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Meaning-Making Across Cultures and Contexts

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Editorial

Intercultural scholarship is often associated with the crossing of national, linguistic, or ethnic boundaries. Yet, the contributions in this issue demonstrate that interculturality also unfolds across pedagogical spaces, professional roles, institutional structures, social group memberships, and the subtle psychological frameworks through which reality is interpreted. At its core, intercultural engagement is a process of meaning-making. It is an ongoing negotiation between self, others, and context. The articles gathered here collectively explore how meaning is constructed through experience, reflection, obligation, bias, solidarity, and relational practice across diverse settings in contemporary society.

The issue opens with Joachim Maier's contribution, which sets an important conceptual and reflective tone for the collection. By foregrounding questions of relationship, interpretation, and intercultural understanding, this opening article situates intercultural competence within the broader dynamics of human interaction and shared meaning. It invites readers to consider how understanding emerges through engagement with difference and through reflective awareness of one's own positioning within intercultural encounters.

This opening perspective is followed by the article by Jan Kraner, Peter Senn, Oliver Kessler, and Martin Gubler, which examines effective learning in outdoor settings within higher education. Their qualitative analysis highlights how outdoor learning environments function as holistic pedagogical spaces that integrate embodied experience, emotional engagement, social interaction, and reduced distraction. Central to their findings is the role of reflection depth, through which learners interpret experiences and integrate them into personal value systems and future orientations. Viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, this reflective process supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and sustainability competence. Outdoor learning emerges not simply as an alternative educational setting, but as a carefully designed reflective and socially embedded environment that enables deeper learning and intercultural awareness.

Patrick L. Schmidt's article then shifts attention to the internal processes shaping perception and interaction. Drawing on neuropsychological insights, his exploration of unconscious biases examines how early life experiences leave lasting imprints that continue to influence perception, interpretation, and behavior. Concepts such as imprinting and inattentive blindness illuminate the extent to which individuals construct their realities through deeply embedded cognitive frameworks. In intercultural contexts, such biases can shape expectations and responses in subtle yet significant ways. By bringing these unconscious processes to the fore, the article underscores the importance of critical self-awareness as a foundation for meaningful intercultural engagement and equitable interaction.

Peter S. Gardner's reflective narrative on Japanese gift-giving practices provides a personal and cultural lens on the negotiation of meaning across differences. Centering on the concept of *giri*, or social obligation, the article illustrates how cultural norms embedded in everyday practices shape expectations and relationships. A misunderstanding with a former student becomes an opportunity for reflection and intercultural learning, highlighting how easily dissonance can arise when implicit cultural frameworks remain unexamined. The account demonstrates that appreciating both the objective and subjective dimensions of culture fosters deeper intercultural connections and reduces the likelihood of inadvertent offense. Moments of misunderstanding, approached with humility and curiosity, can become powerful catalysts for growth and understanding.

The relational and societal dimensions of intercultural engagement are further explored in the article by Paula Nestea and Anne-Claude Lambelet, which examines volunteering with refugees in French-speaking Switzerland. Their qualitative research foregrounds volunteers as key intercultural mediators who provide practical, linguistic, administrative, and emotional support within complex institutional contexts. Volunteers foster mutual learning and meaningful social bonds while navigating significant challenges, including language barriers, bureaucratic constraints, and the emotional impact of exposure to trauma. Despite limited institutional support, their resilience and commitment underscore the central role of solidarity in processes of inclusion. The authors' recommendations—strengthening training, supervision, institutional coordination, and reciprocal participation—point to the structural conditions necessary for sustaining inclusive and human-centered approaches to refugee reception and integration.

The issue concludes with Alejandra Andachi's study, *The Last Slice of Cake: Relationships and Meaning Making in Intercultural Competence*. Through interviews with academic and administrative staff, the study demonstrates how trust, belonging, and shared meaning emerge through everyday interactions rather than predefined cultural knowledge or fixed skill sets. Organizational structures provide orientation, yet the quality of collaboration is shaped by emotional and relational dynamics. Informal encounters, friendship, and negotiated identities play a crucial role in sustaining cooperation across institutional, linguistic, and professional boundaries. Intercultural competence is thus presented not as an individual attribute but as a relational and co-constructed process developed through shared practice and the continuous effort to build common ground.

Across these varied contributions which span conceptual reflection, outdoor education, neuropsychological awareness, cultural practice, volunteer engagement, and transnational collaboration, a common thread becomes visible. Interculturality is not a static body of knowledge nor a fixed set of competences. It is a dynamic, reflective, and relational process shaped by context, experience, and interaction. Meaning emerges through dialogue, through the negotiation of difference, through the recognition of implicit assumptions, and through the sustained effort to build understanding across boundaries.

A recurring emphasis throughout this issue is the centrality of reflection and relationship. Reflection enables learners to integrate experiences, professionals to recognize unconscious biases, educators to design meaningful learning environments, volunteers to navigate complex social realities, and institutional actors to sustain collaborative networks. Relationships, whether formed in classrooms, workplaces, communities, or international alliances, provide the context within which intercultural competence develops and is enacted.

In a world characterized by increasing mobility, diversity, and complexity, the cultivation of reflective and relational meaning-making becomes essential. The contributions in this issue collectively invite readers to consider how meaning is constructed in their own intercultural encounters, how assumptions shape perception, and how intentional reflection and relational engagement can foster more inclusive and empathetic forms of interaction. Through diverse perspectives and contexts, this issue contributes to an ongoing dialogue on what it means to learn, collaborate, and live interculturally in contemporary society.

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Psychological Safety Coming Home: ARKS Landing in Ararat's Shadow, Again

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Abstract: Psychological safety is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of team learning, innovation, and performance. While well-established in Anglo-American and German-speaking contexts, less is known about its transferability to cultures characterized by steep hierarchies and high power distance, such as Türkiye. This study applies a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach to explore the cultural adaptation of the ARKS model—an intervention framework for creating “safe circles” within teams. The authors, from Switzerland and Türkiye, jointly reflect on their encounters in Ağrı, in the symbolic shadow of Mount Ararat, where workshops and dialogues with university staff provided fertile ground for experimentation. Findings suggest that psychological safety is not a uniform climate but emerges in localized circles of trust that may be fostered even within hierarchical settings. Crucially, informal integrators—rather than formal leaders—often anchor safety, enabling others to contribute despite perceived risks. Our experience highlights the paradox of simultaneously experiencing genuine openness and doubt about its feasibility in steep hierarchies. By tracing lived narratives of mutual vulnerability, cultural translation, and trust-building, this study demonstrates how intercultural collaboration can enrich theory and practice. Ultimately, strengthening psychological safety requires bridging inner safety with organizational learning, thereby fostering resilience across cultural contexts.

1) Research synopsis: Key findings on psychological safety and our point of departure

Psychological safety is now widely recognized as the strongest predictor of team performance. It manifests in *equal shares of speech, social sensitivity (Duhigg, 2016), and fear-free communication (Edmondson, 2018)*—all tangible aspects of a healthy and successful team climate (Maier, 2025). Originally conceptualized by Amy Edmondson (1999), psychological safety describes “atmosphere of trust in which all team members can contribute openly and honestly – taking risks in shaping relationships – without fear of being shamed, rejected or otherwise negatively sanctioned.” (Edmondson, 2018). This capacity to speak up is crucial for learning, innovation, and avoiding avoidable errors.

Psychological safety can be traced back to Carl Rogers (1954), who described it as a climate of unconditional positive regard in which individuals feel “accepted, valued and understood,” allowing for creative self-expression without fear of being judged. Later, Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis (1965) advanced the term in an organizational context, defining psychological safety as the condition that reduces anxiety and drives learning.

Google’s *Aristotle Project* brought psychological safety into the spotlight when it revealed that team performance depended less on *who* was on a team and more on *how* team members interacted. Psychological safety emerged as the most important success factor in teams—far ahead of e.g. reliability or clarity of roles (Duhigg, 2016). Further meta-analyses reinforce this view. Biemann and Weckmüller (2021) highlight positive correlations between psychological safety and job satisfaction, learning behavior, and information sharing. Finally, the Culture Code (Coyle, 2019) and Parker Palmer’s “Circles of Trust” (2004) offer complementary

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perspectives: successful collaboration arises not from control or conformity, but from environments where vulnerability related to different safety needs and different triggers are welcomed and integrated. Psychological safety, then, is not about uniformity—it is about *wholeness*, grounded in diversity, empathy, and inner safety (Maier, 2025).

The structural positioning of leaders also matters. Balkundi and Harrison (2006) found that the more central a leader is in their team's network of safe relationships, the higher the team performance—a finding Maier (2025) echoes in his “Safe Circles” approach, which encourages mapping and strengthening psychologically safe subgroups as well as leader inclusion. Yet, as Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) warn, leaders often overestimate both the level of safety in their team and their positive impact on it. However, the challenge of accurately measuring psychological safety remains. Roussin et al. (2016) points out that heterogeneous perceptions within teams often undermine valid measurement. If individual team members experience psychological safety very differently, traditional surveys may fail to capture the nuanced dynamics at play.

Fyhn et al. (2022) demonstrate that even in psychologically unsafe or toxic teams, the presence of just one securely connected individual can significantly enhance overall team performance. This finding underscores the disproportionate impact of localized psychological safety—suggesting that it does not require a uniformly safe climate for a team to benefit. Furthermore, Maier (2025) based on research-data from ARKS – an online-challenge to improve teamwork through psychological safe circles – reveals that leaders themselves are rarely the central integrators of safety within teams, challenging the common assumption that leadership automatically equates to psychological anchoring. Instead, informal integrators or peer connectors often hold the key to fostering trust and performance while bridging fragmented team climates. Together, this body of research affirms that psychological safe circles are not just a “soft” concept—they are a foundational prerequisite for performance, innovation, and resilience in today's complex work environments.

The twin of psychological safety is our sense of inner safety (Maier et al., 2023; Schuhmacher, 2023), which is constantly monitored by our autonomic nervous system and triggers involuntary individual defensive reactions when threatened. Inner and psychological safety can be reliably moderated by strengthening the psychologically safe circles within the team (Maier, 2025). Psychological safety is a variation of the basic need for safety, which plays a role in all cultures.

Frazier et al.'s. (2017) meta-analysis on psychological safety calls for research regarding the influence of cultural context. One hypothesis could be that in high power distance cultures (e.g., Turkey, China, many Arab or Latin American countries), hierarchical norms may discourage speaking up. Thus, psychological safety may be harder to establish and may require explicit efforts by leaders to overcome status differences. Current research confirms that psychological safety is valid and impactful in Turkish organizations, including hierarchical sectors like healthcare and public service. Adapted measurement tools (e.g., Bülbül et al., 2022) enable reliable local assessment.

Findings highlight that power distance orientation strongly influences whether psychological safety leads to voice or initiative. For instance, individuals who accept hierarchy are less likely to speak up, even when they feel safe (Soyalin & Karabey, 2020). Psychological safety also mediates key organizational dynamics—e.g., linking ethical climate to voice (Soyalin & Karabey, 2020) or cynicism to whistleblowing (Filiz et al., 2025). Despite steep hierarchies, psychological safety still predicts positive outcomes like initiative and self-efficacy (Aksoy & Mamatoğlu, 2020). However, some public-sector employees report low safety levels, often resorting to indirect political behavior (Horuz & Taşgit, 2020). In Turkey, building

psychological safety requires explicit efforts to overcome hierarchy—through ethical climates, inclusive leadership, and empowerment of lower-status members.

This study adopts a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach to explore the cultural transferability of psychological safety practices from the German-speaking world to the Turkish context. CAE is a qualitative method in which multiple researchers reflect on and reconstruct their personal experiences in dialogue with each other, blending narrative inquiry with cultural analysis (Chang et al., 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). In our case, the researchers—Joachim, who developed the ARKS model, and Pinar, who seeks to appropriate it for a series of future workshops—acted as both experienced narrators and analysts. Within the scope of the research, specific steps of the psychological safety model ARKS (Maier, 2025) were applied in a workshop format with a small group. The aim is to describe our encounter from a radically subjective perspective while taking interpersonal risks: how did we experience this, what touched us profoundly, how about fear and vulnerability – material for future reference fueling an open learning process. Data was collected through dialogues written from the researchers' individual perspectives, in English and Turkish language continuously translated with DeepL. The dialogues were structured to reflect different dimensions of the workshop experience (application of the model, emotional processes, group dynamics, and learning outcomes). The dialogues were analysed through a collaborative reflection process among the researchers, recorded and transcribed debrief, collective writing in a Google Doc and WhatsApp dialogue. This analysis evaluated how individual experiences were transformed into common themes, which aspects of the psychological safety model stood out, and what kind of learning opportunities its application offered. The analysis process included steps of comparison, interpretation, and reinterpretation among the researchers, in line with the collaborative autoethnography approach. From here, we describe the events of August 12, 2025, in dialog form to give ourselves and the reader different perspectives on the topic of psychological safety and, at the same time, to make our own relationship observable:

2) Working towards psychological safety: Dialogue regarding a true story

Joachim: On the evening of August 12, I arrived with my 16-year-old son in Agri by bus with backpacks, after having climbed Mount Ararat the week before. The land around Mount Ararat has been a longed-for destination for me since I began working on the open-source software ARKS (<https://www.arks.ch/>) to map psychological safe circles seven years ago – after all Ararat is where Noah's ARK is said to have landed after the deluge. The journey was a reward for my book on psychological safety, too. I had just published a 6-stage process for leaders, working towards deploying the ARKS online challenge in stage 5. To cut a long story short, having arrived here felt kind of natural. Having been in loose contact with Pinar via LinkedIn some weeks ago – we are peers working on safety related issues – we had agreed to meet up for tea during the trip to Eastern Anatolia, if we happened to be in her area. Earlier that day Pinar offered to recommend a hotel.

Pinar: While conducting research on psychological safety, I also connected with subject matter experts on LinkedIn and read their publications. To this end, I connected with Dr Joachim on LinkedIn. Joachim asked me why I had connected with him, and I explained that LinkedIn posts would contribute to my research and that I wanted to learn about the ARK model. Joachim made some suggestions and told me his book was coming out. He also said he would be climbing Mount Ararat in August and suggested we could arrange to meet. I was very happy. I was excited to meet a colleague from another culture. However, I wasn't entirely sure he would remember me and arrange to meet. Even though I wasn't sure, I didn't leave Ararat

on the dates he mentioned. Joachim remembered me and contacted me after the mountain climb to say he was coming. I was delighted and immediately shared the news with my husband and friends. I wondered what I could do. I had to welcome him in the best possible way because his coming showed that he valued me. Moreover, the opportunity to discuss the topic of ‘psychological safety,’ which I had begun working on with great enthusiasm, with him was very exciting. He mentioned that his son would be with him. I told him I also had a son of similar age and that I would look after him.

Joachim: Pinar, instead of just sending the hotel’s address, collected us at the bus station together with Sevda – quite an unlikely couple of friends; both associate professors at the local university, Sevda with the appeal of a female rap-star from Istanbul, Pinar every bit the warm-hearted hospitable Anatolian mother I expected. Within half an hour we were adopted into the family, over dinner meeting a plethora of colleagues and family, discussing a mix of private and professional topics. After an hour, Pinar’s husband offered to take tomorrow off to drive us 500 km to our next stop, Ani, and back, to make time in our travel-schedule for a workshop with university staff the day after. My son’s agenda was to conduct interviews for his final year school project about different perceptions regarding the establishment of the Turkish republic between Turkish immigrants in Switzerland and locals – Pinar’s son was his first out of several Turkish interview partners she helped recruit. We felt seen, appreciated and very well taken care of. I was a tad surprised, yet ready to explore – after all curiosity is my safety anchor.

Pinar: They came to Ağrı and the big meeting took place. I was a little worried that my English wasn’t good enough. However, I had previously spoken to my dear friends Sevda and Nurbanu and asked them to help. I also knew my son would be able to help, as he speaks English well. My son, Sevda, and I welcomed Joachim and his son. On the first evening, we went out for dinner. My husband accompanied us. While we were eating, we talked about the work I would be doing and wanted to do. After dinner, I said I wanted to host them at my home. We continued our conversation at my house. Nurbanu had also joined us. My husband said he could get permission to take the day off for Joachim and take him to Ani the next day. After this trip, I said I wanted to plan a workshop at the institution where I worked the following day. Joachim accepted my offer. This would be an incredible experience for me. I am grateful to Joachim for accepting. After leaving the house that evening, Joachim sent me a message. Following our conversation, he said, ‘We have so much to learn from each other.’ Feeling his trust after this message was an incredible feeling.



Figure 1: Pinar and Joachim – Second Evening; and the Family Garden on Our Last Evening

Source: authors' own photographs, 2025

Pinar: After his trip to Ani, I wanted to introduce Joachim to our university's corporate communications coordinator so that we could hold the workshop we had planned and obtain the official permits. Joachim's agreement to this meeting meant a great deal to me. We had tea

in the evening and chatted. He gave me his book as a gift and said he would send me the Turkish translation. I got him to sign the book. His note was very meaningful. I was both very happy and very excited. He told me what he needed for the workshop to be held the next day. I went home and started reading the book right away. I had worked on two sections, thinking he would do the first two exercises. I was eagerly awaiting the morning. Joachim had unknowingly created an environment of trust for me. From the first encounter to the end, I understood that Joachim trusted me too. Joachim was so warm and attentive that he was trying to find out what I wanted. He wanted to teach me things. Joachim explained his psychological safety model. I explained what I knew and the work I had done in the current situation. After our conversations, I told Joachim that I wanted to see how his model could be enhanced for Turkish culture. I also mentioned that I was the Occupational Health and Safety Coordinator at my university and that I planned to conduct workshops by providing training to some of our departments to measure the perception of Psychological Safety and act on the results. He said this was possible. He said that in the workshop we would hold the next day, we would look at how the ARKS model works in Turkish culture. Afterwards, we would share our observations in this way. Following these conversations, Joachim and I decided to undertake a lot of academic work. Joachim said he would talk about psychological safety and that we would learn from our experiences. I think it will be a great experience for me. Actually, we took a risk from the very beginning. Isn't that what psychological safety is all about? I felt safe, and Joachim noticed this. This trust led to the idea of writing an article. As we talked, great ideas emerged. In fact, a safe circle had been created between us.

Joachim: On the morning of our improvised workshop, I did what I would naturally do. For me, the setting always comes first. Together with Sevda, Nurbanu and Pinar we arrived 30 minutes early, tinkered moderation cards for the team-challenge, pushed the tables aside, and formed a circle of chairs. I connected my slides to a screen that, as it turned out, we never used, and prepared the questionnaire designed to capture the level of psychological safety in this group – a gathering of colleagues and peers with different responsibilities and leadership roles at the university. Most of them had never heard of psychological safety before; many, I sensed, came assumingly as an act of friendship to Pinar. I moved through the steps I would take at home: inviting the most senior person in the room to share their expectations, and then handing over to Pinar to outline her agenda. We made it clear from the start: we were not here for abstract theory, but to explore together how psychological safety might take shape in the Turkish cultural context. I certainly did not have the answer, albeit slightly cautious operating in a high power distance culture, fully aware that hierarchy and carelessness could trigger me. I briefly shared Google's Aristotle findings and immediately switched from »why taking an interest in psychological safety« to the topic of inner safety, that all could relate to.

Pinar: The workshop day I had been eagerly awaiting arrived. Early in the morning, I gathered the materials needed for the workshop. I picked up Joachim from the guest house. In my office, we prepared the materials he would use in the workshop. We arranged the classroom to his liking. I got a little stressed because I had a problem with the projector :)). Then I tried to open the smart board. Meanwhile, the team had started to gather. The team included managers from various departments of our university and my director. We opened the presentation, but Joachim didn't use it at all. As far as I understood, he wanted the participants to experience and see for themselves once a safe space had been created. Joachim created the safety circle and asked me to give a brief introduction on the topic. The team members were not fully familiar with the concept of psychological safety. I gave a brief introduction to our participants. Joachim first introduced himself and explained why he was there. He said our goal was to see together how psychological safety takes shape in Turkish culture. First, he defined

psychological safety. He then asked why psychological safety was important. Joachim then tried to spark curiosity in the team about the importance of psychological safety by giving the example of Google. I think he succeeded in this. Because the eyes that were initially wondering why we were there were listening attentively to Joachim. A sense of curiosity had formed in the team. By doing this, Joachim was trying to create a safe space. He told our managers in the team that they could easily understand whether their team members felt safe by observing their facial expressions and outward appearance. Joachim said that because leaders frequently see the group as safe, their impression of the group's psychological safety is usually high – except for managers with specific psychological needs (narcissism or other characteristics of the dark triad). He explained that to create psychologically safe environments, the leader's engagement is central – because performance positively correlates with the leader's centrality, albeit the real integrators safeguarding a team are, in 95% of the teams he had been working with, not (yet) the leader.

