur (Hollas *et al.*, 2022), and the rite of passage lays the foundation for analysing this transformative process.

Skill-transformation process in students aligned with sustainable development goals: service learning and volunteer programme combination

One of the fundamental pillars of higher education institutions is their commitment to society; however, this commitment has been relatively underdeveloped, traditionally focusing on teaching and research (Hlengwa, 2010). Now, more than ever, it is crucial for students to acquire values that enable them to navigate a society grappling with new challenges (Coghlan and Mair, 2018).

Since its adoption in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for SDGs, aimed at achieving sustainable and equitable development, has been acknowledged by researchers for the role that education, particularly at the higher education level, plays in this endeavour (López López *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, this transition from theoretical concepts to practical application necessitates the use of tools that facilitate the acquisition of soft skills and transversal competences, making them paramount (González-Sánchez *et al.*, 2022).

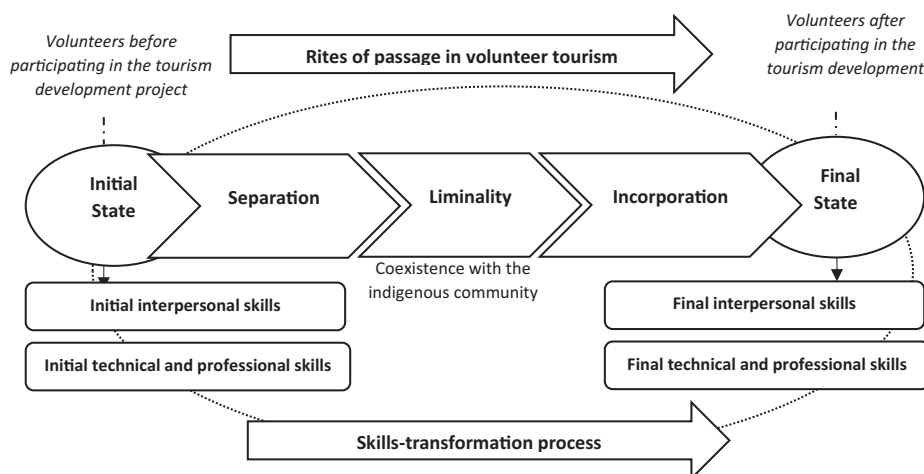
However, education managers often encounter a high level of bureaucracy associated with making changes to degree programmes, which typically require approval from educational agencies beyond the universities. Therefore, the adoption of pedagogical and active tools, such as the service-learning methodology, becomes necessary to provide

students with the opportunity to “experience the context”, question and develop values (Young and Karne, 2015; Gelbmann and Pirker, 2023). These tools can serve as crucial “enablers” for the implementation of education for sustainable development while reshaping formal curricula (Hopkinson *et al.*, 2008).

Connecting service-learning programmes and student volunteering enhances universities’ role in fostering civic responsibility and engagement, although this area has not yet received sufficient research attention (Chen and Qi, 2021). Volunteer programmes offered by higher education institutions (universities) enable students to bridge the gap between their academic studies and real-world issues (Pongponrat, 2021).

Recent research has explored volunteering as a training method to prepare students as future leaders for the attainment of the SDGs in a general context (Lockstone-Binney and Ong, 2021) as well as in specific areas such as the environment (Yee *et al.*, 2021). In some countries, such as the USA and Australia, they have what is known as service learning, which combines experiential learning and volunteering (Konidari, 2022). The results of certain studies indicate that students enhance their independence, confidence, curiosity in “trying new things” and self-control through real-life experiences (Braime and Ruohonen, 2011). Furthermore, university students reported an improvement in their transferable skills as a result of volunteering (Braime and Ruohonen, 2011). Hence, there is a necessity to expand actions that integrate service-learning and volunteering in alignment with students’ needs and interests (Phillips, 2013). The “rite of passage” framework used in this study supports the analysis of volunteers’ perception of the skill transformation process. It entails a specific series of activities that symbolize and signify the transition from one state to another in an individual’s life (van Gemep, 1960). As depicted in Figure 1, this rite involves a process of transformation in volunteers, implying a departure from their previous ways of thinking and the development of new skills (Tomazos and Butler, 2010). In fact, students are empowered through transformational learning that focuses on honing essential soft skills in management crucial for co-creating and co-designing initiatives that contribute effectively to the SDGs (Cottafava *et al.*, 2019).

Skill-based volunteering involves the analysis of professional skills from a dual perspective. On the one hand, it encompasses the skills that professionals possess and “contribute” during



Source: Authors’ creation based on Söderlund and Borg (2018)

Figure 1. Rite of passage as a skill-transformation process in students volunteers

their volunteering activities. On the other hand, it encompasses the skills that are “cultivated” during their time as volunteers (Dempsey-Brench and Shantz, 2022). Encouragement and support from organizations for their employees to engage in volunteering activities have been shown to enhance their technical skills (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, students’ participation in volunteer programmes enhances their ability to create more appealing portfolios for potential employers during job applications (Pongponrat, 2021).

This transformational process delves into the impact of the volunteering experience on both interpersonal and professional skills (Dempsey-Brench and Shantz, 2021) by assessing the value volunteers gain through their interactions (see Figure 1). According to Steimel (2018), skills-based volunteerism is linked to using work-related knowledge and expertise in a volunteer capacity, offering personal and professional development benefits. This type of volunteering programme straddles the line between work with an altruistic focus and volunteer activities. In this particular case, volunteers coexist briefly with a Mayan indigenous community to support the development of tourism products. In addition to their expected roles of providing assistance and entertainment, volunteers may express other interests connected to their studies and aspirations as future tourism professionals.

Implementing projects that facilitate service learning through volunteering takes on a greater dimension and diversity when involving students and teachers from various disciplines. This approach more accurately mirrors the complex business and social realities future professionals will encounter. The mission of any university-organized international volunteer initiative is to foster mutual understanding between host and sponsoring organizations through a range of techniques (Palacios, 2010). These outcomes extend beyond cultural exchanges among participants. According to Palacios (2010), it is crucial that the design of these projects manages realistic expectations regarding what student-volunteers can achieve. The choice of the fieldwork location is a crucial factor to consider. Motivations for volunteering in international projects are often centred on skills development for personal and professional growth through experiential learning activities (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2008).