Joachim: In the ARKS model inner safety is a mirror of team safety: when a group is unsafe, it shows not only in well-established team metrics – equivalent turn-taking, social sensitivity and fearless communication – but in how we are able to regulate stress. Not knowing exactly what to expect from this workshop, I talked about sensing traces of stress in the body, e.g. through our somatic markers and flat breathing – well known to every human, including myself. Stress, drama, and tension spreads across individuals – its absence shows in a well-modulated tone of voice, an ability to make breaks while talking, our heart rate, an ability to breathe deeply connecting brain and gut through a wandering vagus nerve, and muster open facial expressions while checking-in to your own as well as the other person's anchors of safety. For leaders, reading the room is especially tricky. It is well researched that leaders – and all of the participants were in leadership roles to some extent – consistently overestimate the level of safety in their teams, as well as their own positive contribution to psychological safety. That is why anonymously measuring psychological safety was a reasonable baby step to estimate the amplitude of one's self-deception as leader. While sharing this brief introduction to our topic, I referred to my own somatic experience in this moment, prickling in my elbows and knees, inviting me to special attention and care making sure the group is able to relate the – as I stated it – maybe esoteric somatic concepts I was referring to: the connection between inner safety and psychological safety on a group level. While psychological safety was key for performance, inner safety was key for well being and ability to contribute. At that point, 15 minutes into the workshop, reading the facial expressions and posture of our participants, I was confident the group was curious to take the next step: to experience psychological safety first hand through a team challenge – inviting an experience to the group of the positive effects in terms of group climate and performance, once a reasonable level of psychological safety emerges.

Pinar: Joachim had prepared a survey to measure psychological safety levels. I knew Joachim could measure the group's psychological safety level and talk about the subject. However, he wanted the group to experience the formation of psychologically safe environments firsthand through a group challenge.

Joachim: As a trainer, I can talk about psychological safety or even measure it – the latter making not much sense in this context, since they had never met before in this constellation, hence lacking points of reference – but what often leaves a strong impression is a group actually experiencing the emergence of a safe space together. One of my favorite ways to spark this awareness is a short challenge called “A Question of the Right Twist” – a method I learned from my valued German colleague Tanja Laufer. It begins by showing the group a small paper model – while inviting a simple task: “Recreate this. You may look at it as long as you like – but you cannot touch, move, or blow on it.” Only when everyone has built an exact copy in front of

them, do we continue. Each person has three moderation cards and a pair of scissors per five. The exercise usually takes ten to fifteen minutes and never fails – this time the energy levels had been very high from the beginning, and several smaller constellations formed giving their all to push for success. Sometimes participants are tempted to give up and show a flight defensive response, as did Sevda in our case – she tells me later she felt pushed into extra responsibility to come up with a solution, being an artist and graphic designer, thus apt in visual thinking. Debriefing her defensive response later with Pinar invited Sevda to share an aspect of her backstory not even her good friend was aware of. In the challenge, sooner or later, the solution almost always emerges – first within a safe circle, then spreading through integrators until everyone understands the principle and succeeds. In our case a female participant whose main role was to translate, open-heartedly floated between various smaller groups and connected enough insights. In front of our eyes unfolded a full learning journey: first attempts, confusion, gradual insight, defensive responses and finally success. In the process, hidden dynamics become visible – how knowledge was shared, who only worked together in smaller safe circles, who moved in space closer to the object, maybe even getting down on their knees and who does not, how support was offered, how uncertainty managed, who responds defensively and who acts as an integrator. The takeaway message for this situation was loud and clear: success depends on our ability to hear and integrate all voices, regardless of status and function. Today one of the more silent and least powerful members, maybe even by the grace of switching between constellations or even functioning beyond established constellations, was key for success. Through the following discussion it became apparent that every member in that room had countless times been the usually silent participant – who would have been able to contribute to a solution, if only s/he would have taken the risk and spoken up.



Figure 2: Experiencing Psychological Safety – Team Challenge
Source: authors' own photographs, 2025

Pinar: I had taken my place in the group. He showed the group the model he had prepared earlier and asked us to build an identical copy. He said we could only look at the model from a distance and that touching it was forbidden. The group members had paper and scissors to make the model. As a group, we first looked at the model and asked each other questions. Some in the group were commenting, while others were just listening. Some group members were consulting with people they felt closer to. Consequently, small groups had formed. We were excited, and everyone was working to make the model. At first, there was a claim that it couldn't be done. Some group members knelt, some carefully observed the others, and some showed a

tendency to escape. Finally, one of our group members, who was also a teacher, completed the model. After this workshop, I can say that all group members spoke. But the group member who achieved success demonstrated the ability to integrate by listening to all the voices. Yes, the ARKS model was experienced in this workshop. I think our participants were eagerly awaiting the next step. Joachim asked them the question, ‘What did you notice today? What sticks?’ to ensure the team could continue with ARKS, and initiated the feedback process, which is one of the most important steps.

Joachim: And yes, our debrief was fruitful, yet at times it glitched into a general discussion led by one of the male professors. Still, if I could change one thing, I would have invited the group to make our *safe circles* visible as they emerged during the challenge. After all it is in these safe pockets – constellations just small enough for people to take risks and speak freely – where the real work happens. In our challenge, such constellations surfaced naturally, and I wished I had asked random pairs, perhaps even people who had hardly exchanged a word, to sketch their view of these circles. And disclose what created safety and insecurity or maybe even fear for them during this exercise and in work life in general. The safe circle exercise would have been straightforward: take one sheet of paper and a pen per pair, five minutes to draw where collaboration felt easy, where defensive guards dropped, and where cooperation flourished. These sketches reveal integrators – those who connect across circles and spread trust; soloists – often at the margins, yet carrying often overlooked insights; as well as the position of leaders, or the highest authority figure in the room – with team performance depending on their embeddedness in safe circles rather than their authority alone. Every team member could have drafted their own picture and then debrief it with a partner. With a focus on how to strengthen integrators, include soloists and help leaders to increase their centrality – usually intriguing focal points for baby steps to increase a team’s psychological safety. We could have invited a check-out to channel back these baby steps on the spot followed by the simple question: *What did you notice today? Are you curious to explore strengthening both inner and psychological safety, and to grow your safe circles further?*

– this next step – a deep dive to ground psychological safety uses ARKS – an online tool to map safety anchors and trigger themes, integrate perspectives into a team-wide safe circle visualisation, and create an anonymous feedback process to build safety step by step. A prerequisite being the curiosity of the team to embark on the ARKS journey.

Pinar: After the workshop, we held an evaluation meeting with Joachim. Based on my own observations, I can say that these ARKS babysteps worked well with this group. I saw that even this short workshop had an impact on the group members. However, it could have been determined by group dynamics such as those who collaborated, took the risk of speaking up, made an effort, and those who tended to avoid involvement. I was excited about the process of creating safe environments. I thought psychological safety was experienced in the workshop. However, some of our members had doubts that it would not be very easy to implement in a hierarchical structure. I do not think this will be the case. I believe that with the ARKS model, we can gradually create safe environments at our university.

Joachim: From my perspective as moderator, the workshop left me with a striking paradox. On the one hand, I had just witnessed ten university leaders experiencing psychological safety in practice: they spoke without fear, shared airtime more equally, and showed genuine social sensitivity toward one another. For a moment, the theory came alive in the room. On the other hand, some of these very same participants voiced their conviction that these levers could hardly take root in their own organizational reality. In their words, a culture so deeply shaped by hierarchy and authority leaves little space for fear-free communication, balanced participation, or sensitivity to others’ somatic signals. Thus, I left with both

excitement and doubt: excitement, because the experience of psychological safety was immediate and real; doubt, because its translation into a steep hierarchical culture still seemed almost inconceivable. Our workshop ended sort of abruptly. One participant called timeout 15 minutes before the agreed upon endtime, we were just about to measure psychological safety with the Lucerne Questionnaire. The coordinator for international relations urged us to »not let the man wait«, hinting at a previewed meet up with the new rector of Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University Prof. Dr. İlhami Gülçin. Most of the participants followed, the soft-spoken president asked for our experience, gifted me the universities plate of honour – that I promised to hand over to my university president – and asked for our ideas for future collaboration – he showed interest in our topic and I promised to come back to work with his executive team, if he'd be curious to explore their psychological safety level. My most favorite moment? As you can easily recognize, the seating order reflects the steep hierarchy in the room. Ex-president central, president in the middle, then the head of Pınar's department facing me, another head of department and finally Pınar on the far right hand side. The signature moment? Following an overlong moment of silence, echoing Prof. Dr. İlhami Gülçin question, whose guest I was – Pınar courageously and candidly answered: MINE. In that moment, the level of psychological safety was sufficient for her to speak up. Mission complete. Oh yes, my son and myself were on Mount Ararat, 5100 meters high, the landing place of Noah's Ark. The emotional highlight of my trip was the reception at the University of Ağrı by Pınar's family – in the picture with the university president, right after we had conducted a workshop on psychological safety with some of his executives, Pınar speaking up marking her claim. And yes, Joe's Ark has come home. We have come full circle. A happy ending to my sabbatical and departing point for fresh journeys.



Figure 3: After Our Psychological Safety Workshop – Meeting the New Rector of Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University Prof. Dr. İlhami Gülçin

Source: university photographer, 2025

Pınar: Following the workshop, I can say that this application resulted in a realistic experience. Despite the presence of managers among the group members, a safe space was created and everyone spoke. The group was not a naturally formed real team, yet despite the fact that some members did not know each other beforehand, they collaborated and achieved success. I expressed to Joachim that I wanted to implement the ARKS model at our university. He provided me with all the support he could. He translated the survey questions into Turkish, as well as the ARKS online tool. In light of the findings obtained after this application with Joachim, we will begin implementing the ARKS method. The next step I will take will be to take baby steps towards creating safe environments with the teams in each unit of our university. To this end, I observed Joachim and broke down what he did to ensure everyone in

the group spoke in steps based on my own thoughts. The first step I had in mind was to make the environment suitable. Joachim first formed a circle for the group and asked the group what they expected from this activity. The second step was to provide a brief briefing to raise the group members' awareness of the topic. He also shared some vulnerabilities from his own life in a different way to encourage them to share their own vulnerabilities. This was met with smiles in the room. A situation that would normally make us sad – talking about being happily divorced and referencing struggles with teenage kids – was met with open hearted responses. This approach really impressed me. As I understood it, he wanted to eliminate the tendency for individuals to go into defence mode. I even started thinking to myself about what I could do to help the group members connect with each other. I realised that while informing the group members about psychological safety, I needed to give examples of how individuals might react in unsafe environments. The third step would be to conduct an exercise to observe group dynamics and identify safe environments. Joachim began exploring group dynamics by attempting to foster cooperation through a 15-minute activity. My final step would be to gather feedback from group members after the exercise. This exercise with Joachim taught me a great deal. The most important lesson was that if I wanted to create a psychologically safe environment, i.e. increase the success of learning processes and ensure cooperation, I had to eliminate the elements that disrupted the group environment. I had to create an environment free from stress, conflict, avoidance and freezing within the team. However, when I thought about doing the exercise myself, I had some concerns. When working with a real team, might I struggle to break the silence? But the notes I took during Joachim's workshop provided me with clues on how to manage this situation. He said that safe environments can be created even in non-psychologically safe settings in so-called safe circles. I am also reading Joachim's book and learning what I need to do to create a safe space for collaboration when faced with such a team. To create a psychologically safe environment, my key steps will be to 'include those on the sidelines,' 'empower silent bridge builders,' and 'ensure the manager remains central.' Joachim mentioned that the most important foundation of collaboration is inner safety and that without it, external structures can be shaken. Therefore, I must first recognise and strengthen my own safety anchors. Even in stressful environments, I must be able to communicate self-regulated, both with myself and with others. Joachim showed me a few practical examples to strengthen my inner safety through the body, and I am now applying the 4-7-8 breathing technique in my daily life, which is certainly beneficial. Joachim emphasised the importance of social sensitivity in managing tensions and conflicts within the team. This meant establishing empathy to perceive the emotional states and needs of team members and respond appropriately. I felt Joachim did this towards me from our first encounter to the very end. The more I learn, the better I understand his approach to me. He always said I was doing well, that my eyes were shining, and that he felt safe. But it was Joachim who provided me with that safe space. Because we were now a team:)). Finally, I began to think about the practices I would implement to ensure everyone's active participation in the team and to establish fearless communication. There is still much more to learn from Joachim's book. I am ready and very excited to learn with the team to increase and gradually improve the team's psychological safety level through Joachim's 'Psychological Safety Challenge' Arks. And yes, we are considering working towards a Turkish version of the book.

3) Learnings for Pinar's & Joachim's ARK process towards psychological safety

Our goal in this story was to explore together, how to go about working towards psychological safety in the steep lands of Ararat and elsewhere. Writing this text is part-and-parcel of this journey – if all goes well, we might even hand out this very text to Pinar's and many others' coming workshop participants. We are on a quest to formulate a shortcut to the 6 step ARKS method as outlined in Joachim's 2025 book: Onboarding, Workshop, Deep-Dive to explore and strengthen psychological safety.

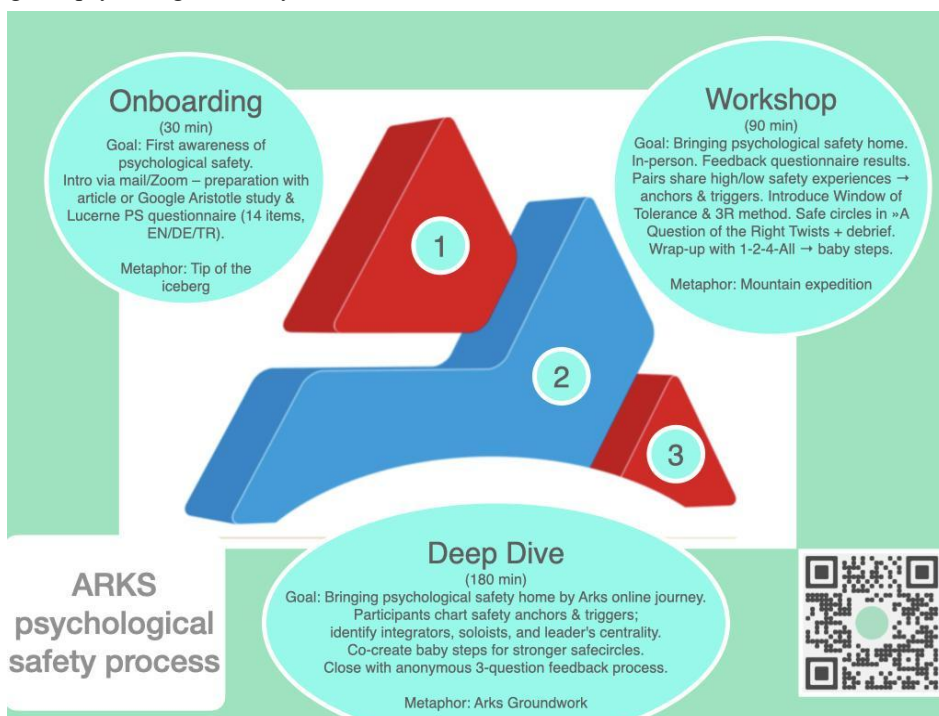


Figure 4: Exploring Psychological Safety in High Power Distance Contexts

Source: author's own slide, 2025

Onboarding: Tip of the iceberg (30 minutes)

Assume a workgroup who—like the people in our article—has never heard of the blessings and promises of psychological safety. They might, by email, in a short Zoom call, or in person, first relate to this article or the excellent 2016 New York Times Magazine piece on Google's Aristotle study. The facilitator then gives a brief introduction to our topic, and the group completes the 14 questions of our Lucerne Psychological Safety Questionnaire – available free of charge in English, German, and Turkish at <https://go.arks.ch/Fragebogen> – for self-service use, simply open the template link, sign in with any Microsoft account, and click “Duplicate it.” The form is then yours: you may adapt it as needed and share your own link, with all responses going directly and exclusively to your account.

Workshop: Mountain expedition (90 minutes)

The in-person workshop comes inspired by the design and learnings of the session described earlier. In a suitable setting, the questionnaire results are shared back with the group, highlighting and deepening the understanding of items that scored particularly high or low. Next, participants work in dyads: each person recalls one work-related situation in which psychological and inner safety was remarkably high (5 minutes). Together they reflect on the effects this had on team performance. They then repeat the exercise with one situation in which psychological and inner safety was remarkably low (5 minutes), again exploring the impact on team performance. To conclude, partners name one another's safety anchors and triggers and explore how these might connect.

As a closing step, the facilitator introduces the window of tolerance (Siegel, 1999): the optimal arousal zone in which we remain connected, capable, and resilient under stress. Outside this window we slide into overactivation (fight/flight) or underactivation (freeze/fawn), reducing our capacity for clear thought and meaningful connection. When one or both partners move outside their window of tolerance, the bridge between them becomes unstable. At this point Perry and Winfrey's (2021) 3-R model might inspire safeguarding options. The first step is regulation – for example, a breath reset, consciously exhaling longer than inhaling to signal safety to the nervous system. Press the Union Valley acupressure point between thumb and index finger to reconnect to your body, a “reset button” for stress and tension. The second step is relating – reaching out across the gap, staying aware of one's own safety anchor while acknowledging the origin of the other person's need for safety. Only on this basis can the third step, reasoning, unfold: rebuilding the bridge together through clear thinking, honest dialogue, and shared problem-solving resting on regained trust – because fundamental safety anchors have been mutually expressed and are taken into account.

After a short reminder of the dimensions of psychological safety introduced in the questionnaire, the group experiences its current level of safety in an exercise like the “Question of the Right Twist.” If some participants are already familiar with your challenge, please ask them to remain in a silent observer role. Once the challenge is completed, a debrief invites the group to step back and reflect—not only on the solution itself, but also on the safe circles that made it possible. The central assumption is this: learning rarely spreads evenly through an entire team at once. It first emerges in smaller constellations where people already feel safe enough to share half-baked ideas and take the risk of being wrong. These safe circles function as incubators of insight, from which understanding then radiates to others. To deepen the reflection, you might ask guiding questions such as:

- Who acted as integrators? In this challenge: which team members connected different safe circles and helped the solution spread?
- Who remained solo—or even triggered? Which individuals stayed more at the margins, and how might they be invited into a circle next time?
- Where was the formal or informal leader positioned? Did their presence strengthen psychological safety, or did safe circles form despite them?

Through these guiding questions, the group becomes aware of the hidden architecture of trust that enabled success in the exercise. This awareness is more important than solving the puzzle itself: it shows how psychological safety actually emerges in practice and how safe circles might be strengthened for future collaboration—by supporting integrators, including soloists, and increasing the centrality of leaders.

The workshop concludes with two questions, explored in the Liberating Structures 1–2–4–All format: Silent reflection (1 minute) – What can I do, starting tomorrow—without additional resources or permission—to contribute to greater psychological safety?– Am I curious and committed to exploring psychological safety further in our team? In Pairs (2 minutes): Insights are shared in dyads, where the safety of one-to-one dialogue allows every perspective to be voiced. Next in groups of four (4 minutes): Pairs join together, comparing and refining ideas, noticing overlaps and differences. Plenary (All): The group surfaces shared insights, chooses two or three concrete baby steps to carry forward, and commits to a next step—if the team wishes. Once a team agrees to take the next step, the journey with Joachim’s Ark begins—or, where needed, further groundwork is laid: training inner safety, practicing equal turn-taking, cultivating social sensitivity, and encouraging fearless communication, following the learning path outlined in “Psychological Safety Played Through” (Maier, 2025).

Deepdive: ARKS groundwork (180 minutes)

The Deep Dive is a three-hour facilitated online journey in which the Ark software builds on the often hidden wholeness of safe circles within a team. Over 180 minutes, participants map their individual perceptions of psychological safety—naming safety anchors and trigger themes—and see how these overlap to form constellations of trust. The process highlights integrators who connect circles, identifies solo players who may need more support, and shows how central the leader is to the team’s safety. This structured exploration not only creates transparency but also enables the group to co-create concrete baby steps for strengthening psychological safety—making the experience both diagnostic and developmental at the same time. The session concludes with an anonymous three-question feedback round, giving every participant a safe space to reflect, share candid impressions, and shape the next steps.

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Effective Learning in an Outdoor Setting: Sustainability Competences in Higher Education

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Abstract: This study explores how outdoor learning settings can support effective learning in higher education. Based on a qualitative analysis of 39 reflection reports from outdoor classes, key learning mechanisms are identified. The findings show that outdoor learning functions as a holistic learning environment that integrates embodied experience, social interaction, reduced distraction, and emotional engagement. “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making” – not “sense-making” – emerges as the central mechanism through which experiences are interpreted, integrated into personal value structures, and linked to future orientations. From a self-determination theory perspective, meaning-making operates as a process of internalisation that supports intrinsic motivation by fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Overall, the study demonstrates that outdoor learning is highly effective when it is intentionally designed as a reflective and socially embedded learning environment that explicitly enables meaning-making processes.

Keywords: Higher Education, Outdoor Learning, Learning Effectiveness, Competences, Interdisciplinary, Intercultural

Introduction

A Personal Learning Adventure to Start With

It is 2:00 a.m., and the two outdoor instructors hear loud sobbing outside their tarp tent. Both crawl out of their sleeping bags, and the student Nadja (name changed) runs toward them, crying. ‘I... I can’t sleep anymore!’ she whispers, her sobs quieting. ‘Alone here under my tarp, in the forest, in my sleeping bag...’ Only quiet sobbing follows.

The instructors exchange glances, unsure how to respond. Just then, another student, Linda, comes running, asks Nadja what is wrong, and embraces her. ‘I’ll stay with you—okay?’ she says. Nadja responds between sobs, ‘No... I can’t ask that of you.’ ‘No problem, really!’ Linda reassures her, taking Nadja’s hand and guiding her trustfully but firmly.

The next morning, the instructors meet Nadja and ask how she is feeling. She says: ‘Great—I didn’t give up! And Linda supported me so wonderfully. She just listened, said very little, and was simply there with me. Phew, what an unforgettable experience!’ Still smiling, Nadja greets Linda, and the two students hug before heading together to the water filters. The instructors’ glance at each other and smile happily. ‘This effective personal learning experience wasn’t accidental,’ one says to the other. ‘It happened because of her and her colleague - and because we are here in the outdoors!’”

Research Question: Effective Learning at Universities through Outdoor-Design?

Does Nadja’s experience reflect effective learning, and did the outdoor design provide enabling conditions for this formative learning experience? This article answers the following research question in a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented way:

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How can an outdoor design support effective learning at universities?

The answer is explored using the subject of business-sustainability and culminates in concrete recommendations for instructors and students to enable effective learning within an outdoor design. Special attention is given to interdisciplinarity and interculturality, as the module was attended by students from multiple departments at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU). Culture is considered multi-layered and can include religions, ethnicity, communication norms, but also values or cognitive frameworks (Genkova et al., 2025) as well as occupational cultures like working in different disciplines or different professional educations (Wenbin, 2025). In this study, students from social work, art and design, business, computer science, and engineering and architecture contributed diverse perspectives, generating rich discussions and learning experiences. These students, with their different backgrounds, brought in their partly different culturally perspective, contrasting values and interpretation of the subjects that were treated in class. Next to the different backgrounds, also students from different religions were present. Leveraging this diversity for effective learning through engaging dialogues was a particular interdisciplinary and intercultural ambition in our outdoor learning design.

The research question mentioned above is also legitimized through the university context: Universities are today under growing pressure to respond to climate change, biodiversity loss, social inequalities, migration and other global challenges. They are expected to prepare graduates who can understand complex systems and act for a just transition and a sustainable economy and society (Baur & Beyer, 2024; ILO, 2015; Neckel et al., 2024; Rosa et al., 2013). Business schools have been criticised for teaching non-sustainable or outdated economic models and for reproducing narrow value orientations that still focus mainly on extractive growth, and narrowly defined efficiency or shareholder value (Fricke, 2020; Laméris et al., 2023). At the same time, students in Switzerland and internationally call for more sustainability in curricula and institutional practice (BAFU, 2021; Cort, 2022; Schweiz, 2021).

These expectations are also visible at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The university has committed itself to integrating ecological, social and economic sustainability in teaching, research and operations (HSLU, 2025).

Answering the Research Question: Theoretically Grounded and Practice-Oriented

To answer the research question in a theoretically grounded way, the study draws on established approaches for effective learning in outdoor settings at universities, with a particular focus on sustainability education and the development of intercultural competencies. Relevant educational theories, such as experiential learning, outdoor learning frameworks, and interdisciplinary as well as intercultural learning models, provide the conceptual lens through which student experiences are understood. This theoretical foundation ensures that the analysis is not purely descriptive but is embedded in established educational knowledge, enabling connections between individual learning processes, group interactions, and broader pedagogical/andragogical principles.

The practice-oriented approach is realized through a qualitative thematic analysis of 39 reflection reports from students who participated in the annual “Outdoor: Business Sustainability Revisited” module between 2023 and 2025. By analyzing these reflections, the study captures concrete, experience-based insights into how outdoor learning settings foster effective learning. This empirical approach allows the research to generate actionable recommendations for instructors, showing how pedagogical/andragogical design, group

dynamics, and reflective practices can be deliberately structured to maximize learning outcomes in interdisciplinary and intercultural outdoor contexts.

Limitations

Within this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the analysis is based on student reflection reports, which were produced within a graded, formal assessment context. This may have influenced students' reflections, with some potentially emphasising aspects they thought aligned better with the course expectations, thereby introducing social desirability bias (Edwards, 1957). As such, the findings are based on context-specific insights rather than universally generalisable outcomes.

Secondly, the dual role of the authors as both instructors and researchers introduce power dynamics that could have affected the content of students' reflections. Given the potential for evaluation bias and the risk of students conforming to perceived expectations, the study acknowledges this dynamic. Reflexivity was employed throughout the research process to mitigate this, though the influence of power relations on the data interpretation remains an important consideration.

Third, as a qualitative study, the findings do not claim statistical generalisability. Instead, the study aims for analytical generalisability, offering transferable insights and design principles for an outdoor learning setting in higher education. The results are context-specific but contribute to a broader understanding of outdoor pedagogies and andragogy. Furthermore, more data should be processed to confirm received results.

Fourth, this study claims to consider cultural diverse backgrounds represented within the participant group. And although the module was explicitly designed as an interdisciplinary and intercultural learning setting, the student cohort comprised individuals from only three national backgrounds and three different religious affiliations. While these differences still generated meaningful intercultural encounters, value negotiations, and perspective-taking processes, the relatively limited diversity may have constrained the range of cultural frames of reference and lived experiences that typically characterise more globally heterogeneous cohorts. As a result, certain dimensions of intercultural learning, particularly those related to broader global inequalities, postcolonial perspectives, or highly divergent cultural norms, may be underrepresented in the findings. Consequently, the learning mechanisms and reflective processes identified in this study should be interpreted as context-specific and may manifest differently in cohorts with greater national, cultural, or religious diversity.

Lastly, the study is based on an intensive, non-traditional learning environment that may limit the applicability of findings to more conventional educational settings. While this study highlights effective learning mechanisms in an outdoor setting, its results are most relevant to contexts where such immersive, socially embedded, and reflective experiences are feasible.

These limitations underscore the need for caution in generalising the findings and encourage further research that addresses these methodological challenges.

Theory

Introduction

The module “Outdoor: Business Sustainability Revisited” showcases how intensive and immersive learning in nature can support deep reflection about sustainability, economic systems, one's own role and personal development. The theoretical streams below link

education for sustainable development (ESD), business and economics education, effective outdoor learning, and intercultural competence in interdisciplinary cohorts.

Education for Sustainable Development and Competence Orientation

Education for sustainable development (ESD) aims to enable students to contribute to sustainable futures in a holistic, interdisciplinary, intercultural and responsible way (UNESCO, 2020). It combines knowledge about ecological, social and economic processes with values, emotions and action skills. In Switzerland, ESD is described as a transversal principle that should run through all levels of education, from compulsory school to higher education and adult learning (SBFI, 2023). The federal State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation stresses that ESD strengthens cross-cutting competencies that allow learners to participate in and co-create sustainable development (SBFI, 2023).

To foster the implementation of ESD in universities lecturers/instructors and students need competences such as critical thinking, systems thinking, self-reflection and the ability to deal with controversial values and conflicting interests (éducation21, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). ESD represents an approach that helps people understand the consequences of their actions and make responsible choices (Bundesministerium für Bildung, 2025). ESD in higher education should open spaces for reflection and collective action, involve all participants in co-creating knowledge and a sustainable future (Universität-Bern, 2024).

Competence-oriented higher education requires constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment (Biggs, 2014; Biggs & Tang, 2011). For ESD this means that courses should not only be trying to convey sustainability knowledge as in this example, or others subjects, but actively offer learner-oriented settings and assignments to develop key competences such as systems thinking, anticipatory competence, normative and ethical reasoning and judgement, strategic action and collaboration (Meyer-Guckel et al., 2019; Wilhelm et al., 2019). Research on ESD at universities suggests that such competence orientation is more effective when didactic settings, tasks and assignments are relatable for the students, complex and interdisciplinary, and when they include reflection on values and human relations (Holst & von Seggern, 2020; Ruge et al., 2024).

Not only in business and management programmes, ESD also links to the debate about “future skills” or “21st century skills”. These include – amongst others – problem solving, collaboration, communication, self-management, intercultural understanding, and ethical reasoning (AACSB, 2022; Meyer-Guckel et al., 2019). Outdoor modules can offer rich environments to develop these competences because they combine cognitive, emotional, social and physical dimensions of learning.

Business and Economics Education Reconciling Growth and Sustainability

Economics and business curricula shape how students see economies, the role of the state, organisations and their own professional responsibility. Influential textbooks still present simplified models of rational, self-interested actors and competitive markets (Krugman, 2023). Empirical studies show that such exposure can affect students’ beliefs and values. Laméris et al. (2023) find that economics students are more likely than other students to support market logic and to accept inequalities as efficient or fair. Earlier work also suggests that economists may judge unfair allocations as acceptable if they follow market rules (Ruske & Suttner, 2012).

Critical social science and sustainability research question whether this narrow economic view is adequate in times of climate crisis and rising inequality (Baur & Beyer, 2024; Fricke, 2020; Neckel et al., 2024; Rosa et al., 2013). They argue that economic education should

include debates about power relations, wealth and resource distribution, planetary boundaries, health and alternative models of prosperity and success. Surveys at Swiss universities indicate that many students in business and economics expect their programmes to address sustainability more systematically and to link it to core disciplinary content, not primarily to elective courses (BAFU, 2021; Schweiz, 2021).

Business schools and accreditation bodies have started to react. AACSB (2022) and other initiatives like the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) or Positive Impact Rating (Muff & Dyllick, 2025) propose comprehensive impact frameworks that include societal and environmental values and indicators, not mainly academic publications, graduate employment rates and graduate salaries. Steingard and Rodenburg (2023) and others call for a shift from a narrow “publish or perish” culture towards scholarship that visibly contributes to solving real-world problems. For this shift to become real in classrooms, didactic designs need to invite students to critically question dominant economic narratives, experience alternative forms of organizing, living, and co-creating, and reflect on their own. Outdoor settings can provide such designs because they place learners in concrete natural and social contexts, far away from abstract case studies.

Outdoor Learning, Well-being and Digital Detox in Higher Education

Research on effective learning provides valuable insights into how perspectives and understandings change through educational settings (Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Hattie, 2009; Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 2000). It suggests that adults may revise their frames of reference when they encounter disorienting dilemmas, engage in critical reflection and dialogue, and experiment with new contexts and roles. Sustainability issues often confront learners with such challenges and dilemmas. They expose tensions and contradictions between personal values and lifestyles, economic systems and choices, professional aspirations and the ecological limits of the planet.

Outdoor and wilderness education has long been used to facilitate intense learning experiences. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews show that well-designed outdoor programmes can have positive effects on self-concept, social skills, resilience and environmental attitudes (Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014; Fang et al., 2021; Hattie et al., 1997; Neill, 2002). University-based field and expedition courses can also foster systems thinking, sense of place/place attachment and long-term commitment to sustainability (Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014). Learning design principles are highly relevant for university teaching. First, outdoor learning works best when it combines physical challenge with psychological safety and supportive group processes (Ewert, 2014). Second, structured reflection before, during and after the outdoor experience is crucial. It helps students link concrete experiences to theoretical concepts and to their own life and work (Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014; Neill, 2002). Third, lasting impacts depend on the integration of outdoor experiences into the wider curriculum, including follow-up tasks and opportunities to transfer insights into everyday practice (Ewert, 2014; Fang et al., 2021).

The module “Outdoor: Business Sustainability Revisited” of the Lucerne School of Business follows these principles. It takes place over a week in a natural setting, including sleeping outside and a deliberate – although not mandatory – digital detox. Students from different departments of Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts share responsibility for the daily routine, engage in guided individual and group reflections, and work on assignments on personal-, organizational-, economic-, societal sustainability and philosophy regarding sustainability. Body and mind are explicitly included in learning processes, for

example through walking conversations, mindful pauses in nature and embodied exercises on leadership and collaboration. Such designs resonate with the idea of whole-person learning in ESD, which addresses cognitive, emotional and physical dimensions (éducation21, 2025; UNESCO, 2020).

The module explicitly combines sustainability learning with health awareness and health promotion. Research on nature and health shows that time spent in natural, green environments can reduce stress, improve mood and attention, and support recovery from cognitive overload (Frumkin et al., 2017; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). In higher education, many students experience pressure, screen fatigue and fragmented attention due to constant digital connectivity. Short periods without digital media – often described as digital detox – can increase perceived presence, quality of social interaction and sleep, even if long-term effects depend on everyday habits (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

By asking students to switch off their devices during the outdoor days, the module creates rare conditions of undivided attention. This makes room for deeper listening, slower conversations and more intense perception of the natural surroundings and the social context. Such experiences can support both mental health and learning. They help students feel their own dependence and likewise their impact on their ecosystems, notice their habitual consumption patterns and experiment with simpler forms of living together (Lin et al., 2017; Tanoue et al., 2021; Williams, 2017). In this sense, digital detox in this module is not only a health intervention but also a didactic tool that strengthens reflection about needs, habits and alternative futures as well as more conscious lifestyles.

Outdoor Education and Intrinsic Motivation

From a self-determination theory (SDT) perspective, motivation in educational contexts is understood as a function of the degree to which learning environments support individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Learning environments that foster these needs are more likely to promote intrinsic motivation, deeper engagement, and sustained learning outcomes. Outdoor learning settings provide a particularly promising context in this regard, as they differ fundamentally from conventional classroom environments in both structure and experience.

Outdoor learning environments often afford learners greater degrees of autonomy compared to traditional instructional settings. Physical immersion in nature, reduced reliance on predefined scripts, and the necessity to make situational decisions can enhance students' sense of volition and self-direction. From an SDT perspective, autonomy does not imply the absence of structure but rather the experience of acting in accordance with one's own values and interests. Outdoor learning designs that encourage exploration, personal reflection, and shared decision-making can therefore support autonomy by enabling learners to experience learning as self-relevant and meaningful rather than externally imposed.

SDT posits that intrinsic motivation is strengthened when individuals experience themselves as competent and effective in interacting with their environment. Outdoor learning settings frequently involve embodied, sensory, and sometimes physically demanding activities that require learners to adapt, problem-solve, and cope with uncertainty. Successfully navigating these challenges can foster feelings of mastery and efficacy. Moreover, experiential engagement allows learners to connect abstract concepts—such as sustainability or responsibility—to concrete actions and lived experiences, thereby reinforcing perceptions of competence in meaningful ways.

Relatedness, defined as the experience of connection and mutual care with others, constitutes a core psychological need within SDT. Outdoor learning typically involves collaborative tasks, shared responsibilities, and prolonged social interaction within small groups. These conditions can strengthen interpersonal bonds, trust, and a sense of belonging. When learners feel socially supported and recognised, they are more likely to engage openly with challenges and to internalise shared values and learning goals. Thus, the social dynamics of outdoor learning settings can enhance intrinsic motivation by embedding learning within meaningful social relationships.

Interdisciplinarity and Intercultural Learning

The module is open to students from several departments and programmes. This interdisciplinarity is not only a logistical feature but a didactical resource. Sustainability challenges cross disciplinary boundaries and involve conflicting interests and values. Interdisciplinary and intercultural learning formats can help students practise collaboration across different expert languages as well as individual and professional identities (Ruge et al., 2024; Wilhelm et al., 2019). Outdoor settings often make commonalities and differences visible in concrete tasks, for example when business students, social work students and design students jointly plan a meal, debate the ethics and sustainability of tourism or reflect upon their own consumption patterns and lifestyles.

At the same time, interdisciplinary cohorts are almost always intercultural cohorts. Students bring different disciplinary and professional cultures, but also different social, linguistic and national backgrounds. Intercultural competence in higher education involves attitudes such as openness and curiosity, knowledge about cultural contexts, patterns and power relations, and skills for perspective taking, communication and conflict management (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). It is closely connected to the aims of ESD, which include empathy, solidarity and the ability to negotiate contested futures (Nikiforova & Skvortsova, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Spencer-Oatey et al. (2022) define “Global Fitness” being “all the features that enable a person or organisation to succeed in contexts of cultural diversity” and that “these features enable people and organisations to function effectively when they face differences of many kinds” (p. 10). This perspective is highly relevant for ESD and incorporated into this module.

Experiential and outdoor formats provide rich opportunities for intercultural learning. Xu (2023) describes how an ocean sailing voyage created intense intercultural encounters and identity negotiations among students from different countries. Similar processes can occur in outdoor weeks and forest camps, where participants depend on each other and share basic needs and routines. Everyday negotiations about cooking, cleaning, comfort and risk taking often surface implicit norms and stereotypes. Guided reflection can turn these moments into learning opportunities.

Intercultural education research stresses that such learning works best when power relations are addressed and when minority perspectives are not marginalised (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Presi et al., 2024). In the example of this module, this means discussing how climate change and resource usage affect people in different world regions, or how gender, socio-economic factors and migration status shape vulnerability and power-distance. Outdoor contexts can make these issues tangible when students compare their own leisure mobility, diet or consumption with global patterns and mirror that with the imminent experience.

Intercultural competence can also be strengthened by explicit tasks. Examples include structured dialogue exercises, or role plays about negotiations between actors from different regions or sectors (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2022). In the module “Outdoor: Business Sustainability Revisited”, students work in mixed teams on sustainability issues that connect local landscapes with ecological concerns, global supply chains and social justice questions. The combination of shared experience in nature and structured intercultural reflection aims to foster both mutual understanding and a sense of shared responsibility.

The theoretical streams presented suggest that outdoor-based modules at universities can provide impactful spaces for effective sustainability and intercultural learning. They bring together the aims of ESD, critical business and economics education, effective learning approaches, outdoor education and intercultural competence development. In the Swiss context, such modules also respond to national policy expectations and to the concrete sustainability strategies of universities. The empirical results chapter, following the methodology chapter, investigates how these ideas materialise in the reflections of students who participated in the module “Outdoor: Business Sustainability Revisited”.

Methodology

Research Design and Methodological Positioning

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive–exploratory research design to investigate how an outdoor learning setting in higher education supports effective learning and the development of sustainability competences. Rather than aiming to measure learning outcomes quantitatively, the study focuses on understanding students lived learning experiences, meaning-making processes, and reflective developments in relation to sustainability.

To achieve this aim, the study employs thematic analysis (TA) as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Thematic analysis is understood here as a fully developed qualitative method, not merely a coding technique, which enables the systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Its flexibility and theoretical openness make it particularly suitable for educational and sustainability research, where learning processes are complex, contextual, and multi-dimensional.

Epistemologically, the study is situated within a constructivist–interpretive paradigm. Knowledge is understood as socially constructed, and learning as a situated, experiential, and reflective process shaped by context, interaction, and prior assumptions. Consequently, the analysis is conceived as an active interpretive process in which meanings are generated through engagement with data, theory, and researcher reflexivity, rather than discovered as objective facts (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Educational Context and Data Generation

The empirical basis of the study consists of 39 anonymised written reflection reports produced by students who participated in the interdisciplinary intensive study module “Outdoor: Business Sustainability Revisited” at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU). The module was attended by students from multiple departments, resulting in a high degree of disciplinary and epistemic diversity.

The module was designed as a five-day pedagogical progression across different system levels of sustainability:

- Sustainability at the individual level
- Sustainability in teams and organisations
- Sustainability in society and the economy
- Sustainability and philosophy
- A return to sustainability at the individual level

This structure guided the learning activities and discussions throughout the module and provided a common experiential frame of reference for all participants.

The reflection reports were written after completion of the module and served as graded coursework. Students were asked to produce personal and critical reflections on their learning experiences, guided by explicit criteria: depth of reflection, critical analysis, integration of theory and practice, self-reflection, structural clarity, relevance to the topic of sustainability, personal engagement, perceived change or development, and a formulation of conclusions. Importantly, these criteria functioned as a framework for the data at hand and not as analytical categories.

Thematic Analysis

The analysis followed the reflexive thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The method was applied iteratively and recursively rather than linearly, acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis. The six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke guided the process:

1. Familiarisation with the data: repeated reading of all reflection reports and the production of initial analytic memos.
2. Initial coding: systematic coding of meaning-bearing segments across the entire dataset.
3. Searching for themes: grouping related codes into candidate themes.
4. Reviewing themes: checking candidate themes against coded data and the full dataset.
5. Defining and naming themes: refining the scope and focus of each theme.
6. Interpretation and reporting: linking themes to theory, research questions, and educational practice.

Inductive and Deductive Coding Strategy

Coding was carried out using a combined inductive–deductive approach to balance theoretical sensitivity with empirical openness.

Deductive Coding

Deductive codes were generated by the used literature, in the chapter “Theory”:

- sustainability competences in higher education,
- experiential and outdoor learning,
- education for sustainable development,
- interdisciplinary/intercultural learning.

These theory-informed codes served as sensitising concepts, guiding attention to analytically relevant dimensions without predetermining findings.

Inductive Coding

In parallel, inductive coding was conducted directly from the data. This open coding process captured context-specific, emotional, ethical, and experiential aspects of learning that were not fully anticipated by existing theory. The integration of inductive and deductive coding enabled a theoretically informed yet data-grounded analysis, enhancing both analytical depth and interpretive credibility.

Theme Development and Analytical Condensation

Codes generated during the analysis were systematically clustered into higher-order themes. A theme is understood as a coherent and meaningful pattern that captures something significant about the data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theme development was guided not by frequency alone, but by the conceptual richness, coherence, and explanatory potential of patterns across the dataset. Each theme integrates multiple codes and is supported by illustrative data excerpts.