According to Sigala (2020), educational programmes should adapt tourism curricula to become more resilient, agile and updated to develop specific skills that can be applied in the industry. It is particularly important that these programmes align with the promotion of SDGs among students (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, soft skills related to volunteering are of great importance for advancing the SDGs (Scheinert *et al.*, 2019; Sumarmi *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, university volunteer projects play a significant role in the pursuit of SDGs, and previous studies have explored this contribution within the tourism sector (Haddock and Devereux, 2016).

To empower students to become agents of change and active contributors to achieving the SDGs, they need a transformative learning experience that transcends disciplinary boundaries and extends across academic borders (Cottafava *et al.*, 2019). Further research is warranted to explore the connection between the acquisition of knowledge and skills for sustainable tourism destination development and its alignment with specific objectives (Dempsey-Brench and Shantz, 2022; Lockstone-Binney and Ong, 2021) demonstrated that tourism volunteering contributes to SDGs 1 through 6, with potentially greater impact due to the international focus of these goals. However, this relationship is more intricate and extensive, taking into account both the type of tourism or destination and the beneficiary involved. For instance, when tourism volunteering is organized in collaboration with local organizations, as in this research, these service-learning programmes for student volunteers also contribute to SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). However, if volunteering does not necessitate engineering-related skills, the potential for advancing SDGs 12 to 15 is somewhat reduced (Lockstone-Binney and Ong, 2021). In the context of this study, volunteering requires tourism technical knowledge but not engineering expertise.

Depending on the beneficiary of the goal, volunteering may have a greater potential impact when contributing to SDGs like SDG4. Quality education can benefit both students and the sector. The extent of its impact will hinge on the skills cultivated within the volunteering project, as it aligns with the goal of “ensuring inclusive education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities” (UN, 2015: n.p.).

Building on the existing literature, this study categorized the most relevant research into seven key learning areas: responsible mindset, ethical literacy, cultural intelligence, self-development, diversity, global mindset and tourism technical skills in volunteering. Table 1 displays the most relevant SDGs to which these various “volunteering skills” could contribute in each learning area.

The potential impact of volunteering as a service and learning tool in the tourism sector on various SDGs is extensive. Given that tourism activities influence all three dimensions of sustainability – environmental, social and economic – each project should be analysed to assess its contributions to specific SDGs. This project is primarily intended to support the achievement of SDG4, with a specific focus on target 4.7, which emphasizes “ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development” (UN, 2015: n.p.). Additionally, taking into account both the indirect effects through the competences and skills that students will acquire and the direct effects on the host community where volunteering activities occur, this project is also expected to contribute to SDG5 (Gender equality), SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG10 (Reduce inequalities) and SDG11 (Sustainable cities and communities).

Background of the project and study site

The project was organized into three stages (pre-fieldwork, during fieldwork and post-fieldwork) over a six-month period. It engaged both virtual/online and traditional/onsite students, professors and tourism experts from both universities. It began with an online training course focused on sustainable community tourism development, which attracted 88 participants. The course aimed to educate participants on various aspects of tourism, with a specific focus on community-based tourism. The curriculum covered diverse perspectives, including sustainable development, the application of the SDGs, human rights, gender and childhood. It ran from March to May 2022.

Subsequently, participants of this training had the opportunity to apply for the volunteer programme, either onsite or virtually. In total, the project team received 73 applications. After evaluating their motivation, curricula vitae (CVs), travel possibilities and conducting personal interviews, nine onsite volunteers were selected. The selection of virtual volunteers was based on their motivation and CVs, resulting in the selection of 14 virtual volunteers. This type of project allows for only a limited number of onsite participants due to the requirement for travel to the communities.

The fieldwork took place in five Mayan indigenous communities in Quintana Roo, Mexico, from late May to mid-June (see Figure 2). The project had a dual objective: to support the creation/development of community-based products (depending on circumstances) in these communities and to enhance the personal and technical skills of the volunteers in alignment with the SDGs.

Research methods

Approach and design of the research

This research relies on online qualitative surveys conducted with volunteers participating in the project. Qualitative online questionnaires enable the collection of in-depth descriptions of situations of interest (Braun *et al.*, 2021). It is important to note that short responses from

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Learning areas	Skills	Authors	SDG
Responsible mind-set	<i>Socially responsible reflection: sustainability (I)</i>	Pless <i>et al.</i> (2011); Caligiuri <i>et al.</i> (2013)	4, 8, 11
Ethical literacy	<i>Moral awareness and social justice (I)</i> <i>Importance of values and virtues (tolerance, integrity, honesty, care for need of others) (I)</i>	Pless <i>et al.</i> (2011) Pless <i>et al.</i> (2011)	16 5, 10, 11
Cultural intelligence	<i>General knowledge about other cultures (I)</i> <i>Cultural empathy (I)</i>	Pless <i>et al.</i> (2011) Gaarder and McCommon (1990); Pless <i>et al.</i> (2011)	8 8
Self-development	<i>Self-esteem (I)</i> <i>Self-confidence (I)</i>	Hollas <i>et al.</i> (2022) Gaarder and McCommon (1990)	4 4
Diversity	<i>Resilience (I)</i> <i>Concern about gender issues (I)</i>	Klinedinst and Resnick (2014) Booth <i>et al.</i> (2009)	1 5
Global mind-set	<i>Feeling of being a world citizen (I)</i>	Pless <i>et al.</i> (2011)	16
Volunteering in tourism	<i>Leadership (P)</i> <i>Teamwork (P)</i>	Jones (2016)	
professional skills	<i>Mentorship (P)</i> <i>Communication skills (oral and written) (P)</i> <i>Creative thinking (P)</i> <i>Analysis of complex environments (P)</i> <i>Co-work support (P)</i> <i>Fundraising skill (P)</i>	Zappala and McLaren (2004) Hu <i>et al.</i> (2016) Booth <i>et al.</i> (2009)	

Table 1. Interpersonal (I) and professional (P) skills in service-learning programmes for student volunteers