Causal-Fragment Diagramming

Following the development of themes through reflexive thematic analysis, an additional analytical step was undertaken to examine relationships between the identified themes and to move from thematic description towards explanatory interpretation. To this end, the study drew on the causal-fragment diagram approach described by Miles et al. (2014). In their framework, themes or higher-order categories can be treated as analytical variables that are not merely listed but examined in terms of how they influence, enable, mediate, or reinforce one another. Building on this approach, the final themes were clearly defined, and then systematically compared across the dataset to identify recurring sequences, dependencies, and directional patterns described in students' reflections. The causal-fragment diagram was constructed iteratively by mapping these empirically grounded relationships, asking how specific experiential and social conditions described in the data appeared to give rise to learning, deeper reflection, personal transformation, and sustainability awareness. Importantly, the diagram does not claim linear causality but rather represents plausibly causal relationships that are consistent across multiple cases, as suggested by Miles et al. (2014). In line with reflexive thematic analysis, this step involved interpretive judgement by the researchers and served to integrate inductively derived themes with theory-informed concepts, thereby supporting a more process-oriented and explanatory understanding of how effective learning emerged in the outdoor setting.

Research Quality and Reflexivity

Research quality was ensured through:

- transparent documentation of analytical procedures,
- systematic application of established qualitative methods,
- iterative checking of themes against the dataset,
- ongoing reflexive engagement with researcher positionality.

Reflexivity was particularly important given the dual role of some researchers as instructors in the module. Rather than being treated as bias to be eliminated, this positionality was critically reflected upon and integrated into the interpretive process, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Empirical Results

Themes generated from Codes

As stated in the Methodology chapter, out of the deductive and inductive codes, themes were generated and explained with an illustrative paraphrased anchor-example that came out of the equivalent reflection reports. To provide an orientation regarding the prevalence of codes across the dataset, qualitative frequency indicators were used (frequently, moderately, occasionally occurring). These ranges reflect the number of reflection reports in which illustrative excerpts were identified, but however, do not imply quantitative weighting or statistical significance.

The following abbreviations are being used in the following table regarding readability: “frequently occurring” = (fo, in 30-39 Reports); “moderately occurring” = (mo, in 15-29 Reports); “occasionally occurring” = (oo, in 5-14 Reports).

Table 1: Themes and Codes based on Theory and 39 Reflection Reports

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Deductive Codes (from theory)</i>	<i>Inductive Codes (from the 39 reflection reports)</i>	<i>Anchor-Example (of frequently occurring codes)</i>
Learning Design & Educational Setting	-	Outdoor setting as learning catalyst (fo); Learning through disruption of routines (fo); Importance of facilitator presence (fo); Learning through informal conversations (fo); Lasting impact of intense learning moments (fo)	“The structure of the course forced us to take responsibility for our own learning.” (R4) “The way the course was designed made learning unavoidable and very intense.” (R17)
Connection to Nature & Embodied Experience	Nature connection; embodied learning; physical challenge and coping; simple living experience; place attachment or reframing	Experiencing nature through the senses (fo); Developing trust in nature (mo); Reframing wilderness from threat to home (mo); Heightened bodily awareness (fo); Body–mind connection in learning (fo)	“Nature shifted from something threatening to something supportive.” (R16) “Physical exhaustion changed how I perceived my limits.” (R23)
Collaboration, Group Dynamics & Responsibility	Teamwork and cooperation; conflict or negotiation; shared responsibility	Developing trust within the group (fo); Experiencing mutual support (fo); Receiving care from peers (mo); Feeling carried by the group (mo); Emotional bonding through shared hardship (fo); Negotiating individual and group needs (mo); Tension	“We supported each other naturally, especially when someone struggled.” (R10) “I realised how much trust is needed to function as a group.” (R34)

		between autonomy and belonging (oo)	
Wellbeing, Presence & Digital Detachment	Digital detox experience (mo); wellbeing and recovery; quality of presence and attention	Emotional relief after overcoming fear (mo); Feeling calmer over time (fo); Experiencing learning as holistic process (fo)	“Without my phone, I was much more present in the moment.” (R5) “I noticed how rarely I am truly present in everyday life.” (R21)
Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making	Reflection level descriptive; reflection level analytical; reflection level critical systemic	Deep self-reflection triggered by experience (fo); Reflecting on personal values (fo); Meaning-making through silence and solitude (mo); Integrating emotional experience into reflection (mo); Learning through structured reflection tasks (fo)	“In moments of silence, I started questioning my usual ways of thinking.” (R9) “Writing about the experience helped me understand why it affected me so deeply.” (R14)
Personal Transformation & Value Orientation	dis-/reorienting experience; assumption challenge; value shift or reinforcement; identity as future professional	Personal change intentions emerging (fo); Strengthened self-efficacy (mo); Reframing professional identity (oo); Desire to transfer learning into daily life (fo)	“I became more confident that I can deal with difficult situations.” (R18) “I want to transfer this mindset of responsibility into my professional life.” (R27)
Sustainability Awareness & Competence	Sustainability as complex system; ESD competence awareness; justice and inequality; planetary limits awareness	Awareness of minimal resource use (fo); Experiencing reduced consumption (fo); Experiencing sufficiency firsthand (mo); Experiencing low ecological footprint (mo); Linking personal behaviour to sustainability (fo)	“I noticed how strongly my usual behaviour is shaped by comfort and habit.” (R25) “Sustainability suddenly felt personal because I experienced its limits directly.” (R33)

Source: Kraner & Senn, own table

Causal-Fragment Diagram

The following causal-fragment diagram integrates the generated themes. It illustrates how the outdoor learning design supports effective learning through interconnected experiential, social, reflective, and motivational mechanisms.

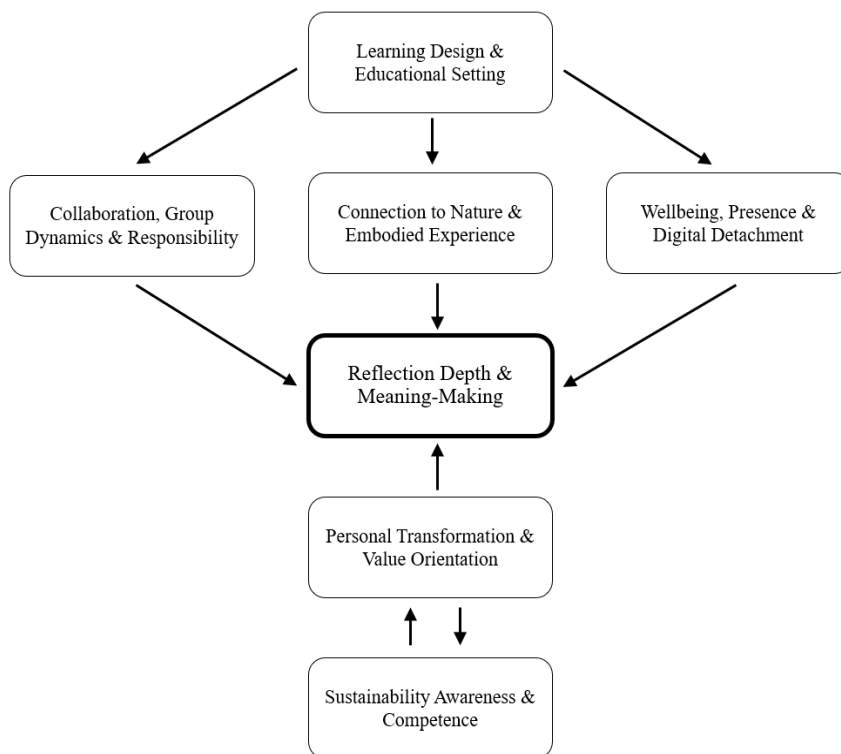


Figure 1: The causal-fragment diagram
 Source: Kraner & Senn, own illustration

At the top of the diagram, “Learning Design & Educational Setting” represents the intentionally structured pedagogical framework of the module. The “Learning Design & Education Setting” integrates deductive codes such as education for sustainable development, experiential learning, and instructor guidance, as well as inductive insights related to the outdoor setting as a learning catalyst, the disruption of everyday routines, and the importance of informal learning moments. Rather than directly producing learning outcomes, the learning design creates enabling conditions that activate multiple downstream processes.

A first pathway leads from the learning design to “Connection to Nature & Embodied Experience”. This theme combines deductive codes such as nature connection, embodied learning, physical challenge and coping, simple living experience, and place attachment or reframing with inductive codes capturing sensory engagement, heightened bodily awareness, and the reframing of nature from a threatening to a supportive environment. The diagram thus reflects both theoretically anticipated and empirically observed forms of embodied engagement, which generate emotionally and physically salient learning experiences.

A second pathway connects “Learning Design & Educational Setting” with “Collaboration, Group Dynamics & Responsibility”. Here, deductive codes such as teamwork and cooperation, conflict or negotiation, and shared responsibility are complemented by inductive codes describing trust development, mutual support, emotional bonding through shared hardship, and the negotiation of individual and collective needs. These social processes

situate learning within a relational context and create conditions for perspective-taking, empathy, and shared meaning.

A third pathway links the learning design to “Wellbeing, Presence & Digital Detachment”. Deductive codes including digital detox experience, wellbeing and recovery, and quality of presence and attention align closely with inductive observations of increased calmness, emotional relief, and heightened attentional focus. Together, these codes indicate that reduced distraction and enhanced presence function as psychological prerequisites for deeper engagement with both experience and reflection.

The diagram positions “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making” as the central converging theme. This theme integrates deductive distinctions between descriptive, analytical, and critical-systemic levels of reflection with inductive codes such as deep self-reflection, questioning of assumptions, reflective engagement with values, and meaning-making through silence, solitude and reflection. Reflection is thus conceptualised not only as an educational technique but as an interpretative process through which experiences are actively examined, contextualised, and integrated. From a self-determination theory perspective, “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making” represents a key process of internalisation. Through reflective meaning-making, students transform embodied, social, and emotional experiences into personally meaningful insights that support autonomy (by recognising personal relevance), competence (by understanding learning and development), and relatedness (by integrating social experiences). In this sense, meaning-making functions as a motivational mechanism that enables the emergence of intrinsic motivation rather than remaining at the level of externally driven participation.

The diagram further shows a direct relationship between “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making” and “Personal Transformation & Value Orientation”. This theme incorporates deductive codes such as dis-/reorienting experience, assumption challenge, value shift or reinforcement, identity as future professional, and agency and change intent, alongside inductive codes capturing personal change intentions, strengthened self-efficacy, and the reframing of professional identity. The causal relationship indicates that reflection enables students to articulate changes in self-understanding, values, and future orientations.

Subsequently, “Personal Transformation & Value Orientation” contributes to “Sustainability Awareness & Competence”. This theme integrates deductive codes such as sustainability as a complex system, ESD competence awareness, justice and inequality, and planetary limits awareness with inductive, experience-based insights into sufficiency, reduced consumption, and linking personal behaviour to sustainability. Sustainability competence thus emerges as both cognitively informed and experientially grounded.

Finally, the diagram includes a conceptual feedback loop from “Sustainability Awareness & Competence” back to “Personal Transformation & Value Orientation”, suggesting that increased awareness of sustainability issues can further reinforce value reflection, and identity development. This feedback highlights the dynamic and iterative nature of learning processes in outdoor and experiential educational settings.

In summary, the causal-fragment diagram demonstrates how inductive, experience-based insights and deductive, theory-informed constructs jointly explain effective learning in the outdoor setting. “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making” emerges as the pivotal mechanism through which experiential and social processes are internalised, motivationally integrated, and transformed into sustainable forms of learning and competence development. Having “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making” as the pivotal mechanism is not so surprising since sense-making refers to understanding what is happening in an experience i.e. explain why waste should not be disposed of in nature, whereas meaning-making involves integrating that

experience into personal values, identity and motivation, i.e. seeing waste on the ground in a forest and be affected by it.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how an outdoor learning setting can support effective learning at university level. By combining deductive, theory-based codes with inductively derived insights from students' reflection reports, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which outdoor learning environments influence learning processes and outcomes. In the following, the findings are discussed by systematically contrasting theoretical expectations with empirically observed experiences, before synthesising these insights into a coherent answer to the research question.

Learning Design and Educational Setting: Convergence of Theory and Practice

From a theoretical perspective, outdoor learning is often conceptualised as an educational approach that promotes experiential learning, autonomy support, and education for sustainable development. Experiential learning theory conceptualises learning as a cyclical process in which concrete experience provides the foundation for reflection and learning (Kolb, 1984). Deductive codes related to learning design emphasise the importance of intentional pedagogical structuring, facilitator guidance, and alignment with sustainability-oriented learning goals. The findings show that the outdoor learning design primarily created experiential conditions rather than transmitting content, thereby aligning with experiential learning theory.

Also, the inductive findings strongly support these theoretical assumptions. Students consistently described the outdoor setting as a catalyst for learning, highlighting the disruption of habitual routines, the intensity of lived experiences, and the significance of informal learning moments. However, while theory often frames learning design in terms of planned pedagogical interventions, the empirical data reveal that students experienced the learning design primarily through its effects on everyday practices, such as shared responsibilities, reduced comfort, and continuous social interaction, rather than through explicit instructional elements.

This convergence suggests that effective outdoor learning design operates less through direct instruction and more through the creation of conditions that make learning unavoidable, experiential, and personally relevant. At the same time, the findings refine theoretical models by demonstrating that facilitation remains crucial, particularly in structuring reflection and supporting meaning-making processes.

Connection to Nature and Embodied Experience: Theory Anticipated, Practice Enriched

Theoretically, outdoor learning is expected to foster nature connection, embodied learning, and experiential engagement (McNatty et al., 2025). Experiential learning emphasises the importance of direct engagement with real-world situations for meaningful learning (Kolb, 1984). Deductive codes such as nature connection, embodied learning, and simple living experience reflect established assumptions in experiential and environmental education literature. Students embodied – and emotionally intense experiences illustrate – how concrete experience functioned as the starting point for subsequent learning processes.

The inductive data largely confirm these expectations but add important depth. Students' reflections illustrate how embodied experiences were not only sensory or physical but also emotionally charged and identity-relevant. Inductive codes such as heightened bodily

awareness, reframing wilderness from threat to home, and developing trust in nature extend theoretical constructs by showing how embodied experience can transform students' perceptions of themselves and their environment.

A key difference between theory and practice lies in the emotional intensity of these experiences. While theoretical frameworks often describe embodiment in abstract terms, students' highlight vulnerability, fear, and coping as integral to learning. These findings suggest that embodied discomfort, rather than comfort, may play a crucial role in triggering deeper learning processes.

Collaboration, Group Dynamics & Responsibility: Shared Ground with Contextual Nuances

Learning is understood as a holistic process integrating experience, reflection, and interaction rather than an individual cognitive act alone (Hattie, 2009). Theoretical models of outdoor and sustainability education emphasise collaboration, shared responsibility, and social learning (Hattie et al., 1997). Deductive codes such as teamwork and cooperation and shared responsibility align closely with these assumptions.

Inductive findings confirm the relevance of these social dimensions but also reveal tensions that are less visible in theory. Students described strong experiences of trust, mutual support, and emotional bonding, but also moments of conflict, negotiation, and ambivalence between autonomy and belonging. These nuanced experiences highlight that social learning in outdoor settings is not inherently harmonious but involves ongoing negotiation of roles, needs, and expectations.

This discrepancy does not contradict theory but rather enriches it by illustrating that social processes contribute to learning precisely because they are demanding and emotionally engaging. Responsibility emerges not only as a pedagogical goal but also as a lived experience that requires continuous adjustment.

Wellbeing, Presence, and Digital Detachment: An Underestimated Theoretical Dimension

The deductive codes related to wellbeing, presence, and digital detachment are grounded in theories that link reduced distraction and increased presence to well-being and improved learning (Frumkin et al., 2017; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). However, these aspects often remain peripheral in higher education discourse.

The inductive findings elevate this dimension to a central role. Students frequently reported increased calmness, attentional focus, and emotional recovery over time, of course this was supported through the one-week-programme outdoor. These experiences were described as enabling deeper engagement with both learning content and social interaction. The empirical data thus suggest that wellbeing and presence are not merely positive side effects but foundational conditions for effective learning.

This insight extends theoretical models by highlighting the importance of temporal deceleration and reduced cognitive overload as prerequisites for reflective and transformative learning processes.

Reflection Depth and Meaning-Making: Bridging Theory and Experience

Both theory and empirical data converge most strongly in the theme "Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making", which emerges as the central mediating mechanism in the causal-fragment

diagram. Deductive distinctions between descriptive, analytical, and critical-systemic reflection align closely with inductive descriptions of deep self-reflection, value questioning, and meaning-making through silence and solitude.

From a self-determination theory perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), this convergence is particularly significant. Reflection and meaning-making function as processes of internalisation through which experiences become personally meaningful and motivationally integrated. The inductive data show that reflection and meaning-making enabled students to internalise experiential learning, thereby transforming participation into intrinsically motivated engagement. Transformative learning theory, on the other side, conceptualises reflection as a process of meaning-making that can lead to perspective transformation (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Mezirow, 2000).

The inductive data show that reflection depth mediated between experience and learning outcomes, positioning meaning-making as the core mechanism of effective outdoor learning. The inductive data illustrate how students used reflection to connect embodied and social experiences with personal values, future intentions, and broader sustainability issues.

Importantly, the findings suggest that reflection is not only a cognitive activity but a motivational mechanism that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This insight bridges theoretical assumptions about intrinsic motivation with concrete learning experiences in the outdoor setting. Furthermore meaning-making evolved as the pivotal lever in learning effectiveness. Meaning-making is also closely tied to learning effectiveness through relevance and personal connection to increased motivation, engagement and effort, which are established predictors of learning effectiveness (Brieflands, 2023). Meaning-making or personally meaningful connections are as well closely related to learning motivation and learning outcome (Priniski et al., 2017). Above all, meaning-making is not limited to individuals, according to Ernstsen (2025), collaborative meaning-making support a shared understanding that support engagement and conceptual understanding likewise. Worthwhile to mention as well, a structured meaning-making process in an outdoor-setting contributes to improved reasoning and understanding of a subject at hand (Nielsen, 2022).

Since the meaning-making aspect seems to be pivotal, it requires a deeper evaluation and discussion: Regarding to theory in outdoor contexts, learners do not only interpret stimuli; they actively co-construct significance through embodied engagement, emotional investment, and reflection on interactions with the natural environment, peers, tasks, and challenges. Empirical studies demonstrate that outdoor experiences rich in aesthetic, sensory, and relational qualities facilitate processes whereby learners embed their experiences into their personal and social life, for example, students develop care for a chosen tree to which their tarp was attached too, linking cognitive insights with emotional and identity-based meanings that extend beyond factual knowledge alone (Berg et al., 2021). Similarly, outdoor education research highlights how meaning-making arises from the integration of prior experiences, social interaction, and emotional engagement with environments and artifacts, processes that continually reshape perspectives and foster deeper learning outcomes that are personally relevant and socially essential (Manni et al., 2016). This focus on meaning-making also aligns with constructivist educational theory, which holds that learners actively create knowledge structures and interpretive frameworks rather than passively absorb information; in outdoor settings, the richness, unpredictability, and multi-sensory nature of the environment amplify this constructive process and help explain why meaning-making is so omnipresent and a strong mediator of learning success in outdoor pedagogy/andragogy, ultimately transforming experiences into enduring understanding, values, and behavioural dispositions appropriate to

both sustainability-literacies and personal growth (Ignelzi, 2000). For further understanding we established a theory-based “sense-making versus meaning-making” table below:

Table 2: Sense-Making versus Meaning-Making

<i>Sense-Making (short term answers)</i>	<i>Meaning-Making (deep, long-lasting impact)</i>
Understanding Facts and Events	Connecting and Reflecting
Analysing and Explaining	Personal & Emotional Growth
Solving Problems	Finding Purpose & Values
Interpreting Experience	Transforming Experience

Source: Kraner, own table, based on Beames et al. (2012); Weick (1995)

According to Weick (1995), sense-making is the process of quickly interpreting and understanding information in the short term, helping to navigate immediate in situations. Meaning-making goes deeper, reflecting on experiences to derive lasting significance or insights, shaping our long-term perspectives and values (Beames et al., 2012). Together, they link immediate comprehension with enduring understanding.

Personal Transformation & Value Orientation: From Experience to Orientation

From a deductive perspective, learning is being conceptualised as a transformative and value-oriented process (Mezirow, 2000; Sterling, 2010; Wiek et al., 2011). These codes emphasise that effective learning involves critically questioning existing assumptions and integrating new perspectives into personal values, agency, and identity, rather than accumulating knowledge alone.

The inductive codes identified in the reflection reports closely reflect these theoretical assumptions. Students articulated personal change intention, strengthened self-efficacy, and reconsideration of priorities, indicating that experiential challenges led to reflection on values and future orientations. Experiences of responsibility, vulnerability, and uncertainty were frequently described as triggers for reassessing self-perceptions and professional aspirations, thereby empirically substantiating the deductive codes.

Taken together, the alignment between deductive and inductive codes suggests that “Personal Transformation & Value Orientation” emerged through the reflective integration of experience. This supports the theoretical assumption that transformation is mediated by “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making”, rather than being a direct outcome of experience alone.

Sustainability Awareness & Competence: From Action to Knowledge

From a deductive standpoint, sustainability competence is framed through the theory-based codes sustainability as a complex system, justice and inequality, planetary limits awareness, and ESD competence awareness (Sterling, 2010; Wiek et al., 2011). These codes conceptualise sustainability learning as a multidimensional and normative orientation that integrates ethical reflection, systemic understanding, and responsibility for future action.

The inductive codes illustrate how these theoretical dimensions were realised in practice. Students described experiencing sufficiency, questioning consumption habits, and connecting personal behaviour to sustainability, indicating that sustainability awareness developed

primarily through concrete experience. Rather than abstract reasoning, sustainability became meaningful when students related it to everyday practices and shared responsibility.

The comparison of deductive and inductive codes indicates that “Sustainability Awareness & Competence” did not develop independently but was closely linked to prior processes of “Personal Transformation & Value Orientation”. Sustainability competence thus emerged as an experiential and reflective orientation, confirming theoretical assumptions that competence development in education for sustainable development relies on the integration of experience, values, and “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making”.

Synthesising Answer to the Research Question

Taken together, this study demonstrates that outdoor learning supports effective learning not through isolated factors but through an interconnected process in which learning design enables embodied, social, and wellbeing-related experiences. These experiences converge in reflection depth and meaning-making, which function as central mechanisms of internalisation and intrinsic motivation. Through reflective integration, learning becomes personally meaningful, value-oriented, and sustainable itself.

In answering the research question, this study suggests that outdoor learning environments support effective learning at university level when they are intentionally designed to combine experiential richness with structured opportunities for reflection. Such environments foster not only cognitive understanding but also personal transformation and in this case sustainability competence.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study explored how an outdoor learning setting can support effective learning in higher education. The findings demonstrate that effective outdoor learning does not emerge from isolated experiential elements but above all from the intentional interplay of learning design, embodied experience, social interaction, and reflective integration as explained above. The outdoor learning design functioned as an enabling structure that created conditions for embodied engagement with nature, collaborative responsibility, and enhanced presence and wellbeing. These conditions were consistently experienced by students as intensive, emotionally engaging, and personally relevant.

Across the analysis, reflection depth and meaning-making emerged as the central mechanism that connects experience with learning outcomes. Reflection enabled students to interpret, contextualise, and integrate their embodied, emotional, and social experiences into coherent understandings of themselves, their values, and broader sustainability issues in this case. From the perspective of self-determination theory, meaning-making functioned as a process of internalisation through which learning experiences became intrinsically motivating by supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This highlights that motivation in outdoor learning settings is not an automatic outcome of experiential exposure but is critically dependent on opportunities for reflective integration.

The study further shows that personal transformation and value orientation serve as key intermediaries between experiential learning and the development of sustainability awareness and competence. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract knowledge, sustainability learning was grounded in lived experiences of sufficiency, shared responsibility, and everyday practice. The identified feedback loop between sustainability awareness and personal value

orientation underscores the dynamic and iterative nature of learning processes in outdoor educational contexts.

Building on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made for instructors, which outlines the benefits as well that students can gain from participating in well-designed outdoor learning settings. Together, these perspectives highlight how effective learning emerges through the interaction of pedagogical/andragogical design and student engagement.

Recommendations for Instructors:

- Design for experience, not only content:
Outdoor learning is most effective when it is designed as an experiential learning environment rather than a mere relocation of classroom instruction. Prioritising embodied, sensory, and emotionally engaging experiences helps disrupt habitual routines and creates conditions for meaningful learning.
- Intentionally scaffold reflection and meaning-making:
Given the central role of “Reflection Depth & Meaning-Making”, instructors can enhance learning by providing structured and varied opportunities for reflection, such as guided prompts, individual journaling, group reflection sessions, and periods of silence or solitude. Reflection that connects experience, personal values, and broader sustainability-related questions supports deeper learning.
- Support autonomy while maintaining structure:
Effective outdoor learning balances autonomy support with clear structure. Allowing space for student decision-making and responsibility, while clearly communicating expectations and learning goals, supports both engagement and orientation.
- Leverage social dynamics as a learning resource:
Group processes such as shared responsibility, collaboration, and negotiation function as powerful learning resources. Making these processes visible and addressing tensions as part of the learning process strengthens social and reflective learning.
- Create conditions for presence and reduced distraction:
Reducing digital distraction and slowing down the learning rhythm can enhance presence, attentional focus, and wellbeing. Intentional design choices that allow time for experiential engagement and reflection support these effects.

Benefits for Students

- Deeper learning through engagement with challenge and uncertainty:
Outdoor learning settings provide students with opportunities to experience and reflect on moments of discomfort, vulnerability, and uncertainty. These experiences can contribute to deeper insight and learning when they are meaningfully processed.
- Enhanced meaning-making and personal relevance:
Through structured reflection, students can interpret their experiences, explore underlying values and assumptions, and connect learning to personal and professional contexts. This supports learning that is perceived as personally meaningful rather than externally imposed.
- Strengthened social learning and sense of belonging:
Shared experiences, collective responsibility, and mutual support foster trust and

social connectedness. Students benefit from learning in a socially embedded environment where relationships contribute to understanding and motivation.

- Development of intrinsic motivation:
By experiencing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, students are more likely to develop intrinsically motivated engagement with learning. This supports students in taking over ownership over their learning process.
- Personally grounded sustainability competence:
Students benefit from experiencing sustainability not only as an abstract concept but as a lived practice connected to everyday decisions, values, and responsibilities. This supports the development of sustainability competence as a reflective and value-oriented orientation.

In conclusion, the study suggests that outdoor learning environments can support effective learning in higher education when they are designed to combine experiential richness with structured opportunities for reflection and meaning-making. Such environments foster not only cognitive understanding but also intrinsic motivation, personal transformation, and sustainability-oriented competence. This study contributes therefore to a more nuanced understanding of outdoor learning as a pedagogical/andragogical approach and offers concrete recommendations as well as implications for the design of transformative and motivationally supportive learning environments in higher education.

A Personal Learning Adventure to End With

It is 3.00 p.m. on top of the Sonnenberg, the destination of our outdoor week. The two instructors stand with Nadja and Linda, looking out over the lake of Lucerne and the city below. For a long moment, the four of them remain in silence. Their eyes meet briefly, then wander again across the shimmering lake and the mountains encircling Lucerne. One of the instructors notices a tear slowly tracing its way down Nadja's cheek. Without a word, Linda steps closer and gently puts her arm around her. The two instructors exchange a glance and smile, quietly and knowingly.

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Deconstructing Unconscious Biases: Neuropsychological Insights into How We Construct Our Reality

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Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of unconscious biases, which are memories of early life experiences, that are mostly forgotten but deeply embedded in the mind. Yet, they largely dictate our perceptions and behavior.

Keywords: Unconscious Bias, Imprinting, Inattentional Blindness

Introduction

Let us begin with a simple example of how our biases affect our perceptions. Imagine someone holding up their right hand, showing four fingers extended and the thumb down, and asking: “What do you see?” Many readers would answer four fingers. Others may respond “five”, and others may simply say “a hand”.

The different answers summarize the whole problematic of perception — there is no real, absolute answer; it can be four... or five fingers... or something else. It all depends on how your unconscious biases interpret what you are seeing. And this problem of perception has intrigued many people with countless questions, such as:

- Are our perceptions reliable, i.e., can we trust what our perceptions are telling us?
- What are the cognitive processes that prompt people to prefer one reality over another?
- And when there are different realities, does it mean that our perceptions have a conflicting relationship to reality?

One approach to answering these questions is to examine how early life experiences can influence our thinking, perceptions, and the decisions we make, especially those concerning our lifestyle and preferences for certain people. These preferences are our biases, most of which are unconscious.

What I wish to do in this paper is deconstruct the phenomenon of unconscious biases by demonstrating how memories of early life experiences, which are mostly forgotten but deeply embedded in your mind, largely dictate our perceptions and behavior. This is the premise of the paper.

Definition of unconscious bias

It would be useful at first to examine the origins and meanings of “unconscious bias”. *Unconscious* means lacking awareness; it’s outside our conscious control. The word originates from the Latin *inconsci*: the prefix *in-* meaning “not”, and the word *consci* meaning “aware” or “conscious”.

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Bias is simply a preference, an inclination that hinders neutrality or impartiality. The word originates from the old Provençal French *biais*, which meant a slant or slope. It was first used in English around the 1560s in the game of “bowls”, to describe balls made with greater weight on one side, causing them to curve. Over time, it became a commonly used term meaning preference or inclination.

Today, the word “bias” has a mostly negative connotation, so many interculturalists use terms such as “lens”, “predisposition” and “frame”. For the purposes of this article, we will define unconscious bias as: *a preference or inclination that exists outside our conscious control.*

Why do we have biases and how do they develop?

Before answering the above questions, we need to clear up a common misunderstanding: your perception of reality has less to do with what is out there and more to do with what is happening in your mind. Neurological research shows that our five senses feed the brain staggering amounts of information every second.

However, the brain cannot and does not want to process all this data — it needs to function like a perceptual lens, quickly filtering new information. These filters are essentially your biases.

These biases have evolved for a reason — to reduce the enormous intake of information, so as to save on cognitive resources and use cognitive energy more effectively. It is all part of the brain’s evolutionary design to retain only key information necessary for survival. The survival instinct is the primary and overriding function of the brain, allowing us to make quick decisions on whether a situation or person is safe or dangerous. Your whole brain circuitry is constructed in a defensive “survival mode”, which works 24 hours a day, non-stop.

From a physiological perspective, these biases are neurological pathways, pre-established templates that contain memories and past experiences. A great number of them are developed at an early age, when we begin to experience life and make assumptions about family, friends and school. They are rooted in your preferences, mostly associated with pleasure or pain. For example, “I love chocolate.”, “I don’t like the noise of city traffic.”

These biases are so profoundly ingrained in our minds that we are unaware of most of them, let alone the way they influence our behavior. Yet, it is these unconscious recollections that essentially influence what we see, hear and interpret. And they, in turn, dictate most of our decision-making and judgments.

The neurobiological mechanism that generates our biases

To understand how biases are created, we need to look at the term *imprinting*, a process that takes place in the very early period of our childhood, by which we instinctively bond with a moving object. The person who revealed the importance of this process was Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz. His observations of imprinting in animal behavior, especially that of baby geese, got him the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1973. So, why is imprinting so important in generating biases?

To answer this, we need to examine Lorenz’s cultural upbringing. He was born in Vienna at the turn of the 20th century into a family of prominent medical doctors; his father and mother were doctors, all of his uncles were doctors as well as his two grandfathers. Growing up in this environment, it was only natural that he would study medicine. During his studies, he asked himself, why he had such an attachment to medicine and not to engineering, business or

anthropology. All of his friends told him that it was natural that he was studying medicine because he grew up in a family of doctors. But he wanted to know the exact mechanism that motivated him to be a doctor. So, upon finishing his medical studies, he did a second doctorate in animal behavior with a simple idea: if I understand animal behavior, I can extrapolate the findings to human behavior.

His work began with the study of “attachment”, the mechanism that makes newborn geese follow their mother. He discovered the process was a combination of instinct and learned experience, which he called *imprinting*.

Imprinting can be defined as a distinctive form of learning that occurs during a brief but critical period in young animals, who are absorbing the characteristics of a separate organism and forming an attachment. Once the process is complete, it’s almost irreversible.

Lorenz came to understand this process by experimenting with unhatched goose eggs. He’d take about a dozen and divide them into two groups, one to be hatched in an incubator, the other by the mother goose. Newborn “incubator geese” were kept by Lorenz for the first 16 hours and were exposed to his walking in boots from their 13th to 16th hour. When the babies were returned to the mother goose, they didn’t follow her but him.

He theorized that baby geese would instinctively follow a moving object shortly after hatching, normally the mother. In this case, it was the movement of his boots, triggering attachment, strongly suggesting imprinting is innate, genetically programmed.

Neuroscientists today have extrapolated Lorenz’s findings to human beings. The critical period of human brain development is generally said to be from birth to the age of 12. During this time, almost all stimuli are absorbed by the child indiscriminately, like water to a sponge. And the more a certain behavior is repeated, the more likely it will remain in the unconscious for life. These established neural pathways affect our subsequent adult behavior, becoming the foundation for our thoughts, habits and behavior and they can appear unexpectedly later on.

The French writer Marcel Proust describes how these sudden appearances occur in his masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time (A la recherche du temps perdu)*. His work is a recollection of his childhood experiences that affected his adult life. In one section, he writes about eating a *madeleine* cake as an adult, which would triggered a happy childhood memory of his aunt giving him one of the small sponge-cakes every Sunday morning, just before going to church.

Researchers now say that many unconscious biases, such as a strong attachment to family, clan and even one’s country are of an imprinting nature. This applies equally well to learning one’s mother tongue — mimicking speech until it becomes permanently embedded.

Neurological investigations on the unconscious

Despite all the research on how imprinting impacts unconscious biases, many readers will still claim to be objective and consciously aware. You assume consciousness is the dominant feature of the brain. Neurological experimentation suggests a rather different picture.

Back in the 1980s, German researcher Manfred Zimmermann at the University of Heidelberg undertook the task of counting the number of binary units of information, that is bits of information, which flow through our five senses every single second. He and his team did this by first calculating the number of receptors each sensory organ possesses — how many visual cells the eye has, how many sensitive points the skin has, how many taste buds the tongue has, etc... They then counted how many nerve endings of each sensory organ send information to the brain per second.

These neuroscientists calculated that our five senses capture and send a little over 11 million bits of information per second to the brain. The eyes receive most bits, about

10,000,000; skin, a little less than 1,000,000; ears 100,000; nose 100,000; tongue 1 000 per second. Even more interesting, Zimmerman's team found that a person's conscious actually receives only a small amount of this incoming information — about 40 to 50 bits per second.

What this means is that our conscious captures very little of reality and that 99.99% of the incoming information is processed by our unconscious biases. It's our unconscious mind, working in the auto-pilot mode, that triggers practically all our actions, such as driving a car, playing a musical instrument, riding a bike, or communicating appropriately with people in our cultural group.

Your conscious is actually just a passive recipient of the information processing that has taken place in the unconscious. It can only generate and assign a meaning, i.e. a simplified picture, an image, an illusion of reality. Metaphorically, the conscious mind is a tiny pond compared to the vast ocean of the unconscious. How little the conscious captures reality comes as a surprise to most people and clashes with their gut instinct of what awareness is.

Going deeper, your conscious perception is only what you think is important for your survival. It's only the passive recipient of the incoming stimuli processed by our unconscious biases, which means our conscious captures only one part of reality. The famous "invisible gorilla" experiment is an example of this phenomenon.

In the 1990s, American researchers Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons demonstrated how our biases can blind us to certain aspects of reality, what psychologists call "inattention blindness". It's defined as the inability to perceive an event or stimulus in plain sight.

Participants were asked to watch a video of people passing a basketball to each other and were instructed to count the number of passes made by those wearing a white tee-shirt. During the video, a person, dressed in a gorilla costume, walked through the scene of those passing the basketball for about nine seconds.

Approximately half of the participants completely failed to notice the gorilla! When you're intently focused on a specific task, you can easily miss other significant events or stimuli that are right in front of you. Our conscious perception doesn't generate an all-encompassing view of reality but, rather, a selective and biased interpretation, influenced by what we choose to pay attention to.

The following exercise will help you better understand this phenomenon. Close your eyes, then open them just for a tiny second. Now recall what you just saw.... Your conscious is taking a tour of what you what you just perceived but it takes a few seconds to look around the image you captured in a millisecond. Your conscious is not identical to what you initially perceived. You sense more unconsciously than you do consciously.

So, are we all naturally biased?

Yes! Biases are unavoidable, they are part of our human DNA. Your unconscious biases are simply survival processes that use latent memories that affect our perception, decision-making and interaction with other people. Once you recognize that we all need biases to survive, you realize that it doesn't make you a bad person, just a normal human being.

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Presents, Pastries, and Rain: Japanese Gift Giving and Intercultural Dissonance

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Abstract: Gifting norms and practices, with their prescriptions and proscriptions, vary widely around the world and reflect contrasting cultural values, beliefs, and forms of social etiquette. These variations may result in unintentional offense and misinterpretation when interacting with someone of a different culture. In this article, I relate a misunderstanding I had with a former Japanese student in the U.S.A. centering on my perception of gift-giving practices in Japan. I focus on the Japanese concept of giri—obligation or social responsibility—a nuanced belief, often involving gift giving, that plays an important role in Japanese culture influencing social interactions and relationships. With limited knowledge of this concept, I behaved in a manner dissonant with Japanese decorum. I conclude that appreciating global differences in gift-giving practices, including the ways they are manifested in objective and subjective culture, fosters intercultural connections and minimizes inadvertent mishaps.

Keywords: Global Gift Giving, Giri, Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Encounters, Objective and Subjective Culture

In China, one usually avoids giving a gift that comes in a set of four since the number “four” sounds similar to the word for “death.” In Canada, a gift is often given with one hand and is opened in the presence of the receiver who shows their appreciation, while, in Vietnam, a gift is given with two hands as a sign of respect and is opened after the presenter has left. In Saudi Arabia, one should steer clear of alcohol or pork as presents since these are both prohibited under Islamic law. In Mexico, during festivals such as Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, edible and decorative sugar skulls are often exchanged to honor deceased loved ones and stress death as a natural part of the cycle of life. In Russia, it is appropriate to bring flowers when invited to someone’s home, but one avoids yellow flowers, such as lilies and carnations, which are associated with funerals, sadness, and infidelity. And, in rural areas of Kenya, it is common to bring practical items such as coffee, sugar, flour, or maize when visiting others as a sign of goodwill, esteem, and social connection (Aperian, 2025; Cultural Atlas).

Gift giving is a universal practice and an important form of social interaction expressing sincerity, gratitude, congratulations, sympathy, friendship, goodwill, prosperity, and love. Gifting norms and customs, however, with their prescriptions (what one should do) and proscriptions (what one should not do), vary widely around the world and reflect contrasting cultural values, beliefs, and forms of social etiquette (Stauss, 2023). These variations represent a minefield when interacting with someone of a different culture, often resulting in unintentional offense and misunderstanding. Appreciating cultural differences in gift-giving traditions can foster intercultural connections and minimize inadvertent faux pas. A few decades ago, near the beginning of my career in intercultural communication, I fell into one of these gift-giving traps when interacting with a former Japanese student and her mother.

Yumiko had been a student of mine in an advanced English Language course at my college in Boston. I remember her as being a respectful and hard-working student who improved significantly over the semester. After receiving her undergraduate degree, she enrolled in a Master’s program in education at University of Massachusetts-Boston. Before submitting her Master’s thesis, she asked if I would read it and give some recommendations. I gladly did so.

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Her thesis was well written, though she especially needed some work on her literature review. I spent a fair amount of time reading through her work and providing detailed feedback. Yumiko was very appreciative and, to thank me, invited me one afternoon, with her mother who was in town, for tea and pastries at a nearby café specializing in European confections. This invitation was only part of the giving of gifts that was to follow.

In Japan, gift giving is an essential part of the culture, expressing the giver's sincere gratitude, indebtedness, and respect. Gifts are given on many occasions to co-workers and superiors, to family members, to friends, and to others, each event requiring a certain type of gift emphasizing its appropriateness and thoughtfulness. Two of the most common occasions for gift giving are the seasonal "Oseibo," or year-end gifts, meant to show appreciation to those who have been helpful or kind during the year, such as bosses, colleagues, teachers, and landlords and "Ochugen," or mid-year summer gifts, expressing gratitude to those who have given assistance and support throughout the year, such as family, friends, doctors, and business associates (Baker, 2022). Gifts are also given on many other occasions during the year to mark personal milestones and events. In Japan, the wrapping and presentation of a gift are as important as the gift itself, as they enhance the present's aesthetic appeal and the care and attention given the relationship. Presents are carefully wrapped in beautiful paper, often in elegant *Furoshiki* cloth, and tied with attractive ribbons.

Not only are exquisitely wrapped gifts given on multiple occasions to people of different social relationships, but they reflect the Japanese concept of *giri*, with gifts intended to express gratitude and fulfill social expectations. *Giri* is commonly translated as duty, obligation, or social responsibility. It involves a sense of moral debt and is a complex concept that plays a significant role in Japanese culture, influencing social interactions and relationships (Hanabira, 2025). *Giri* entails a sense of reciprocity, where one is expected to return favors and gifts to demonstrate respect and loyalty in response to assistance or kindness. It requires navigating subtle social dynamics and assumptions and reflects the cultural values of harmony, fidelity, humility, appreciation, and mutuality (Paul, 2023). At times *giri* may be duty driven, but more often it reflects genuine concern and care for others. Even for Japanese, however, *giri* involves "a nuanced dance between authentic sentiment and societal harmony" (Living in Japan, 2023).

When I met Yumiko and her mother at the café, I was only vaguely aware of the intricacies of gift giving in Japan, though I had heard of the importance of *giri* and mutual reciprocity in the fostering of interpersonal and social relationships. A little knowledge, however, can be a dangerous thing in intercultural interactions.

After cordially introducing me to her mother, who thanked me for the help I had provided her daughter with her Master's thesis, Yumiko ordered several enticing pastries from a tray the server had brought by. Among others, she selected a piece of Linzertorte and apple strudel, both common in Austria, where I had studied music some years earlier. She told me they were in honor of my studies abroad, which she knew were an important time in my life and about which I often spoke. I was touched by her personal and considerate gesture.

As we were eating the sweets, Yumiko thanked me profusely for the help I had given her on her graduate thesis. She told me she could never have finished it without my assistance and that she was especially appreciative knowing my heavy teaching load and academic responsibilities. Having taken two English language classes with me and come to my office hours many times for advice on her courses, personal life, and future career, Yumiko regarded me as an important mentor. The Japanese have an honorific title for teachers (and others who are respected for their experience and guidance in their fields) which is *sensei*. *Sensei* are a type of role model and moral guide, not simply dispensing academic knowledge and advice but shaping students' personal, social, professional, and ethical development. Japanese

traditionally respect elders and those in positions of social status, part of their Confucian heritage, and *sensei* are particularly revered figures in Japan whose impact on students continues long after their academic studies have ended. (Monahan, 2018). It is not uncommon in Japan for students to maintain ties with their *sensei* after they graduate from college and sometimes visit them for career and other types of counsel. I believe Yumiko thought of me as an enduring *sensei*.