Source: Authors' own creation

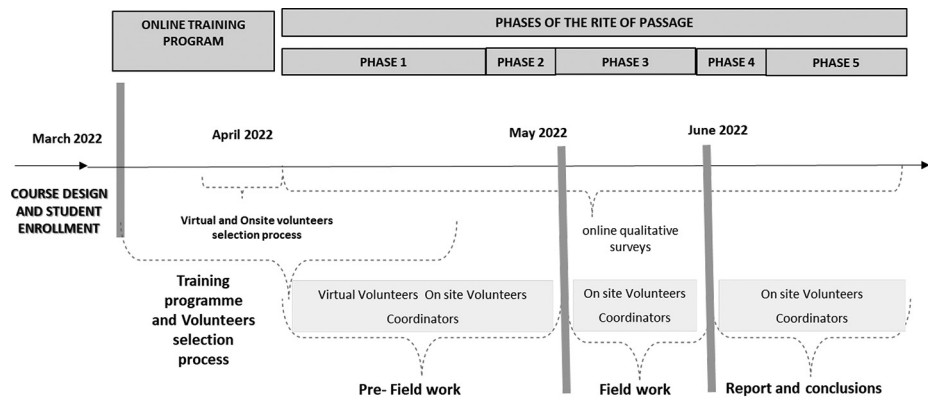


Figure 2. Project and research timeline

Source: Authors' own creation

individual participants in qualitative online surveys do not compromise the overall complexity and depth of the data set (Braun *et al.*, 2021). Previous studies in the field of tourism have also successfully used online qualitative surveys to draw conclusions (Tsartas *et al.*, 2020). Despite the brevity of individual responses, qualitative survey data sets can provide a wealth of rich and in-depth information, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The methodology implemented in this study considers the concept of rite of passage to develop a longitudinal study (Gallarza *et al.*, 2013; Lin and Nawijn, 2020), as elucidated in Figures 1 and 2. In particular, longitudinal technique contributes to the study of change

across time (Corden and Millar, 2007). The duration of fieldwork is contingent upon the length of time required to thoroughly investigate and examine the characteristics of the issue under research, resulting in a lack of consensus regarding its specific duration (Saldaña, 2003). Previous studies have demonstrated that the temporal extent of fieldwork can vary significantly, spanning from a few weeks to several months or even years (Saldaña, 2003; Hermanowicz, 2013). This variability serves as a foundational element in categorizing this research as a longitudinal study. As a result, the online qualitative surveys encompass the stages of the rite of passage, aiming to capture volunteers' experiences across five distinct forms corresponding to the five phases outlined in the framework (see Figure 1). These online qualitative surveys were completed by all participants in the volunteer project, totalling 23 respondents. Subsequently, the project team, consisting of five members, assessed the performance of these volunteers by completing a questionnaire.

Online qualitative survey design and distribution

The online qualitative surveys were designed based on the existing literature and the chosen framework. Each questionnaire was tailored to the various phases of the rite of passage concept, encompassing sections informed by prior literature on volunteer motivation, skills and perceptions (see Table 2).

The questionnaires were distributed online to volunteers and the project team during distinct phases (refer to Figure 2) of the project, aligning with the progression of the volunteering programme in May, June and July 2022. The initial and final questionnaires included identical questions, with adjustments made for each type of participant. In the case of the evaluation of volunteers' performance, the questions were individually tailored to assess each person. The questionnaire primarily consists of open-ended questions to gather perceptions, complemented by some questions featuring a Likert Scale (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") to gauge volunteers' self-assessment of their skills across different phases.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposeful sampling based on their involvement in an international volunteer project. The final sample for this study encompasses all volunteers and the project team, representing diverse profiles. There were two distinct categories of participants: onsite and virtual volunteers (23) and the project team (5).

The volunteer group (Table 3) consisted of participants with varying educational backgrounds and nationalities, including individuals from Europe and Latin America. To ensure their anonymity, volunteers were assigned unique codes (onsite volunteers: OSV + number; virtual volunteers: VV + number).

The project team was composed of five different participants that answered the online qualitative surveys about the volunteers' performance (Table 4). The participants have been assigned a code to guarantee their anonymity (TPP + number).

Data processing and analysis

The initial step in the analysis process involved reviewing and preparing the response sheets for the forms. Since all participants were Spanish speakers, the analysis was conducted in Spanish.

The second step entailed thematic analysis using Nvivo (v2022) to delve into qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using a deductive approach based on the chosen framework (refer to Table 5). A total of three researchers participated in the results analysis: two were actively involved in the project, and one was an external researcher to provide an objective

Forms and phases considered	Blocks	Questions
Phase 1. Initial state (From April 12 to May 18, 2022)	Interpersonal skills (Gaarder and McCommon, 1990; Booth <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Bontis <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Pless and Maak, 2009; Pless <i>et al.</i> 2011; Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Caligiuri <i>et al.</i> , 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your opinion, what are the personal skills that the ideal volunteer should have? List each specific skill and explain why • Which of your personal skills do you think will be most useful for your next volunteer placement? List each specific skill and explain why • Which personal skills do you think you will develop the most in your next volunteer placement? Indicate each specific skill and explain why • What level of development of the following interpersonal skills do you think you currently have? Evaluate the following skills through a Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree). Skills to be evaluated: understanding and tolerance of other cultures and lifestyles; empathy; concern for sustainability; moral awareness and social justice; importance of values and virtues; gender; self-esteem; self-confidence; resilience; feeling like a global citizen
	Volunteers' technical and professional skills (Zappala and McLaren, 2004; Booth <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Hu <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Jones, 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the professional skills that the ideal volunteer should have? • What professional skills do you think you will develop the most in your next volunteer placement? Please indicate each specific skill and explain why • What level of development of the following professional skills do you think you currently have? Evaluate the following skills through a Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree). Skills to be evaluated: democratic leadership, teamwork, oral and written communication, analysis of complex environments, creative thinking, fundraising skills, mentoring, partner support and tourism development
Phase 2. Separation (May 19, 2022)	Volunteers' feelings and expectations about the programme start (Magrizos <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of your expectations (personal, professional and educational) of this volunteer programme have been fulfilled? • How was your experience of trying new things (such as this programme)? • What was your experience of the local culture you encountered? • What was your experience with the tasks you did in the programme like? • What has your experience been like with the local community you have worked with on the programme?

Table 2.
Online qualitative
survey design

(continued)

Forms and phases considered	Blocks	Questions
Phase 3. Liminal period (From May 21 to June 5, 2022)	Volunteers' perceptions about immersiveness, societal meaningfulness and transformation regarding the volunteer programme (Magrizos <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	Explain if you identify with any of the following statements and justify your answer: I take the opportunity to try new things, I immerse myself in the culture, I am fully committed to the tasks, I perform demanding tasks, I interact a lot with the local community, I am more self-aware, my world-view has changed, I feel more confident and I reflect critically on my world-view
Phase 4. Incorporation (June 6, 2022)	Transformation of the volunteer once they are integrated into the community (Magrizos <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the end of the experience, do you think about what you leave behind? Explain your thoughts • Do you consider what lies ahead now that the experience has come to an end? Explain your thoughts • Explain your feelings now, when you return to your routine and your usual space. Try to explain yourself as fully as possible • Explain the reasons why you would or would not repeat an experience like this
Phase 5. Final state (From June 7 to June 30, 2022)	Perceptions about the volunteer programme (Chen and Chen, 2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been your experience with trying new things (like the ones in this programme)? • What was your experience of the local culture you encountered? • What has your experience been like with the tasks you have done in the programme? • What has your experience been like with the local community you have worked with in the programme? • Do you think that the actions carried out in the programme will help to improve the host community in the short term? • Do you think the experience has made you more self-aware? • Do you think that the experience has changed your view of the world?
	Interpersonal skills (Gaarder and McCommon, 1990; Bontis <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Booth <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Pless and Maak, 2009; Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Pless <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Caligiuri <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Klinedinst and Resnick, 2014)	After the volunteer experience, the questions from Phase 1 about interpersonal skills were asked again to check and obtain new results. Also, a new open-ended question was introduced: Please explain below if there are any additional interpersonal skills that have not been considered above but that you have developed through the programme
	Volunteers' technical and professional skills (Zappala and McLaren, 2004; Booth <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Hu <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Jones, 2016)	After the volunteer experience, the questions from Phase 1 about technical and professional skills were asked again to check and obtain new results. Also, a new open-ended question was introduced: Please explain below if there are any additional technical and professional skills that have not been considered above but that you have developed through the programme.

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 2.

Table 3.
Volunteers' profile

Type of volunteer	Previous experience in volunteer programmes	Gender	Country of origin	Level of education	Participating in the following phases	Code
On-site	Yes	Feminine	Spain	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV1
On-site	Yes	Feminine	Rumania	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV2
On-site	No	Feminine	Spain	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV3
Virtual	No	Feminine	Colombia	Master degree	Phase 1	VV1
Virtual	Yes	Masculine	Spain	Master degree	Phase 1	VV2
Virtual	No	Feminine	Spain	Master degree	Phase 1	VV3
Virtual	No	Feminine	Colombia	Undergraduate degree	Phase 1,2	VV4
On-site	No	Feminine	Spain	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4	OSV4
Virtual	Yes	Masculine	Argentina	Undergraduate degree	Phase 1	VV5
Virtual	No	Feminine	Colombia	Master degree	Phase 1,2	VV6
Virtual	No	Feminine	Spain	Master degree	Phase 1,2	VV7
Virtual	Yes	Masculine	Mexico	Master degree	Phase 1	VV9
On-site	No	Feminine	Mexico	Master degree	Phase 1	OSV5
Virtual	No	Feminine	Mexico	Undergraduate degree	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV6
On-site	No	Feminine	Mexico	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV7
Virtual	No	Feminine	South Korea	Master degree	Phase 1	VV10
Virtual	Yes	Feminine	Spain	Undergraduate degree	Phase 1	VV11
Virtual	Yes	Feminine	Peru	Master degree	Phase 1,2	VV12
Virtual	Yes	Masculine	Panamá	Undergraduate degree	Phase 1	VV13
Virtual	Yes	Masculine	Peru	Undergraduate degree	Phase 1,2	VV14
Virtual	Yes	Feminine	Argentina	Master degree	Phase 1,2	VV15
On-site	No	Masculine	Mexico	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV8
On-site	No	Masculine	Mexico	Undergraduate student	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	OSV9

Source: Authors' own creation

perspective. The preliminary analysis was conducted by one researcher, who identified codes based on the content. Subsequently, another researcher performed the coding process, building upon the preliminary analysis. Following this, two researchers participated in the final coding phase, allowing for the correlation of codes and their classification into themes within the proposed framework. A third researcher ensured the reliability and validity of the findings. These themes were subsequently used to analyse and present the results.

Results

The complementarity between the responses of coordinators and volunteers enables us to present the main results in an integrated manner, organized according to the structure of the five phases established in the framework.

Phase 1. Initial state

A) Personal and professional skills. The initial phase commenced when volunteers (both online and onsite) were selected to participate in the project. They initiated with the pre-fieldwork linked to the online training course. During this phase, responses indicate that, regardless of the volunteers' origins and their type of participation (virtual or onsite), they perceived themselves as well-prepared. This readiness extended to both their personal and professional skills required for this type of project. Notably, they emphasized professional skills such as teamwork and communication (both oral and written). Among interpersonal skills, their empathy and commitment to sustainability, in alignment with SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities), were particularly noteworthy. In this stage, volunteers reflected on how they can apply their prior

Gender	Country of origin	Role in the project	Evaluating volunteers' performance in the following phases	Code
Feminine	Spain	Leader of the project	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	TPP1
Feminine	Spain	Coordinator of volunteers	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	TPP2
Feminine	Spain	Coordinator of volunteers	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	TPP3
Masculine	Mexico	Local leader of the project	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	TPP4
Feminine	Mexico	Coordinator of volunteers	Phase 1,2,3,4,5	TPP5

Table 4.
Profile of participants from the team project

Source: Authors' own creation

Themes considering the framework proposed	Examples of codes included on the themes
Interpersonal skills	Understanding, tolerance, empathy, sustainability, moral conscience, justice, values, gender, resilience, self-confidence. . .
Technical and professional skills	Leadership, teamwork, co-worker support, mentoring, communication, creative thinking. . .
Immersiveness	Trying new things, immersion in local culture, engagement. . .
Societal meaningfulness	Interacting with the local community, positive impacts on local community, enhancing local community. . .
Transformation	Reflexion, self-consciousness, self-confidence, world vision. . .

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 5.
Themes and codes

knowledge about the environmental and social issues in the area they are about to visit, as well as on how each one can contribute to a more sustainable world and how they can help reduce inequalities (SDG10). However, despite volunteers expressing their awareness of sustainability implications and the SDGs, the coordinators' responses differed from the students' perceptions. The coordinators commented that students were aware of their prior knowledge about sustainability acquired during their studies but were not aware of the importance of their involvement in the green transition. The following quotes reflect this:

I have knowledge of sustainability, which aids in understanding the project. I believe teamwork is crucial, involving constant dialogue, meeting deadlines, and problem-solving. (VV15)

Students are still unaware of the change they are about to experience and the actual implementation of key sustainability aspects in a tourist destination, as well as how they are a part of the green transition, both on a personal level and in their future careers. (TPP2)

Therefore, in accordance with previous research findings, making volunteers aware of the potential of their prior knowledge through a feedback process has a positive effect on their self-expansion and, secondly, on their performance (Tang *et al.*, 2021).