After we had talked briefly, Yumiko opened a bag and took out several gifts. She presented these to me with two hands, as is traditionally done in Japan, to express respect and sincerity. I accepted the presents with both hands, as I had learned to do a few years earlier while teaching in Japan, and which I knew signified the importance of the exchange and the value placed on the relationship between giver and recipient. I wondered, however, if I should open the gifts then, since this is not usually done in front of the presenter in Japan, or wait until I got home. I decided to open the presents then, so as to be able to thank Yumiko and her mother in person, though I knew this might not be an appropriate Japanese behavior.

Two of the gifts were large beautifully wrapped Japanese children's books, translated into English, for my two young daughters. I remember their having gorgeous illustrations with brilliant colors. The two other gifts, again gracefully wrapped with ribbons, were intended for me. One was a set of elegantly designed chopsticks in a red box embossed with gold designs. The other was a lovely wooden bookmark with a tassel at the end, again in a handsome box. Accompanying the gifts was a small card with the carefully written words, "Dear Professor, Thank you so much for helping, inspiring, encouraging, and comforting me since the first time we met. Being your student is one of the best things that has happened to me and the best thing I will be always proud of. Wishing you a wonderful Happy New Year. Yumiko."

I was moved by the attentive gifts Yumiko had given me and her heartfelt words on the card, though I felt uncomfortable with the expense of the presents, especially those for my children. I thanked Yumiko and her mother, both in Japanese and in English, for the gifts and pastries. In addition to my feelings of discomfort and gratitude, my primary reaction was one of confusion—confusion as to whether I should give a physical gift in return, though, clearly Yumiko was thanking me for the gifts I had already given her—my serving as a *sensei* for her and my having read and responded in depth to her Master's thesis. Yet the word *giri* kept running through my mind, with its sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity, and this seemed to imply the giving of a tangible gift in return.

I remembered Yumiko once telling me that she and her mother both loved classical music, especially Mozart. Feeling an urgent need to give Yumiko a physical gift in exchange for the lovely gifts she had presented me, I excused myself, saying that I needed to go to the restroom. My intent, though, was not one of rest, but of running to a local music store and buying a CD collection of Mozart's works for Yumiko and her mother. Little did I know, however, that it was then pouring outside, and I didn't have an umbrella. Nonetheless, I rushed to the record store, around five minutes away, arriving drenched from the storm. I frantically searched for the Mozart bin of CDs, and, after several minutes, selected a two-CD collection of Mozart's symphonies, which I also remember Yumiko mentioning at one point as a favorite of hers. I had the present giftwrapped, though certainly not as appealingly as the gifts Yumiko had given me.

I rushed back to the café, soaking wet, went to the restroom, and tried the best I could to dry myself off with paper towels, though my clothes and hair were still noticeably wet. I then returned to our table, some 25 minutes after I had left, excusing myself for having taken so long. I can only imagine what Yumiko and her mother were thinking of my long absence and sodden and disheveled appearance. Confused, concerned, but perhaps a bit amused? A

professor going to the restroom and returning almost half an hour later sopping wet, bedraggled, and acting as if nothing had happened?! Their bemusement had likely rivaled my own.

I presented the gift to Yumiko and her mother, thanking them again for inviting me to the café and for the special gifts. Clearly surprised, Yumiko opened the present, remarked on how much she and her mother loved Mozart, and thanked me extensively. However, I could see that she was feeling uncomfortable, and it only occurred to me later that my attempt to fulfill *giri* was inappropriate and misguided. Not only was my gift unnecessary, but I believe it undermined Yumiko's gracious attempt to thank me for everything I had done for her. I had committed the type of intercultural faux pas against which I had often warned my students.

This café story serves as an example of the mishaps we may encounter when interacting with those of a different culture. Not knowing the nuances of gift giving in Japan, especially the concept of *giri*, I had acted in a manner dissonant with Japanese etiquette despite my best attempts to the contrary. Moreover, my heightened emotions about doing the right thing only intensified my sense of urgency, confusion, and unease.

Every cultural practice, such as the giving of gifts, has both an *objective* component—the external, tangible aspects that can be seen on the surface of culture, such as rituals, artifacts, and behaviors—and a *subjective* component—the internal, intangible aspects that are not seen but are under the surface of culture, such as values, beliefs, and attitudes (Triandis, 1972). The objective and subjective components of culture are inextricably intertwined, as the objective stem from the subjective. When interacting with those of another culture, it is essential to understand both the objective and subjective aspects of a cultural norm since it is both what we see, and what we don't see, that help us appreciate the complex web of culture but that can also lead us astray.

My afternoon with Yumiko and her mother helped me better understand the nature of gift giving in Japan and the cultural values, beliefs, and norms associated with it. As well, I gained an appreciation of the subtle interplay between objective and subjective culture, the contribution heightened emotions play in intercultural misunderstanding, and the ways in which one can easily become entangled in intercultural snares even while trying to build bridges to another culture. Decades after my misadventure in the café, I still tell my students the story of presents, pastries, and rain.

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Volunteering with Refugees: Experiences in a Formal Context

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Abstract: Faced with the global challenges of migration and the limits of institutional responses, volunteering plays a pivotal role in the reception and inclusion of refugees. This study presents the results of an exploratory qualitative research into the experiences of 30 volunteers engaged in formal refugee-support structures in French-speaking Switzerland (cantons of Vaud and Geneva). Participants, recruited through EVAM, the Hospice général, and the NELA association, were interviewed between September 2024 and January 2025. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the research examines volunteers' roles, challenges, and perspectives on inclusion.

Findings highlight the central function of volunteers as intercultural mediators, combining practical, administrative, linguistic, and emotional support. While their engagement fosters mutual learning and deep social bonds, volunteers face significant intercultural, emotional, and institutional challenges, including language barriers, bureaucratic obstacles, and the psychological toll of exposure to trauma. Despite limited institutional support and training, volunteers demonstrate resilience and commitment.

The study concludes with targeted recommendations: strengthening intercultural and emotional training, providing structured supervision and recognition mechanisms, improving institutional coordination, and promoting reciprocal participation from refugees. Volunteers emerge as indispensable actors in refugee inclusion—agents of solidarity who bridge systemic gaps and embody a human-centered approach to inclusion in French-speaking Switzerland.

Keywords: Volunteer, Refugees, Intercultural, Migration, Inclusion

Introduction

Migration is one of the most pressing global issues of our time (Stahl et al., 2024). Political crises, armed conflicts, and ethnic or religious persecution have led millions of people to seek refuge in third countries, often in precarious and underfunded reception contexts. Faced with the scale of these migratory flows, states and formal institutions are not always able to meet the complex needs of refugees. In this context, volunteers have played a crucial role in filling the gaps in institutional reception systems and contributing to the social, cultural, and sometimes even administrative integration of refugees (Benton & Newland, 2018).

Recent research has highlighted the diversity of forms of volunteer engagement, ranging from one-off material support to long-term, often emotional and symbolic support (Jensen & Kirchner, 2020). These commitments take place in a variety of settings, such as reception centers, associations, shelters, and schools, and are part of relational dynamics marked by interculturality and otherness. Through their actions, volunteers act as "bridges" or "cross-cutting facilitators" (Wise, 2009), crossing cultural, administrative, and social boundaries and helping to build the social ties that are essential for the inclusion and stability of societies.

However, while the contributions of volunteers to refugees have been documented, their own experiences remain relatively unexplored in the scientific literature. What motivates their commitment? How are volunteers perceived, and how do they perceive their role? What skills are mobilized or developed in this context? What lessons can they pass on from their experience?

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Few studies have focused on this topic in Switzerland. To date, we have identified three:

- Volunteering for refugees in Switzerland: Results of a representative study (DemoSCOPE, 2019);
- "The contribution of informal volunteering to the integration of immigrants" (Thorshaug, Müller & Studer, 2020);
- and the latest report from the "Observatory of Volunteering in Switzerland" (Fischer, Lamprecht & Stamm, 2025).

The first two studies mentioned are more than five years old. Nevertheless, the latest report from the Swiss Volunteer Observatory shows that foreigners living in Switzerland, including migrants and refugees, are very willing to become more involved in formal volunteering. It also highlights that volunteering can play a key role in the social inclusion of migrants and refugees by offering them opportunities to actively participate in society.

Furthermore, a representative survey conducted by Swiss Interchurch Aid (HEKS) reveals that 24% of the Swiss population has already volunteered to help refugees, and that 4% do so on a regular basis. The most common activities include providing daily support, helping with job or internship searches, and teaching a national language.

However, little mention is made of the intercultural dimension of volunteers' contributions. The only Swiss study on this subject is *Apport du bénévolat informel à l'intégration des immigrés* (Thorshaug, Müller & Studer, 2020), which addresses several aspects related to interculturality. In particular, it highlights the role of informal volunteering in the integration of immigrants, emphasizing that informal encounters and exchanges enable the transmission of knowledge about the host society, the establishment of contacts, and easier access to social participation.

The report emphasizes the importance of tandem relationships, in which an immigrant is accompanied by a volunteer, thus promoting direct intercultural interaction. These relationships enable newcomers to better understand Swiss mentalities and processes, while creating social ties that strengthen their integration. In this regard, we identify a gap in the research, as to our knowledge, no study in French-speaking Switzerland has yet examined the intercultural dimension of formal volunteer work with refugees.

Furthermore, in the academic world, the work of Kals & Strubel (2017) reminds us that the willingness to help others is often based on a broader perception of social justice, which includes refugees in its moral sphere. Furthermore, this experience of otherness, in a volunteer setting, can promote the development of intercultural skills, such as cognitive flexibility, empathy, and intercultural communication (Leung, Ang & Tan, 2014).

Our study proposes to analyze the experiences of volunteers working with refugees, paying particular attention to their role as intercultural mediators. The aim is to understand their initial motivations, the challenges they encounter, and the personal or professional transformations that this commitment can bring about.

The study thus aims to analyze the intercultural experiences of volunteers working in a formal setting to support refugees in French-speaking Switzerland. Using a qualitative approach, it seeks to better understand how intercultural interactions influence their role in promoting social inclusion. The study has the following objectives:

- Identify the main challenges related to intercultural situations encountered by volunteers in their support activities.
- Explore the motivations and representations of the role of volunteers, including how it is perceived in their social circle.

- Highlight the resources, knowledge, and skills mobilized or needed to navigate intercultural exchanges.
- Distinguish between positive and negative experiences in these exchanges and draw lessons for the future training and support of volunteers.
- Examine the role of volunteers as "*boundary spanners*," i.e., intercultural mediators who foster connections between refugees and the host society.
- Formulate concrete recommendations to improve practices and support mechanisms for volunteering in an intercultural context.

1. Definitions and theoretical framework

Understanding the nature of volunteering and its intercultural dimensions requires first clarifying the conceptual foundations that underpin this study.

Volunteering, as a multifaceted social phenomenon, encompasses a wide spectrum of activities and motivations — from structured commitments within formal organizations to spontaneous, person-to-person acts of solidarity. Each of these forms reflects different social logics, organizational contexts, and implications for both participants and beneficiaries.

Likewise, when volunteering takes place in intercultural or migration-related settings, it becomes an arena where cultural encounters, negotiations of meaning, and emotional exchanges are central. This theoretical framework therefore aims to define the key concepts mobilized in this study and to situate them within existing academic debates.

1.1. Formal and informal volunteering

Formal volunteering (sometimes referred to as organized volunteering) refers to unpaid, voluntary activity carried out within or through a structured organization (Lamprecht, Stam & Fischer, 2020). These organizations can be non-profit associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, public institutions (hospitals, schools, museums), religious groups, or sports/cultural clubs.

The key characteristics of formal volunteering are as follows:

- **Organizational framework:** The commitment takes place within a framework defined by an organization (Wilson, 2000). Volunteers contribute to the objectives and activities of this structure.
- **Structure and organization:** Tasks, schedules, and responsibilities are often defined, although they remain flexible. There may be a form of "moral contract" or even a formal contract, training opportunities, and supervision (Rochester et al., 2010).
- **Visibility and measurement:** this type of volunteering is more easily identifiable and measurable, which explains why it is often the focus of statistical surveys, such as those conducted by the Swiss Volunteer Observatory (Lamprecht, Stam & Fischer, 2020) or the DemoSCOPE study (2019) on engagement with refugees (which often takes place through associations).
- **Beneficiaries:** Beneficiaries may be members of the organization, third parties (service users, target audience), or the community in general.

For example, teaching language classes in an association that helps refugees, coaching in a sports club, helping to organize a charity event, or sitting on the board of a neighborhood association are all forms of formal volunteering.

The distinction with informal volunteering (or informal assistance, community volunteering) lies in the fact that the latter refers to unpaid assistance provided directly between individuals, outside of any structured organizational framework (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Hustinx et al., 2010). It is often based on interpersonal, neighborhood, or community relationships. The study by Thorshaug, Müller & Studer (2020) specifically highlights the importance of this informal volunteering (e.g., through tandems) for the inclusion of immigrants in Switzerland, as it facilitates the transfer of knowledge, the creation of contacts, and social participation.

The key characteristics of **informal volunteering** are as follows:

- No organizational framework: assistance is provided on a person-to-person basis, without the intermediary or structure of a formal organization.
- Spontaneity and flexibility: it is often spontaneous, less regular, and less structured than formal volunteering. It responds to specific needs or is part of mutual support relationships within a community.
- Interpersonal relationships: it is strongly rooted in social ties (neighborhood, friendship—outside of strict family obligations, community).
- Beneficiaries: Beneficiaries are typically neighbors, friends (in a context of immediate non-reciprocal assistance), acquaintances, or other members of the local community.

It should be noted that most academic definitions exclude help provided within one's own household (domestic tasks) or obligatory help to close relatives.

- Less visible: this type of volunteering is more difficult to quantify and is sometimes underestimated in official statistics, although its volume and social impact are considerable (Lamprecht, Stam & Fischer, 2020).

Examples include helping an elderly neighbor with shopping, occasionally babysitting for friends, helping a neighbor move house, offering informal language support to a newcomer (such as in a tandem arrangement not organized by an association), or participating in a spontaneous collective action in the community (e.g., an unorganized neighborhood clean-up).

The main distinction lies in the presence or absence of a formal organizational structure that oversees the volunteer activity. **Formal volunteering** is organized *by* or *through* an entity, while informal volunteering is direct assistance *between* individuals. Both forms are crucial to the social fabric, but respond to different logics and dynamics.

In this sense, and based on this distinction, **this study focuses exclusively on formal volunteering**, as organized by host structures such as the Hospice Général (Canton of Geneva), non-profit associations, and the Établissement Vaudois d'Accueil des Migrants (EVAM, Canton of Vaud).

1.2. Intercultural competence: definitions and challenges

When supporting refugees, volunteers are regularly confronted with situations of intercultural contact involving differences in language, values, social representations, and everyday practices. To understand the dynamics at work in these interactions, the concept of **intercultural competence** is an essential key to understanding.

According to **Deardorff (2006)**, intercultural competence can be defined as:

the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

It involves a combination of cognitive (understanding cultural differences), affective (empathy, openness), and behavioral (adaptation, active listening) dimensions.

From a European perspective, Davoine (2015) proposes a contextualized approach rooted in concrete interactions. He considers intercultural competence to be a dynamic process, shaped by social situations and reflective experiences. In line with this, Tian & McConachy (2022) highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity and meaning negotiation in intercultural communication, particularly in multicultural environments linked to migration. Apostolidou (2015), meanwhile, emphasizes the emotional impact of migration narratives in intercultural exchanges.

Thus, intercultural competence cannot be viewed as fixed knowledge: it is experienced, negotiated, and transformed through interactions. Klocke-Daffa and Hermeking (2022) highlight this dialogical dimension, pointing out that intercultural competence is co-constructed by interaction partners through dynamics of recognition, adjustment, and sometimes resistance.

This approach resonates particularly strongly in volunteer work with refugees, where interactions are often marked by urgency and vulnerability, but also by the co-construction of meaning within often asymmetrical relationships.

1.3. The role of cultural mediation by volunteers

The concept of *boundary spanner*, which can be translated as intercultural mediator or intercultural liaison officer, was first used in organizational sociology (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) to refer to individuals who connect different subcultures or levels within an organization. By extension, the term now refers to actors who are able to navigate between several social or cultural worlds, facilitating communication, mutual understanding, and the circulation of resources.

The introduction of this concept into the field of migration volunteering has raised semantic and symbolic questions. The literal translation as "border crosser" was perceived as problematic by several respondents because of its potentially negative connotations, referring to the world of smuggling or illegality. This reception highlights the fact that terminological choices are not neutral: they influence the way roles are perceived and recognized. From this perspective, the term "intercultural mediator" seems more appropriate, as it values the role played by volunteers and better reflects expectations in the field.

In this perspective, Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) explore the idea that cultural and linguistic skills can be valuable resources for ensuring this *boundary-spanning* role within multinational companies. Their study shows that these skills not only reduce organizational and cultural barriers, but also create new dynamics of cross-functional cooperation. Applied to the field of migration, this analysis highlights how individuals with diverse cultural and linguistic capital become key players in intercultural mediation, not only by translating languages, but also by interpreting the implicit norms and frames of reference on both sides.

In the field of migration, Wise (2009) introduces the notion of *cross-cutting enablers*, which can also be translated as intercultural mediators or cross-cutting facilitators, to describe individuals who play a crucial role in connecting culturally distant groups. These *transversal*

enablers are often volunteers, social workers, or even refugees themselves who, through their position as intermediaries, symbolically and practically translate each other's expectations, norms, and values.

Chen (2017) also develops the idea that volunteers can become intercultural bridges, creating *third spaces* conducive to exchange and transformation. Jensen & Kirchner (2020), in their study in Berlin and Copenhagen during the "refugee crisis," show how volunteers position themselves at the intersection between the host society and refugees. Their role goes far beyond simply providing material assistance: they become intercultural mediators, capable of building bridges where there are gaps in language, perception, or access to rights.

Askins (2015) and Artero (2023) agree with this perspective, emphasizing that volunteering is a space for active citizenship where volunteers experience new forms of solidarity, while being exposed to tensions related to institutional expectations and their own emotional limits.

The role of *boundary spanner* requires a high level of **intercultural competence**: it involves identifying potential misunderstandings, defusing them, and establishing inclusive modes of communication. As Leung, Ang & Tan (2014) point out, intercultural competence is not just an individual disposition, but a set of practices built through repeated and reflective experiences of cultural contact.

In the case of volunteers working with refugees, this competence is particularly evident in their ability to rephrase institutional expectations in language that is understandable to beneficiaries, to adapt their approach to cultural sensitivities, and to demonstrate relational flexibility. O'Dea et al. (2023) emphasize that these skills are often developed in the field, through trial and error, in close connection with the emotions experienced.

Interculturality is not limited to a cognitive framework, but is embodied in everyday gestures, shared emotions, and interpretive choices. Radford (2017) and Vescan et al. (2020) show the extent to which relationships between volunteers and refugees involve a co-construction of intercultural meaning, where each learns from the other, navigating tensions and convergences.

Finally, these dynamics are part of a broader systemic framework. Schmid et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of institutional recognition of the role of volunteers as intercultural facilitators, calling for better training and greater appreciation of their social function.

2. Methodology

This study is based on an exploratory qualitative approach, focusing on the experiences of volunteers involved in supporting refugees in French-speaking Switzerland. This approach is particularly relevant when seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of phenomena that are still poorly documented or complex, from an inductive perspective. As Creswell (2013) points out, the qualitative approach allows us to understand the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences, particularly in specific social contexts. Patton (2002) also emphasizes the value of qualitative exploration when it comes to understanding human dynamics rooted in experience. Finally, inductive data analysis, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), allows significant themes to emerge from the collected narratives, which is fully in line with the objectives of this exploratory research.

The research was initiated by the development of a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1), conducted in conjunction with an exploratory review of the relevant scientific literature via Swisscovery and Google Scholar on the role of volunteers in supporting refugees.

This guide was developed based on the work of David Bousquet, Veronika Cummings, and Judith M. Poersch as part of the *IncluKIT (Inclusive Intercultural Communication Kit)* project, as well as the *RAAS (Refugee Action and Support System)* project, which aims to support volunteers working with refugees. The latter was initiated by Katharina Lefringhausen.

The guide addressed the following topics: volunteer activities and difficulties encountered, motivations, perception of the role, available intercultural resources, significant intercultural experiences (positive and negative), and perceived contributions to the process of refugee inclusion.

A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers recruited mainly through two public inclusion support mechanisms, namely the Hospice Général in the canton of Geneva and the Établissement Vaudois d'Accueil des Migrants (EVAM) in the canton of Vaud. To this were added volunteers from the NELA association, also active in the canton of Vaud. This is therefore an opportunity sample—or convenience sample—which is a non-probability sampling method based on accessibility, geographical proximity, or availability of participants at the time of the research (Marshall, 1996; Etikan et al., 2016).

This method, frequently used in exploratory qualitative research, allows for rapid data collection, although it has certain limitations in terms of representativeness and generalizability of results. Nevertheless, it enabled us to gather a variety of experiences and contexts of engagement, and data saturation was achieved when the interviews began to produce redundant information, without the emergence of new significant themes, as advocated by Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) or by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014).