B) Transition to separation. Between the final part of the first phase and the beginning of the second phase (separation), a shift in the volunteer team dynamics becomes evident. Naturally, a division arises between onsite volunteers and virtual volunteers. Virtual volunteers reduced their level of engagement in the project due to their inability to physically contribute, leading to a sense of detachment. This observation is supported by the fact that virtual volunteers ceased responding to questionnaires and withdrew from the programme.

As noted by Trautwein *et al.* (2020), the satisfaction and engagement of online volunteers are influenced by the support they receive on the platform and the fulfilment of their volunteering motives. Virtual volunteers perceived the importance of being physically present within the community, which ultimately led to their disengagement from the project. The following sentence summarizes this sentiment:

I would like to have a close relationship with them, despite being doing virtual volunteering, to be able to meet them and, perhaps, visit them in the future to see first-hand how we have helped them. (VV3)

The difficulty in accessing technologies in some countries or in online degree programmes can create a digital divide that limits full participation in education for sustainability and the implementation of certain SDGs. These technological barriers should be considered as a challenge in the creation of international educational programmes (SDG4) aimed at implementing sustainable practices in developing destinations (SDG8).

These results are in line with previous works that conclude the need for new technology patterns to "achieve transformative changes in economic, social, environmental and political systems for the SDGs" (Walsh *et al.*, 2020, p. 1).

Phase 2. Separation

The separation period is the phase immediately preceding the journey to the destination. During this phase, there is a process of detachment from the traveller's place of origin (Jafari, 1987), which entails both physical and psychological distancing. This distancing is what enables travellers to step away from their daily routines and immerse themselves in a unique experience where habits change, and the encounters feel distinct.

Onsite volunteers perceived it as a moment of rupture from their usual reality and way of life. It is important to note that volunteers travelling long distances felt as if they were entering a new perspective of the world that was unfamiliar to them. This brought about a sense of uncertainty, which was alleviated by their confidence in the team. The following sentence elucidates this point:

Now, just 4 hours before the flight, I feel nervous and anxious about experiencing everything we've been discussing for these weeks: meeting the other volunteers, the communities, the lifestyle, and the country's reality. (OSV1)

Mexican onsite volunteers experienced the separation phase to a lesser extent since they were frequently in contact with communities, and many of them had prior experience in similar fieldwork. This aligns with the concept highlighted by [McKercher and Lui \(2014\)](#) regarding the engagement process of travellers, which tends to progress more swiftly when individuals enter a culturally similar environment with a lower level of unfamiliarity. This is discernible through their less emotionally charged testimonials and their heightened focus on the project's technical and training aspects, such as tourism development and the theoretical component of the project. Mexican volunteers were more aware of analysing the sustainability of community growth (SDG8: decent work and economic growth; SDG11: sustainable cities and communities), considering how the rapid development of these communities without control over sustainable tourism practices could lead to a negative image among tourists and potentially hinder indigenous cultures. This may be due to a greater emphasis on sustainable practices in their university's previous studies, given their location in the Riviera Maya, where tourist saturation and global warming are prompting changes in tourism policies. Also, because the university programmes of Mexican students included a greater number of field trips and community-related work hours. Regarding this, two volunteers commented the following:

I believe it's a fantastic opportunity for me to undergo an experience that can change my perspective and show me that I possess the skills to be an agent of change (OSV4).

I have previously been to indigenous communities thanks to a course in my degree, and I believe we can help with their tourism growth. Some of them lack knowledge on how to recycle and are very dirty. (OSV7)

These results emphasize the need for training prior to fieldwork for the application of the SDGs. Interspersing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practical training throughout higher education curricula enables students to learn about the "real" problems they will face in contributing to the SDGs ([Gelbmann and Pirker, 2023](#)).

Phase 3. Liminal period

In the liminal phase, the most important aspect is the transformation experienced by the onsite volunteers, in which there is a greater interrelationship between education and SDG learning. This moment coincides with the immersion in the community and the project itself during the fieldwork. In line with the outcomes observed in earlier research, in this stage, the interviews of the participants collectively illustrate examples of new self-definitions ([Wade, 1998](#)) and critical self-reflection ([Snyder, 2008](#)). It is through critical self-reflection that the SDGs can become a genuine challenge rather than just a temporary solution to the current unsustainable situation ([Henfrey et al., 2023](#)). The following sentences summarize this aspect:

This volunteer project has been fulfilling for me both personally and professionally. I discovered a part of myself that I wasn't aware of, and I truly felt like a part of the community (OSV3).

Now I realize what it means to put the SDGs into practice in these indigenous communities; For fair tourism development it is necessary to guarantee respect and protection of their territorial and cultural rights (OSV5).

This reflection process involves an examination of one's cognitive, affective and behavioural processes and an assessment of how effectively those processes are being carried out (Mezirow, 1991). Through interactions among volunteers and the host community, sentiments of "giving" and "gratitude" emerged. From these feelings, friendship and solidarity sentiments emerged (Palacios, 2010), including feelings of justice and the reduction of inequalities (SDG10). As identified in the previous separation phase, the perception of immersion and integration into the local community varied among participants. Those familiar with the Mayan culture had a project-focused integration experience, while volunteers from other countries formed emotional connections. This suggests that emotionally attached onsite volunteers tend to develop personal skills, while those familiar with Mayan communities focus on practical and professional skills. Volunteers' different cultural backgrounds influence their attitudes and social norms, and this heterogeneity needs to be reflected in the design of programmes (Randle and Dolnicar, 2009). This is also reflected in the evaluation by the coordinators:

Despite being a local volunteer, the Mayan culture interests them (refers to a Mexican volunteer). They feel that they don't know enough, and it is something to be preserved. (TPP1).

It is also worth noting that for volunteers without prior experience in this type of community work, immersion brings about changes in their perception of the world, accompanied by a process of self-reflection. During this stage of the transformation process, the focus shifts towards changes in perspective, values and awareness. The implementation of the SDGs leads to a deeper transformation towards an awareness of global issues and personal responsibility to address them. It involves a reflection on how individual actions can contribute to the achievement of sustainable objectives. These "less experienced" participants display striking changes in their outlooks, motivations and behaviours (Coghlan and Weiler, 2018). The following statement summarizes it:

This trip has been a complete surprise. I never expected it to have such a profound impact on me, especially emotionally. My expectations in terms of training were already high, but they have been exceeded in every way. [...] I've come to realize that we can all contribute to achieving the SDGs, not just large companies. From a tourism perspective, there are alternative, more sustainable ways to travel that also benefit the local population (OSV4).

A) Personal and professional skills progress. When developing volunteers' skills, it is crucial to take into account the environmental factors in which the volunteering activity occurs. In international settings, it is important to address power imbalances between hosts and volunteers or between the host partner and organizers. These imbalances can be mitigated by fostering mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships (Chen, 2018). Additionally, the fact that the volunteer project's fieldwork takes place in a foreign country is often seen as a benefit of the programme (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, both the social and locational dimensions should be considered in the activity's design (Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2019).

A.1. Professional skills progress. A great lack of knowledge was identified about how to start and develop tourism businesses; therefore, and in line with SDG4 (Quality education), one of the objectives of the project was to contribute to the professional training of community members. Volunteers participated in designing and teaching various workshops within the local communities in collaboration with a local Non Governmental Organization (NGO). The workshops addressed the needs identified during the fieldwork, including

tourism and product development, social networks and Google Business. For volunteers, this experience contributed to the development of professional skills, such as teamwork. The following quote reflects this:

I believe my actions are benefiting the communities. Particularly, in the networking workshop, everyone seemed to learn, which filled me with satisfaction. I think the actions we've taken will contribute to a larger project that will come to fruition later [. . .] (OSV2).

This improvement in professional skills due to the emphasis on local education (SDG4) was noticed by all onsite volunteers, regardless of their origin. For the community, it represented an advancement in the understanding of fundamental tools for their businesses. This contributes to lifelong learning opportunities beyond formal institutions recognized in the 2030 Agenda as a quality education driver for sustainable development (Webb *et al.*, 2019).

A.2. Interpersonal skills progress. During this phase, notable skills progress was detected, including a broad understanding of other cultures, tolerance, empathy and gender equality. In the case of SDG5 (gender equality), it was particularly relevant because onsite volunteers collaborated closely with CIAM, a local NGO dedicated to children and women, assisting them in workshops and various activities.

The volunteers, less familiar with indigenous communities, perceived differences in gender issues between countries. Although the gender problem is international, the students detected a lack of empowerment and active participation of the women of the communities in the tourism activity, in which they did not know how to navigate due to their respect for local cultural practices. This is reflected in the responses of the volunteers but also in the coordinators' evaluation:

I am concerned about gender problems in the communities: as a woman I have this responsibility. I think that the problems in the community are very different from what I knew. I feel like I should help but I don't know how to do it (OSV1).

(Name) is one of the volunteers who has fully immersed herself in the local culture. She actively engaged with local women and assessed their roles in the community. I believe she has uncovered a gender issue that took her by surprise (TPP2).

In a parallel way, the results of some precious papers show that volunteers from countries with a low level of social protection have a higher altruistic value motivation (Güntert *et al.*, 2022). This support enabled a deeper understanding of the indigenous community's circumstances, aligning with the implementation of SDG5 (gender equality).

Phase 4. Incorporation

The incorporation phase occurred within the first week after returning home. During this phase, several transformations in the onsite volunteers were evident. These transformations resulted in a perception of being valued by the community and the team, leading to improved personal skills. Interpersonal skills acquired among volunteers encompass the ability to care for one's interests and collaborate with others (Elstad, 2000, p. 18). Professional skills, on the other hand, are developed through practical experience and formal education (Khasanzyanova, 2017). In this case, professional learning pertains to evaluating the tourism development of the indigenous community and implementing the SDGs.

The students feel that they have actively participated in the economic development of the community (SDG8), providing guidance on how to harness their tourism resources without losing their culture. They have received training on network distribution, geolocation and how to promote sustainable community growth (SDG11). All of this generates a high level of

satisfaction among the volunteers, knowing they are well-prepared for their future careers. The following quotes describe this feeling:

I would repeat an experience like this due to the enrichment that comes from interacting with other cultures toward a common goal. Such experiences promote personal growth, independence, and professional development through hands-on practice (OSV2).

I have put into practice everything I have learned about tourism resources with the aim of improving the community's economy. We have tried to show them that they should cherish their culture, something they should preserve (OSV1).

The fact that they have experienced a high degree of autonomy, which they have often not experienced in their educational or professional environment, increases their motivation (Güntert *et al.*, 2022). However, despite the positive experience, onsite volunteers also experience negative emotions during this phase of returning to reality. The strong connection with the community and the team has a profound impact on their emotional well-being. One of the participants mentioned the following:

I feel sadness, boredom, stress, anxiety (very high), I feel nostalgic [. . .] (OSV9).

That sadness arises for two reasons. On the one hand, because the volunteers had spent quality time with the community and then broke the bond they had established (Proyrungroj, 2017). On the other hand, the students realize all that remains to be done in the community in terms of economic development and sustainability and experience feelings of helplessness. Additionally, they have recognized the need for collaboration with local and international tourism institutions (SDG16), and they need to continue collaborating and assisting the community members they now know personally. They do not want their participation in the project to be an isolated event; the development of the SDGs requires ongoing continuity:

The fact that the community was fully engaged and willing to receive information and participate in discussions motivated them to contribute to the community's growth and prosperity, aiming for greater autonomy than what they already had (OSV4).

I am sure I will return to this community; there is still much to be done. This has only been the first step (OSV1).

This sense of isolation diminishes when they reconnect with others who had also participated in the project. Various authors (Sink, 2011) have highlighted that in today's digital age, the ability to stay in touch with the host community via social networks (such as Instagram and Facebook) mitigates the impact of reintegration. In the context of this project, one of the workshops provided to the community focused on marketing their tourist products through social media, which has facilitated more extensive post-project contact.

Phase 5. Final state

After returning to their respective realities, onsite volunteers emphasized the impact of this experience on their perception of the world. It is during this phase that they truly realized the process of skill transformation. The implementation of actions aligned with the SDGs in the indigenous community has led some volunteers to take on a new role as advocates for sustainable development and the promotion of alternative forms of tourism. They are now more aware of their role in the green transition, meaning they become drivers of positive change in their respective countries. In other students, however, the change produced is minor, and they return to their previous sustainable habits.