In addition, ethical considerations were respected during data collection. An ethical charter, signed by participants before each interview, guaranteed free and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality of the comments collected, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences for participation in the study (see the ethical charter in Appendix 2).

The interviews were conducted between September 20, 2024, and January 30, 2025 (i.e., over a period of approximately four months), either in person, by videoconference, or by telephone, depending on the preferences of the participant. The total duration of the 30 interviews was 1,442 minutes, or 24 hours, with an average duration per interview of 48 minutes.

All 30 interviews were transcribed using two software programs: Microsoft Word Transcriptions and PLAUD Transcriptions. The total number of pages in Microsoft Word is 517, or 17 pages per interview. The transcripts were then manually corrected for the first time on an ad hoc and arbitrary basis to verify their accuracy in relation to the interviewees' statements. Then, during the analysis, the interview text was corrected again on an ad hoc basis when significant discrepancies were identified between the statements and the transcripts. The names of the files containing each interview were anonymized before being imported into the analysis software. To respect the anonymity of the participants, excerpts from the testimonies are designated in this report by letters, for example AB.

Based on these transcripts, data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software according to a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was based on both an inductive reading of the interviews and an initial coding grid developed according to the research objectives. The themes were grouped into analytical categories (codes), allowing trends, tensions, and areas for improvement regarding the intercultural role of volunteers to emerge. Each code was precisely defined, accompanied by inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples extracted from the responses during an initial reading of the transcripts (see the list of code memos in Appendix 3). The initial list of themes and codes was adjusted iteratively as the transcripts were coded.

For the sake of conciseness, this report presents a selection of the most salient themes emerging from the analysis, without claiming to be exhaustive. Some themes have therefore been set aside (e.g., "Lessons learned by volunteers" or "Questions raised by volunteers") and will be the subject of further analysis. Due to the richness in terms of quality and volume of the data collected, this document constitutes an initial exploration. The following section presents the results organized according to the main themes selected.

3. Results

Beyond statistics, exploring volunteers' profiles offers a window into the social fabric of contemporary civic engagement. The data reveals recurring patterns in terms of gender, age, and education, yet these categories alone cannot capture the complexity of their motivations.

Many volunteers see their involvement as an extension of deeply held values: empathy, justice, and human dignity, while others approach it as a means of learning, sharing, and maintaining meaningful connections in later stages of life. Their engagement often reflects broader cultural norms surrounding solidarity, as well as generational differences in how individuals relate to social issues and diversity.

3.1. Who are the volunteers?

There is a diversity of profiles among volunteers involved in supporting refugees. Although common traits emerge, particularly in terms of gender, age group, and motivations, the results also highlight the wealth of personal and professional experiences that shape their commitment. Here is a summary of the main characteristics.

3.1.1. Diversity of demographic profiles

The volunteers surveyed are mainly women over the age of 45. The most represented age groups include people aged 60 to 70, which may be linked to increased availability during retirement. However, there is also male participation, particularly among men over the age of 60, as well as in younger age groups, between 30 and 35. The youngest volunteers, aged 25 to 35, represent a new generation that is sensitive to social issues, although they are very few in number.

Given the convenience sample used in this study, we cannot generalize these results. Nevertheless, they do allow us to identify a trend: the predominance of women aged 45 to 70 who volunteer to work with refugees.

This trend is also mentioned in several testimonials, which lament the lack of diversity in terms of gender and age among volunteers, particularly when it comes to supporting young Afghan men under the age of 30.

An excerpt from the responses illustrates this concern well:

"Most of us volunteers are women over 45, whereas some male refugees would often have more to learn and would feel more comfortable with men." (XA).

Another volunteer said:

"Sometimes, when I'm walking with him, this handsome 19-year-old, I think to myself that I'm 55 and he could easily be the age of my children. I wonder what people I don't know think, like the neighbors who don't know who he is. What is she doing with this young man who doesn't look like her child? I just ask myself the question, and then it passes." (AH).

It would be useful to explore further the question of which volunteer profiles (gender and age) are best suited to the specific needs of refugees. The data collected suggests that, in some

cases, pairing with a man of the same age or older promotes more harmonious inclusion. This type of sponsorship seems to offer a reassuring relational framework conducive to establishing lasting bonds. A more detailed analysis of these dynamics would make it possible to adjust pairing practices and enhance their effectiveness.

3.1.2. Varied educational backgrounds and career paths

Volunteers generally have a high level of education, ranging from doctorates to more technical or professional training in a variety of fields, including teaching, healthcare, law, administration, and the arts. This diversity of skills contributes to the multidimensional nature of the support offered.

For example, a volunteer whose relatives have expertise in human resources noted the positive impact of structured resumes for refugees:

"EVAM has effectively highlighted the skills acquired during their migration journey, which is essential for employers to understand the versatility of these skills." (AL).

Systematic lack of prior experience with refugees

Although some volunteers are aware of migration issues through their personal or professional backgrounds, this is not a prerequisite:

"I had no experience directly related to refugees, I learned on the job." (LA).

This observation highlights that volunteer engagement can arise from a variety of backgrounds.

3.1.3. Family support and personality traits

Volunteering is not only shaped by individual motivation but also by the social and emotional environments that sustain it. Family support and key personality traits such as empathy and open-mindedness emerge as crucial elements that enable volunteers to remain engaged over time.

Facilitating role of family support

The family environment is often mentioned as a factor that encourages volunteer involvement. Volunteers explain how their loved ones support their commitment, particularly in terms of time and resources.

A retired woman shares her experience:

"My children and my husband understand why I devote this energy to volunteer work, and that helps me persevere." (ZA).

Personality traits: empathy and open-mindedness

Empathy and listening skills are qualities that come up frequently in the interviews. One participant explains:

"Support requires a lot of patience and emotional adaptability." (IA).

However, some people reported moments of emotional exhaustion when faced with the upsetting stories shared:

"I have to learn to set emotional boundaries so I don't get overwhelmed." (AG).

Volunteers have a variety of backgrounds and skills

This exploration of the profiles of volunteers working with refugees reveals a wide diversity in terms of backgrounds and skills, while also highlighting certain constants, notably a high representation of women aged 45 and over. Although this trend may reflect the sociological reality of volunteering in Switzerland, it also raises questions about the diversity needed to best meet the specific needs of those being supported, particularly young male refugees.

The data suggests that more appropriate pairings—taking into account gender, age, or relational expectations—could promote more balanced and effective support dynamics.

Furthermore, the variety of professional and personal backgrounds shows that a lack of previous experience with refugees is not a barrier to volunteering. The key often lies in human qualities such as empathy, patience, and open-mindedness, supported by a favorable family environment.

3.2. Perceptions of the role of volunteers

Analysis of the responses reveals a predominance of positive perceptions of the role of volunteers, both among their close circle of friends and family and among their wider circle of acquaintances. This positive perception is generally accompanied by active or moral support, although there are some nuances in certain cases, particularly with regard to concerns about personal investment or social perceptions of involvement with refugees.

3.2.1. Perception by the circle of close friends and family

In most cases, volunteers' close friends and family express admiration and support for their commitment. This support is sometimes active, with volunteer work becoming fully integrated into family life, reinforcing its collective and rewarding nature.

Examples from verbatim quotes:

"The sponsorship I do with my godchild is really a family project. My husband, my children, and even my parents are actively involved. It creates a positive bond within the family." (IA).

Another volunteer recounts:

"I organized a raclette dinner for the volunteers and their families. My children and granddaughter were there, which shows that this commitment is an integral part of our family life." (FA).

However, in some cases, concerns about overinvestment or the risk of burnout are mentioned. These concerns are expressed by loved ones who support the values underlying volunteering, while questioning the personal implications for the volunteer:

"My husband and parents support what I do, but they remain a little cautious. They worry that I will burn out or that it will take too much time away from my family life." (IA).

One participant adds:

"Sometimes it feels like, 'Oh, another thing she's doing.' But I try to make sure it doesn't take away from my family time." (IA).

Overall, despite these concerns, the support of loved ones plays a fundamental role in the sustainability and success of volunteer work.

3.2.2. Perception by the wider circle of acquaintances

The perception of volunteers' wider circle of acquaintances is, in most cases, favorable, with reactions ranging from curiosity to admiration. This interest can even lead to additional

volunteer commitments: several respondents mentioned that their experience had inspired friends or acquaintances to get involved as well.

Examples from the verbatim interviews:

"I often share what I do on social media. This arouses curiosity and inspires my friends to get involved too, particularly in mentoring." (IA).

Another volunteer adds:

"My family and friends find it rewarding. They encourage me and understand that I'm doing this by choice." (FA).

Nevertheless, some volunteers report occasional misunderstandings or criticism, particularly when the social or political context surrounding the reception of refugees influences perceptions and when volunteering with refugees is seen by some as a controversial choice:

"I've had a few heated political discussions about migration. This doesn't directly concern my volunteer work, but it shows how sensitive this issue can be." (CA).

"Some people don't understand why I'm so involved. But most say that young migrants are lucky to have me, and that motivates me." (ZA).

In general, volunteers report an overall encouraging response from their wider circle of acquaintances, which can strengthen their motivation to continue their involvement.

Dealing with criticism and lack of prepared responses

The majority of volunteers surveyed say they do not have prepared responses to potential criticism of their involvement with refugees. However, this lack of preparation does not reflect a feeling of vulnerability or a lack of foresight. On the contrary, it seems to reflect a strong confidence in their choices, their abilities, and the legitimacy of their involvement. Volunteers seem to fully embrace their role and believe that they do not need to convince others of the rightness of their actions.

For example, the following testimony illustrates this point:

"I have never felt the need to prepare myself. I am very clear with myself about what I am doing and why I am doing it. If someone has an opposing view, I cut the discussion short, because it will not affect my commitment." (IA).

Another participant explains:

"I don't try to convince or argue with anyone. My commitment is enough for me, and I think everyone is free to have their own opinions." (CA).

Some volunteers mention that, even though they have not been confronted with direct criticism, they feel confident in their ability to respond calmly and firmly if such a situation were to arise:

"I've never had to deal with this type of situation. I'm pretty confident about it, so I'm not worried. I fully embrace my commitment." (ZA).

"I don't feel the need to convince people at all costs. For me, my volunteer work speaks for itself, and I have nothing to prove." (IA).

Thus, the perception of the role of volunteers is overwhelmingly positive, both among their close circle of friends and family and among their wider circle of acquaintances. Support from family and friends plays an essential role, allowing volunteers to maintain their commitment with peace of mind. However, there are some nuances, particularly in terms of misunderstandings or criticism regarding the time invested and the relevance of this commitment.

Faced with this potential criticism, the majority of volunteers demonstrate remarkable resilience, without feeling the need to prepare specific responses. It seems that the absence of

prepared responses does not reflect a lack of preparation or insecurity, but rather a strong confidence in their abilities and the legitimacy of their choice. This confident and assertive attitude allows them to focus their efforts on concrete actions, while avoiding fruitless or confrontational debates.

The ability of volunteers to manage tensions and integrate their commitment into their personal lives underscores the importance of their role in a society where multicultural inclusion remains a major challenge. Their commitment, both strategic and deeply human, embodies an essential dynamic for strengthening positive interactions and social cohesion in an increasingly pluralistic world.

3.3. Reasons for volunteering

Analysis of the responses highlights a wide variety of motivations and expectations among volunteers working with refugees. These motivations, although interconnected, can be grouped into a few main categories: altruism, the desire to take action against injustice, personal enrichment, the use of skills, and contextual or emotional triggers.

3.3.1. Volunteer motivations

Testimonies show how commitments arise at the intersection of personal values and upbringing, lived experiences of inequality, and transformative relationships and encounters, reinforced by an inclusive vision of society. Altruism, sensitivity to injustice, and civic responsibility recur alongside a search for meaning, cultural openness, and personal enrichment, with many volunteers mobilizing professional skills and responding to perceived institutional shortcomings, or simply to chance triggers. Together, these themes depict volunteering as a multidimensional practice shaped by empathy, context, and life trajectories rather than by cultural origin alone.

Cultural origins and motivation for engaging with refugees

Although the volunteers participating in this study are mainly of Swiss origin, some have personal or family ties to migration. However, analysis of the testimonies collected reveals that volunteer engagement cannot be reduced to a specific cultural affiliation. Rather, it stems from a combination of personal, relational, and contextual factors that shape individuals' motivations for working with refugees.

Rooted in personal experiences and education

Many of those interviewed associate their volunteering with values passed on within their families or through their education. The idea of solidarity, openness to others, and moral responsibility often manifests itself from childhood, as evidenced by this excerpt:

"I'm not a caregiver for nothing. I think it was still based on the idea of empathy." (AK).

These values resonate particularly strongly with people who have themselves experienced migration or been confronted with diverse social realities:

"I tell myself that I am very lucky to live in Switzerland [...] we have the right not to be selfish." (AG).

These accounts thus highlight a heightened awareness of global inequalities and a willingness to act according to one's own means.

The influence of relationships and encounters

Personal relationships forged with refugees appear to be powerful triggers for engagement. Whether through sponsorship, welcoming refugees into the home, or informal exchanges, these human encounters challenge initial perceptions:

"They immediately took him [the refugee they were supporting] into their arms, and now they call him Little Brother." (AE).

The accounts also show a strong receptivity to media reports, which reinforce identification and involvement:

"Every time we see [something about Afghanistan], we watch it, we read it." (AE).

An inclusive vision of society

Finally, some volunteers place their commitment in a broader historical and economic context, recognizing the role of migration in the construction of Swiss society, as illustrated in this example:

"Switzerland was built with the arrival of people from all over the world. [...] If it weren't for all those people, it wouldn't exist as it does today." (LA).

This perspective highlights a sense of civic solidarity based on the recognition of the interdependence of migration and collective prosperity.

In summary, although cultural origins may influence motivations and approaches to volunteering, engagement seems to be more determined by factors such as empathy, personal values, life experiences, and the desire to contribute to the inclusion of refugees.

Altruism and sensitivity to injustice

Altruism emerges as a central motivation, driven by a desire to share and be fair, and to give back what one has received. Far from being motivated solely by pity, volunteers affirm a universalist vision of solidarity:

"I love people, I love discovering others. [...] It's not a question of origin." (AE).

For many of them, giving is seen as a natural act when one enjoys favorable living conditions:

"If we can give something because we are fortunate [...] we can help other people who have had a hard time before. Yeah, it's an altruistic act, let's say." (AE).

Volunteers are thus motivated by a deep desire to help the most vulnerable people. This desire to take action is often coupled with a heightened awareness of global inequalities and the consequences of conflict.

"I've always told myself that with everything we have here, the least I can do is take small, concrete action to help victims of disasters or wars." (AG).

"I am sensitive to injustice. These people have experienced horrors, and here we are so protected. It was obvious to me that I had to do something." (AI).

"Faced with the realities they face, I couldn't remain passive." (AI).

Personal enrichment, search for meaning, and cultural openness

Beyond the desire to help, commitment is also driven by a need for meaning, particularly during periods of transition in life such as retirement, or by a search for cultural openness and discovery of others. Volunteering thus becomes a vehicle for personal transformation.

"When I retired, I wanted to use my time for something meaningful. By working with young refugees, I have found a mission after an active career." (ZA).

"Beyond helping others, I have learned a great deal: about cultures, migration journeys, and even about myself." (AL).

"I quickly realized that I wasn't just helping them, but that this experience was also giving me a lot." (AI).

"I have traveled extensively, and these experiences have opened my eyes to the needs of other cultures." (CA).

Leveraging skills

Several volunteers use their professional or personal skills (in the fields of health, law, education, etc.) in a concrete social service initiative.

"In my work as a psychiatric nurse, I came into contact with refugees. The lack of support available to them was a catalyst for me to look for something more concrete and humane." (AI).

"With my legal training, I became aware of the issues surrounding unaccompanied minors, and I wanted to go further in providing humane care for these young people." (CA).

Reaction to institutional shortcomings

Other volunteers express their commitment as a response to the perceived inadequacy of institutions. Their action is seen as a necessary complement to the shortcomings of the system.

"I see volunteering as a way to do what institutions fail to do." (AI).

Commitments initiated by chance or chance encounters

In some cases, commitment begins without a pre-established plan, but rather as a result of an unexpected trigger: an encounter, a news report, a conversation.

"I came across a young refugee in my neighborhood and it changed me." (AF).

3.3.2. Expectations of volunteering

The initial expectations of volunteers working with refugees vary between openness, adjustment, and learning. Most of those interviewed begin their commitment without any specific expectations, while others have structured ideas that evolve as they gain experience in the field. In all cases, a process of adaptation takes place.

Absence of defined expectations

Most volunteers are characterized by an attitude of openness, stating that they have no preconceived notions about their role or contribution.

"I wasn't expecting anything in particular, just to see how I could be useful to these young people. In the end, it was exactly what I was looking for, even though I didn't know I needed it." (AH).

"We didn't have high expectations, we just wanted to help and see where it would lead us. But it gave us much more than we expected." (AL).

Adjusting expectations in the field

For those who had a more precise idea of their role, the field often led to a redefinition of their expectations, which was generally perceived as positive.

"I thought I would be in a position of unilateral help, but I quickly realized that it was an exchange. These young people give me as much as I give them." (AI).

"I expected to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds and cultural needs. But I didn't expect to have my own way of thinking challenged." (AL).

Learning and transformation process

Adjusting expectations often goes hand in hand with learning about oneself, others, and the complexity of intercultural relationships.

"My expectations have evolved over time. I have a better understanding of their realities and their courage, and this has prompted me to redefine what I can offer them." (AI).

"The initial gap between what I imagined and reality did not disappoint me. On the contrary, it allowed me to better adjust to what they really expect from me." (ZA).

The motivations and expectations of volunteers working with refugees are varied and evolving. Between the desire to take action, the search for meaning, the mobilization of skills, and contextual triggers, these individual trajectories paint a rich picture, rooted in sincere and often transformative commitment. Their journey illustrates a dynamic of mutual exchange, at the heart of successful intercultural inclusion.

3.4. Who are the refugees?

Analysis of the responses provides a nuanced overview of the profiles of refugees supported by volunteers. This section highlights the diversity of their origins, migration paths, and life situations, as well as the challenges they face in terms of inclusion.

3.4.1. Diversity of origins and demographic profiles

The refugees encountered and supported by volunteers represent a mosaic of human stories shaped by displacement, resilience, and hope. Their backgrounds, ages, and personal trajectories reveal the complexity of contemporary migration flows and the diversity of those seeking safety and belonging.

Geographical origins

The refugees supported by volunteers come from a variety of countries, with a strong representation of Afghans, Eritreans, Syrians, and Ukrainians. These populations reflect geopolitical contexts marked by conflict, forced displacement, and violence.

For example, one volunteer shares:

"The vast majority are young Afghan men, but we also meet a few women and refugees from other countries." (IA).

Diversity of ages and profiles

Although the majority of refugees mentioned in the interviews are young men aged 18 to 25, the demographic spectrum also includes families, women, unaccompanied minors, and elderly people.

For example, one participant describes her experience with an Eritrean family she has been supporting for five years:

"They are a couple with three children whom we help with both their practical needs and their social integration." (ZA).

Furthermore, it seems that unaccompanied minors represent a particularly vulnerable population, requiring specific emotional and educational support. One volunteer explains:

"Some young people need time to spread their wings and develop their independence." (AH).

3.4.2. Diverse migration paths and statuses

Refugees' journeys are often marked by complex challenges, ranging from violence in their country of origin to prolonged and uncertain displacement.

For example, one volunteer recounts:

"I am supporting a young Afghan who lived in exile in Iran before arriving alone in Switzerland. His journey has been incredibly difficult." (CA).

Migration statuses

Refugees' statuses vary considerably, ranging from temporary residence permits to longer-term permits in Switzerland. These differences influence their access to resources, particularly in terms of housing, education, and employment.

It therefore appears that recent arrivals face different challenges than those who have been integrated for several years, particularly in terms of language proficiency and familiarity with administrative procedures.

3.4.3. Needs and vulnerabilities

Refugees face a combination of material, emotional, and financial challenges that deeply affect their integration process. Their needs go far beyond administrative support, encompassing the search for stability, belonging, and dignity in their new environment.

Material and practical needs

The primary needs of refugees mainly include access to stable housing, learning French, and access to professional opportunities. The Swiss labor market, which is often complex, represents an additional challenge.

For example, one volunteer mentions:

"Finding a job requires not only learning the language, but also understanding cultural codes and administrative procedures, which is often difficult." (IA).

Psychological vulnerabilities

The testimonies mention refugees who frequently exhibit emotional fragility due to trauma suffered during conflicts or their migration journey. These stressful situations affect their ability to fully integrate.

For example, one participant said:

"Some young people show signs of depression, particularly when they have no news of their families back home." (IA).

Financial challenges

The financial pressure of living in Switzerland while sometimes supporting their families in their countries of origin is another vulnerability.

One volunteer explains:

"Many send their entire salary to help their families, which limits their own stability here in Switzerland." (IA).

3.4.4. Cultural differences and integration challenges

Cultural and linguistic differences shape much of the refugee experience, influencing their adaptation to daily life in Switzerland. Navigating between traditions, beliefs, and new social norms requires constant dialogue and mutual learning, an effort in which volunteers play a crucial mediating role.