These differences may have psychological underpinnings, but further research into the relationship between psychological underpinnings and forms of volunteering is an area that needs to be explored (Ackermann, 2019).

A) Personal and professional skills evolution.

A.1. Personal skills progress. Both coordinators and volunteers reflect that the most developed skills during the experience are interpersonal skills, rather than professional ones. These interpersonal or “soft” skills are of particular interest to companies during the hiring process (Osipov *et al.*, 2022). The evolution of skills varies depending on the volunteers’ level of education. For undergraduate students, interpersonal skills have been more prominent. For graduates, their perception of growth is higher in professional skills, as this was one of their main motivations for participating in the project. This difference may also be attributed to the volunteers’ age, as previous research has indicated that age influences the volunteering experience and skill development (Alexander, 2012). The following quote illustrates a graduate volunteer’s reflections:

The interaction with the communities and volunteers is always enriching. Many new things are being integrated into my knowledge, and many others that I thought I knew are being exposed with new perspectives. I am surprised by the different forms of organization and participation among communities to carry out their projects (OSV8).

Interpersonal skills such as self-esteem and self-confidence improved after the volunteer experience, especially the final one. These results are consistent with previous research. Olsen *et al.* (2021) showed that for volunteers, the development of self-confidence appears to be linked to the improvement of self-esteem. From the point of view of the coordinators, this evolution is more visible in undergraduate volunteers:

[. . .] (Volunteer Name) has developed an understanding of other ways of life and cultures. I think that has been the most significant aspect for her. Additionally, empathy has played a very important role in the expression of her emotions. They have developed a concern for social justice and have gained self-confidence (TPP2).

Within the interpersonal skills, results from all participants highlight the perception of the evolution of empathy, concern for sustainability, the importance of values and virtues, honesty, integrity and care for others.

These results highlight the need to introduce the SDGs into educational programmes in a more practical manner, such as through volunteering. Previous research has established a strong correlation between volunteerism and sustainable development, serving as a catalyst for the accomplishment of the SDGs (Devereux *et al.*, 2017). For instance, in tourism, aiming at economic growth (SDG8) and sustainable urban development (SDG11).

Additionally, the results reveal the evolution of the gender concern in all the participants (SDG5). Authors such as Wearing and Neil (2000) recognize that volunteering increases concern about gender issues. Volunteers coming from other sociocultural contexts recognize having greater concern about this topic after the experience. Grabowski (2011) also found differences in the experience depending on the sociocultural context of the volunteer. This is reflected in both onsite volunteers’ and coordinators’ responses:

This type of project helps to improve the economy of the community, encourage the participation of women and, at the same time, make the role of women visible (OSV9).

(Volunteer Name) has observed different gender issues from those faced by young women in developed countries. Issues related to limited access to education, societal exclusion due to gender,

subordination to husbands, and the restriction of career choices based on gender norms [...] (TPP1).

A.2. Professional skills progress. In relation to professional skills, the most developed by all the volunteers were analysis of complex environments, creative thinking and co-worker support. From the analysis of the results, a new competence emerges: professional ethics. In this final phase, students, with the perspective gained from their experiences, feel that they should not only integrate the SDGs into their personal lives but also into their future careers. They are aware that their future professional decisions can influence the orientation of sustainability and the SDGs within their companies, and they intend to put this into practice. Both the volunteers and the coordinators emphasize the acquisition of this competency related to commitment to the environment as important for the future of tourism. They comment on the following:

They have become aware of their comfortable lifestyles and have realized that they can be agents of change, demonstrating ethical and sustainable commitment to make a difference in other communities (TPP4).

I believe this experience will impact my future professional self; I must take steps to improve tourism sustainably (OSV7).

Previous work has examined the ethical aspects of volunteer programmes in various fields, such as medicine (Asgary and Junck, 2013) or translation with migrant populations (Basalamah, 2020). Its application to the professional sphere of sectors with significant human, social and economic impact represents a contribution to this field of study.

Conclusion

This research emphasizes the educational perspective of comprehending SDGs through tourism volunteering at the university, adopting the rite of passage to analyse the volunteers' skill-transformation process. The rite of passage and its phases allow for an examination of the perception of the skills-transformation process in service-learning programmes for student volunteers (RQ1). Results reveal that the immersion phase is crucial for the development of participants' skills, as there is an interconnectedness between the volunteers, the project team and the host community.

The volunteer project, managed with educational objectives and carried out by universities, facilitates the improvement of interpersonal and professional skills aligned with SDGs (RQ2). Findings underscore the importance of the structure of the educational programme in achieving skills transformation (RQ5). The educational actions proposed in this project, including workshops and collaboration with local NGOs, helped participants foster professional and interpersonal skills, especially during fieldwork. These actions also contributed to a better understanding of SDGs. Thus, it can be concluded that the methodology adopted in these types of projects needs to be implemented throughout the volunteer process (pre-, during and post-fieldwork) to provide a pedagogical and holistic perspective to the project.

Interviewees revealed that both volunteers' individual characteristics (educational level and sociocultural context) (RQ3) and the sociocultural context influenced the perception of the skills transformation process. This process exhibited differences between undergraduate and graduate participants. Results indicated that undergraduates noted greater development of interpersonal skills than graduates. For graduates, their perception of skills development was greater in professional skills. This difference may also be attributed to the age of the volunteers.

Regarding the sociocultural context, results from this study demonstrated that volunteers perceived the improvement of their interpersonal and professional skills differently after volunteering in tourism (RQ2). These differences depended on their prior background, including their familiarity with community culture and experience with community projects. Those volunteers with prior knowledge were able to apply more of their professional skills during the project.

In addition, results indicated that immersion is essential for developing participants' skills. In this regard, virtual volunteers did not experience this transformation as expected, and many were left out of the project due to distance and technological limitations. Poor fieldwork site coverage made it nearly impossible to track the progress of virtual volunteers despite the team's efforts. On the other hand, the virtual pre-field and post-fieldwork stages were crucial for enabling the skills transformation process. These stages facilitated the participation of individuals from different countries and promoted collaboration in the project.

Service-learning programmes for student volunteers hold strong potential to put the SDGs' universality into practice (RQ4). This is especially relevant when the projects have an international dimension.

Volunteering in the tourism sector can have a significant impact on achieving multiple SDGs both directly and indirectly. Firstly, it provides learning and education opportunities for both volunteers and local communities (SDG4). Students put into practice the knowledge acquired in the classroom, and, on the other hand, community members receive training in specific aspects related to entrepreneurship and tourism.

Furthermore, it has been observed that volunteers have expanded their perspective on gender equality (SDG5). Despite being an international issue, they have identified cultural barriers that hinder the reduction of inequalities in indigenous communities while also being aware that changes must always be made with respect and sensitivity to the local culture. By escaping the constraints of the social norms and cultural backgrounds of their home countries, the students have cultivated innovative thinking.

Considering the interconnected nature of the SDGs and their consequential relationship with one another (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2023), this volunteer project, which focused on enhancing the university students' learning, could be viewed as having an impact on the achievement of other SDGs connected to the project's attributes. Similarly, volunteering provides practical and clear learning about how tourism can stimulate local economic growth by promoting sustainable tourism. This can create jobs and economic opportunities for local communities, contributing to SDG8. Likewise, this growth can help reduce inequalities by promoting inclusive and sustainable development (SDG10). In other words, tourism will be a positive tool as long as local cultural heritage is preserved, sustainable tourism planning is carried out (SDG11) and indigenous communities are allowed to make their own development decisions.

Finally, it is detected that volunteering in tourism promotes collaboration among different institutions involved in tourism development: the communities themselves, as well as with local institutions and universities, contributing to SDG16.

To sum up, volunteer projects offer comprehensive training for students, as they combine the acquisition of specific knowledge (in this case, sustainable tourism) with the realization of transformative personal experiences. It would be advisable for participation in these types of international projects to be integrated into the curriculum, which would also promote a better understanding and implementation of the SDGs.

Contribution, implications and limitations

Theoretical contribution

The theoretical contribution of this work, after analysing the results obtained in the project, is a new proposal for the design of University Educational Programmes in volunteering aligned with the SDGs (Figure 3). Volunteering projects at the university require a structured educational approach to facilitate volunteers’ learning processes, considering different stages and actions. This would be beneficial even when the project consists of short fieldwork stays.

The programme should include a well-defined educational action plan with various objectives structured across different phases. Ideally, there should be a pre-stage focused on the virtual training of all participants regarding SDGs. This stage is crucial. The fieldwork phase should include specific actions to encourage the application of the knowledge that students already possess into practice. Additionally, a virtual post-stage focused on participating in the final report and conclusions, sharing knowledge and exchanging experiences with other students would help to “close” the learning circle. It is preferred that volunteer teams are composed in a balanced manner, taking into account their expertise, ages, nationalities and educational levels.

Practical implications

The study highlights some practical implications related to the integration of volunteer programmes aligned with the SDGs into university curricula. There is a pressing need for universities to incorporate these projects into their educational systems as a means of

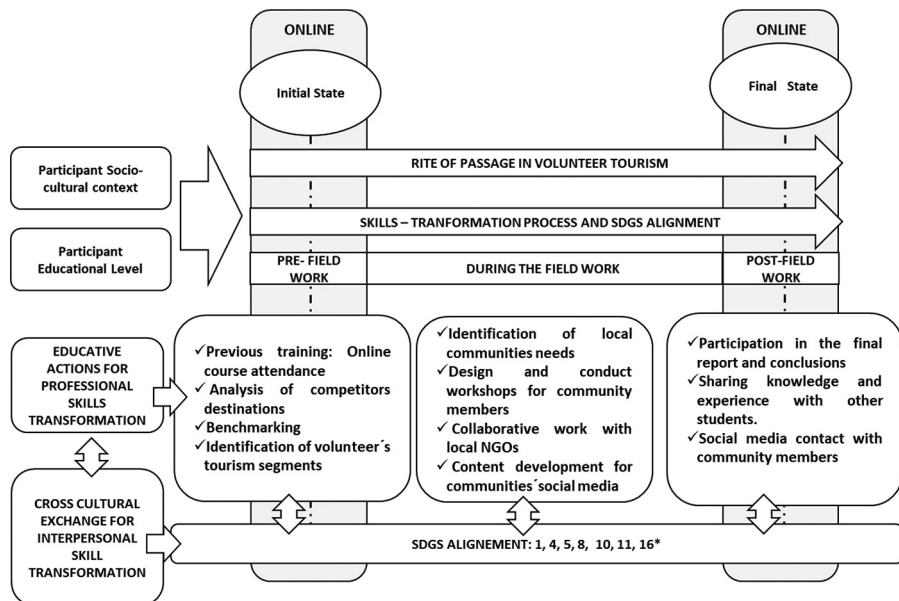


Figure 3. Proposal for an international volunteer programme focused on interpersonal and personal skills through SDGs alignment

Notes: *SDG1: No Poverty; SD4: Quality Education; SDG5: Gender Equality; SDG8: Decent Work and Economic growth; SDG10: Reduced Inequalities; SDG11: Sustainable cities and communities; SDG16: Peace, justice and strong institutions

Source: Authors’ own creation

supplementing student learning. However, the operation of these programmes presents certain challenges. Beyond the logistical difficulties associated with coordinating with host institutions in different countries, the primary challenge lies in regulating these activities as educational initiatives fully integrated into university programmes. This necessitates adjustments to the existing educational programmes and their approval by relevant authorities, which is a complex process involving governmental and educational institutions. Additionally, official programmes must receive validation from the appropriate quality assurance agencies. These processes must consider not only the responsibilities of individuals participating in these projects but also institutional accountability.

Furthermore, in the context of universities, it is advisable to involve ethics committees responsible for overseeing ethical aspects of educational and research processes, as well as bodies such as social councils, student associations and faculty members, among others. This shift requires a change in the philosophy of universities and a greater investment in training and adherence to the SDGs.

Limitations and future research lines

This research has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the use of online qualitative surveys can result in shorter responses compared to other methods, potentially limiting the depth of data obtained (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Additionally, thematic analysis, as used in this study, has known disadvantages that have been previously discussed in the literature (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). Another limitation relates to the specific characteristics of the project involving indigenous communities, which imposed constraints on the number of participants. Furthermore, the short duration of the fieldwork for volunteers, primarily due to the need to accommodate their studies, presents challenges for its integration into educational programmes. Finally, this study raises questions about the sustainability of the skills acquired during volunteering. Future research should investigate whether these skills are maintained over time and are effectively integrated into volunteers' ongoing personal and professional development or if the learning outcomes are short-term and not sustained.

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