Cultural and religious aspects

Cultural differences are a major source of tension and learning for refugees and those accompanying them. Gender relations, religions, social customs, and modes of communication are areas where differences can pose challenges.

One volunteer mentions:

"Young Afghan men often have a protective attitude towards their sisters or mothers, which requires dialogue to explain gender equality in Switzerland." (AH).

Proficiency in French

Learning French is identified as an essential lever for the inclusion of refugees in French-speaking Switzerland. However, language proficiency is a significant challenge for those who have not had access to education before.

One volunteer explains:

"Some cannot read or write, even in their own language. This makes learning difficult but crucial." (ZA).

Volunteers often perceive cultural differences as both an asset and a source of frustration. One participant explains:

"Accepting their customs while familiarizing them with those of the host country is a delicate balance." (AG).

While refugees show resilience and adaptability, they still face significant cultural differences in terms of housing, language, employment, and mental health. The support offered by volunteers plays a critical role in their journey toward inclusion.

Volunteers' testimonials highlight the importance of taking into account refugees' personal backgrounds and cultural specificities, while promoting their autonomy and inclusion in Swiss society.

3.5. What do volunteers do? Activities and roles

Analysis of the responses reveals a wide variety of volunteer activities involving refugees. These activities are adaptive and versatile, aimed at meeting a range of needs, filling gaps in administrative systems, and bringing refugees closer to the host society. Depending on the profiles of the volunteers, their skills, and the contexts in which they work, common practices emerge, while leaving room for personalized commitments. Here is a summary of the main activities, functions, and associated issues.

3.5.1. Cultural mediation function

A central theme that emerges from the interviews is that of volunteers as intercultural mediators, or *boundary spanners* (Wise, 2009; Chen, 2017). Their commitment goes far beyond practical assistance: they translate the social norms, institutional expectations, and cultural codes of the host society, while taking into account the reference points of refugees. By acting as cultural bridges, they facilitate both mutual understanding and gradual empowerment.

This includes a contextualized approach to providing support with practical procedures and intercultural understanding, as well as raising awareness among both parties—refugees and Swiss residents—of each other's realities and values.

For example, one volunteer describes:

"In the context of sponsorship, there are often cultural misunderstandings, for example about gender roles. My role is to facilitate exchanges so that everyone understands each other's values and expectations." (ZA).

Two others explain:

"I spend a lot of time explaining local customs, such as respecting schedules or waste management, things that are trivial for us but confusing for them." (ZA & AG).

Volunteers also teach volunteers about respecting the resources made available to them. One volunteer illustrates this approach with the following example:

"A young man left the light on in the bathroom day and night. When we pointed this out to him, he replied, 'EVAM pays for it...' We then explained to him that EVAM was also us, with our taxes, who pay for it." (AB).

Support and explanation of procedures and social codes

Volunteers help refugees navigate complex administrative systems, while contextualizing procedures that can sometimes be abstract or implicit for new arrivals. The assistance goes beyond simply providing information: it includes explanations tailored to the realities experienced by refugees.

For example, one volunteer said:

"We helped him write his cover letter, decipher the professional jargon, and understand what companies here are looking for." (CA).

Volunteers also act as interpreters of cultural differences, which are often invisible but fundamental in everyday life. They help prevent misunderstandings and facilitate mutual understanding. Some testimonials illustrate the complexity of these adjustments:

"We know that these people have been through wars, made horrible journeys, and had terrible experiences. And they need to settle down. But then I think they need more information about Switzerland, about Swiss cultures, about how to behave. I am also not originally from Switzerland, and I considered myself polite, but I learned that in Switzerland you always have to say: 'hello,' 'please,' 'excuse me,' 'go ahead,' 'thank you,' '... whereas sometimes there are cultures that don't really have 'please,' for example." (HA).

"It's up to us to take a step towards him, and up to him to take a step towards us. Once again, that's what we said: we refuse to buy halal meat when he comes, but we buy meat—just not pork. It's up to him to know, not just with us, but for his inclusion here." (AE).

The volunteers do not aim solely to pass on practical knowledge: their support also seeks to promote the autonomy of refugees by encouraging them to make their own choices and actively integrate into their environment. Several testimonials illustrate this support:

"V. [the refugee] learned very quickly, and he did it all on his own. We tried to help him out with a friend... but he didn't need it, and he managed to motivate someone to take him on all by himself. That's great." (AE).

"I contacted his social worker in Sainte-Croix because this young man has an F permit, which is extremely complicated. And we still managed to get him started on an apprenticeship." (IA).

"He wanted to do something like Uber, and then we told him that it wasn't necessarily a good idea, that he should do an apprenticeship instead. We're not his parents, we're his godparents, giving him advice. We told him, 'It's better to do this now. If you really want to do Uber, you can do that too, but it won't get you very far.' So the idea is to guide him a little, to put him on the right track." (AE).

Social and cultural activities

Beyond practical needs, volunteers organize or participate in activities that promote social inclusion and cultural discovery, which are essential for combating isolation.

One volunteer shares her experience:

"I accompanied a group of young migrants to the theater and helped organize volleyball training sessions, a project that they then ran themselves." (IA).

Another participant recounts:

"We explained Swiss celebrations such as Christmas and National Day so that they could discover this social dimension of local culture." (AG).

These initiatives help to create moments of sharing that transcend cultural differences.

Intercultural adjustments

Volunteers often play a role in adjusting refugees' expectations to Swiss realities, while raising awareness among the local population of the richness and dignity of the values brought by these new arrivals.

One volunteer explains:

"Some young people think they can start working right away, as in other countries. I have to explain the Swiss education system to them, showing them the advantages of a long-term project." (IA).

Another insists:

"Cultural differences, for example in relation to time or gender roles, require time and dialogue to create common ground." (AH).

Overcoming the challenges of cultural mediation

Despite their indispensable role, volunteers report encountering various challenges, such as intercultural misunderstandings, language barriers, and emotional management in cases of depression or difficulties experienced by refugees.

For example, one volunteer mentions:

"Explaining how institutions work may seem trivial, but it requires a lot of patience to overcome differences in ways of thinking." (ZA).

Others say:

"When a refugee feels lost or depressed, I work with them to set concrete goals, such as obtaining a driver's license or pursuing an apprenticeship, so that they feel motivated again." (AG & AL).

We can see that volunteers, through their concrete actions and human interactions, embody intercultural mediation at the local level. Their commitment not only contributes to practical

support, but also to the creation of conditions conducive to respectful, conscious, and sustainable inclusion. Volunteers facilitate understanding of norms, help overcome cultural barriers, and support the empowerment of refugees in their new living environment.

The analysis reveals a remarkable convergence around the role of volunteers as "*boundary spanners*," or intercultural mediators, who play a crucial role in the process of including refugees.

Their work goes beyond practical assistance to include intercultural mediation and the prevention of interpersonal tensions, social education, moral support, and even monitoring to detect mental health issues early on and prevent them from escalating.

These efforts not only support refugees in their inclusion, but also create constructive links between the host society and new arrivals.

Cultural mediation and mutual learning

Volunteers thus play a key role in mediating between two worlds, facilitating mutual understanding of cultural values, norms, and behaviors. Their mission is not limited to imparting knowledge; it also involves a reciprocal exchange that allows both parties—refugees and locals—to enrich each other.

For example, one volunteer shares her experience:

"In the sponsor-mentee pairing, it's not just about helping refugees discover Swiss culture, but also about enabling the host family and relatives to discover the realities of migration. It becomes a mutual discovery." (IA).

Another volunteer emphasizes the importance of promoting integration while enabling refugees to better understand the norms and values of the host country:

"They must learn to understand our culture and our ways of life in order to fully integrate." (AL).

This effort to transmit culture helps reduce misunderstandings and enables refugees to gradually adapt to their new environment.

Moral support and proactive monitoring

The involvement of volunteers goes beyond administrative and educational tasks, as many of them provide psychological and moral support. Their role often includes proactive monitoring to detect and manage the emotional vulnerabilities of refugees, linked to trauma or frustrations related to inclusion.

Several testimonials refer to this monitoring role:

"Some of the young people I work with sometimes get depressed by the slow pace of administrative procedures. I help them set concrete goals, such as getting their driver's license, which gives them a little motivation and structure in their daily lives." (AG).

"When young people are not doing so well, I talk to them to identify their needs or connect them to the local medical network. This goes beyond standard support, but it is essential." (IA).

By creating a safe space and encouraging one-on-one interactions, volunteers help refugees build confidence and tackle the challenges of inclusion with greater peace of mind.

Understanding and managing cultural differences

Volunteers play a key role in deciphering the differences between the cultural practices of refugees and those of the host society, which are often a source of misunderstanding or tension. This sensitive work requires both intercultural education and the ability to adjust the expectations of both parties.

For example, one volunteer recounts a situation in which she had to intervene:

"Young refugees sometimes find it difficult to understand that, in order to find a job, they need to undergo long and structured training. In their country, small jobs are commonplace. It takes time to explain our system to them." (IA).

Another volunteer shares:

"The differences in the place of women in society are sometimes shocking to them. I take the time to explain that here, women can live alone, work, and be independent." (ZA).

These interactions not only educate refugees about the norms of the host society, but also help to adapt local perceptions to avoid a monolithic view of foreign cultures.

As one volunteer explains:

"We have to break down fixed representations, which are often the basis for misunderstandings on both sides." (IA).

Resolving tensions and adjustments

In some cases, volunteers act as intercultural mediators to resolve tensions between refugees, host families, or institutions. These interventions require a sensitive approach and a deep understanding of the values of the parties involved.

Several testimonials raise this point:

"When there are disagreements between a sponsoring family and a young migrant, I intervene to adjust cultural interpretations. Often, it is enough to help each party understand the other's perspective to resolve conflicts quickly." (IA).

"One young person needed to understand that sponsorship is an exchange based on mutual respect. These adjustments are crucial to avoid misunderstandings." (AH).

Collaboration with institutions and managing gaps

Despite their commitment, many volunteers mention the lack of resources or training to help them better understand the specific needs of refugees. This vulnerability calls for better collaboration with institutions to harmonize initiatives.

For example, one participant points out:

"We don't always have the tools to explain complex concepts such as rights or administrative procedures. Targeted training for volunteers could improve the impact of our actions." (FA).

Another participant shares:

"Some refugees find themselves caught between two worlds, without any structured support. I think that better coordination between associations and institutions would improve their inclusion." (ZA).

3.5.2. Administrative assistance and practical support

Still within the framework of building cultural bridges, one of the pillars of volunteer engagement is to support refugees in dealing with administrative systems that are perceived as complex, even intimidating.

For example, one volunteer explains:

"I help them with everything: writing their resumes, responding to administrative letters, and understanding their rights regarding permits and housing." (ZA).

Another volunteer shares:

"We went through his apprenticeship contract together so that he could understand his rights and obligations." (AG).

The role of volunteers is crucial in preventing refugees from becoming marginalized due to limited access to clear information or appropriate services, or even exposed to abuse.

In addition to their support in situations involving exploitation, particularly by unscrupulous employers, testimonials mention their direct intervention in cases of scams.

One volunteer recounts, for example:

"Last year, we had an experience with a whole wave of Turkish migrants. They had been contacted by someone claiming to be an employee of an insurance company, promising to help them find an apartment in exchange for taking out an insurance policy. More than 15 people signed up because they were staying in a collective center at the time. One of them told us about it, which allowed us to intervene. We managed to get the contracts canceled and their money refunded." (FA).

This example illustrates how volunteers act as complementary actors to institutions. Without their presence, it would have been very difficult for these refugees to know who to turn to or how to assert their rights. This type of intervention reinforces the role of volunteers as *"boundary spanners"*: bridges between worlds, who make practical and contextual knowledge accessible that is difficult for formal institutions to convey.

3.5.3. Language and educational support

French classes and educational support are a cornerstone of the volunteers' work, addressing one of the key needs for inclusion.

For example, one volunteer recounts:

"We have set up weekly French lessons with individual attention, tailored to their specific needs." (ZA).

Another volunteer recalls:

"I explained basic mathematical concepts that were essential for his learning, as he had never been taught these in his own country." (AL).

By combining their expertise or learning in the field, volunteers not only help develop essential practical skills, but also build refugees' confidence.

Volunteers as "boundary spanners": a central role in a pluralistic society

Volunteers engaged as *"boundary spanners"* embody an essential dynamic in the process of refugee inclusion. Their multifaceted work combines cultural mediation, psychological support, and social pedagogy to establish a balanced relationship between the host society and newcomers.

This role transforms not only the lives of refugees, but also those of the volunteers:

"We learn as much from them as they learn from us. These exchanges are not one-sided; they make us reflect on our own culture and values." (IA).

To reinforce this impact, it is essential to invest in volunteer training, provide them with appropriate resources, and promote better collaboration with institutions. As key players, volunteers are involved in building a pluralistic society, where interactions become a breeding ground for overcoming barriers and promoting sustainable inclusion.

3.6. Experiences ranging from positive to dramatic

The experiences of volunteers working with refugees range from deeply rewarding moments to emotionally intense or dramatic situations. These interactions reveal both the richness of human connection and the challenges of supporting vulnerable populations.

3.6.1. The richness of positive exchanges and shared humanity

The experiences of volunteers involved in supporting refugees highlight the richness and depth of intercultural exchanges. These relationships, although rooted in the formal framework of volunteering, often go far beyond this to become lasting, rewarding, and deeply enriching human bonds. A multitude of contexts and testimonials illustrate the positive dimension of this commitment.

Mutual enrichment and shared learning

A central theme in the testimonials is the idea of mutual enrichment. Volunteers report profound personal development thanks to their exposure to different cultures, values, and perspectives on life. This enrichment goes beyond simple cultural discovery to become a constructive questioning of their own reference points and prejudices. For example, one volunteer says:

"Very quickly, I realized that it was much more horizontal than that: he was helping me and also bringing me a lot." (BA).

In the same vein, other responses highlight the unique opportunity to reconsider one's own beliefs:

"It is by confronting our cultures, by truly sharing things, that we can challenge ourselves on cultural aspects." (AG).

For refugees, these exchanges represent an opportunity for mutual learning, ranging from acquiring language skills to gaining a better understanding of Swiss culture. Several volunteers mention the role these encounters play in the social and professional inclusion of refugees. These successes, experienced as shared victories, fuel the volunteers' sense of gratification:

"Extremely grateful young people tell me: 'I've found a new family, it saved me.'" (ZA).

Diversity of contexts and strength of the bonds created

These positive intercultural interactions occur in a wide variety of situations: language classes (JA), cultural and sporting activities (AI), shared meals (KA), festive celebrations (AG), and even shared moments of everyday life (AE). These varied contexts allow bonds to be formed that often transcend the initial framework of volunteering and evolve into friendships or quasi-family ties. One volunteer describes it this way:

"He has become like a big brother to my children. He calls me 'mom' in his dialect. There is something very solid and very positive about it." (IA).

In the same vein, another volunteer recounts an intimate and deeply rewarding experience:

"I was invited to their first wedding ceremony and saw all this cultural richness. They became my family of the heart." (ZA).

These experiences show that intercultural interactions foster mutual understanding and strong emotional bonds, contributing to lasting emotional and social inclusion.

Social recognition and broader impact

The positive impacts of volunteer work also extend beyond direct interactions with refugees. The involvement of volunteers' families (AE, AO) and society's recognition of their commitment demonstrate the broader impact of these initiatives. One volunteer emphasizes:

"This volunteer work is an incredible experience that brings me something meaningful for life." (AI).

Volunteer support therefore helps to strengthen a collective sense of solidarity and inclusion, reinforcing social cohesion in a broader context. The unanimous testimonials of

volunteers highlight the richness of intercultural exchanges as a driver of personal fulfillment and social transformation. Mutual learning, lasting friendships, and the feeling of contributing to a more humane and respectful inclusion are central elements that fuel the motivation of those involved in this work. These initiatives demonstrate the power of human encounters as a lever for building a more united and inclusive society.

3.6.2. Emotionally challenging or dramatic experiences

On the other hand, some situations prove to be extremely difficult due to the vulnerability of the beneficiaries or the events affecting them. These scenarios highlight the impact of international conflicts on refugees even after their arrival in Switzerland, as well as the intense emotional burden borne by volunteers. The feeling of powerlessness in the face of ongoing violence or the trauma experienced by those being supported is a recurring theme in the testimonies.

For example, one volunteer helplessly recounts the story of a young Afghan man:

"His life was threatened here in Switzerland, but so were the lives of his relatives who had stayed behind. He told me, 'If I don't do what they say, they'll kill my father. And the next day, he told me that the Taliban had killed his father because he hadn't sent any money. At that moment, I felt completely powerless; I had no idea what to do.'" (IA).

Volunteers sometimes find themselves in situations that are perceived as Kafkaesque or impossible to resolve. One volunteer described the helplessness she felt in the face of endless administrative procedures, particularly for family reunification, but also for departures.

"[I accompanied] a woman from Mongolia. She wanted to leave because her husband—who had brought her to Switzerland with their two children, one aged 10 and one a toddler—had left her. She wanted to return to Mongolia, and it was a struggle... She said to me: 'I don't understand. Those who want to stay are sent back. I want to go home, since my husband brought me [here] and then disappeared, and I don't want to stay in Switzerland. My parents are in Mongolia, I want to go home!' It was pretty tough. That's when I realized how much the administration simply lacked common sense. It confronted me [with this reality], making me realize that these refugees need support because no one is listening to them." (AD).

Administrative procedures are therefore often a major obstacle and a source of considerable frustration, both for refugees and for the volunteers who support them. The above testimony strikingly illustrates this complexity, which can sometimes reach absurd levels.

The case of this Mongolian woman, who faced significant bureaucratic difficulties in leaving Switzerland and returning to her country of origin after being abandoned by her husband, highlights an administrative rigidity perceived as a lack of "common sense." This situation, in which the person's desire to leave is thwarted by institutional obstacles—ironically contrasting with situations of forced return—underscores how procedures can seem disconnected from human realities and expressed individual needs.

These experiences generate incomprehension and feelings of powerlessness among those concerned, reinforcing the impression of an opaque system that does not "listen" to them. They also demonstrate the crucial need for support from third parties (volunteers, social workers) to navigate these administrative maze and assert individuals' rights or wishes in dealings with institutions.

Despite these difficulties, some volunteers find ways to support volunteers at critical moments, including through consultations with intercultural mediators or close emotional support. As this volunteer points out:

"I had to accept my limitations, make them clear, but still be there for him, without giving up." (IA).

These moments, although dramatic, reveal the resilience and solidarity that underpin volunteer work, while highlighting the need for psychological support and guidance for the volunteers themselves.

3.7. Intercultural challenges faced by volunteers

The intercultural challenges faced by volunteers range from simple cultural misunderstandings to more complex structural barriers. These difficulties highlight the complexity of the relationship between cultures and the need to develop adaptive skills and greater sensitivity.

3.7.1. Language barriers and intercultural communication

One obstacle frequently highlighted by volunteers is the language barrier, particularly when beneficiaries have a very low level of English, which hinders administrative procedures and complicates the creation of personalized relationships (LA, AG). These communication difficulties also arise in everyday situations where volunteers struggle to explain or convey essential concepts, such as Swiss timetables or local administrative procedures.

For example, one volunteer said:

"When the level of French is very low, it makes it really difficult to understand each other properly. It slows everything down..." (IA).

In addition to language, cultural differences also cause misunderstandings and miscommunications. These differences concern both the implicit expectations of the roles of the volunteer and the beneficiary.

"Some migrants expect their sponsor family to be like their family of origin, taking care of everything. For others, it is a strictly utilitarian role they are looking for. These differences force us to constantly adjust the way we do things." (IA).

The challenge is amplified by cultural differences in social codes and perceptions of politeness. For example, some refugees may hesitate to contradict or express their needs for fear of being disrespectful, which hinders fluid dialogue, as mentioned in the following testimonials:

"Some young people don't really dare to say what's wrong, out of respect or fear." (IA).

"I don't know him well enough; he's been with me for six months [a young refugee]. I wasn't sure if I could take him to the movies or the theater. So we tried the theater, but he didn't like it... So we tried the museum, but he didn't like that either." (AJ).

Time management is also a source of recurring misunderstandings: tardiness, missed appointments, or a flexible understanding of schedules impact interactions and cause frustration among volunteers.

"Their concept of punctuality is different; some arrive at appointments well after the scheduled time." (ZA).

Furthermore, differing expectations between migrants and volunteers complicate the relationship. Some refugees struggle to adapt to Swiss requirements, such as the need to complete training before entering the labor market:

"Some don't understand that in Switzerland you have to build a plan, get training, not just look for a small job right away." (IA).

3.7.2. When volunteering raises questions

Another cultural challenge mentioned in the responses is a certain mistrust of volunteers on the part of refugees. Although this is not a central theme, some excerpts suggest a difficulty in understanding selfless volunteerism.

Volunteers note a certain initial uncertainty in the support process, marked by a difficulty in clearly identifying the expectations of refugees. This uncertainty is illustrated in the following testimony:

"I don't know exactly what they expect. What do they really expect from this sponsorship? I don't know." (AL).

This uncertainty could reflect a latent mistrust or misunderstanding of the volunteers' motivations, particularly when volunteering is perceived as unusual or difficult to interpret in the cultural context of the people being supported.

Refugees' mistrust of volunteers does not appear as overt hostility, but rather as a silent distance, made up of unasked questions, perplexed looks, and implicit misunderstandings. It is not so much a questioning of the volunteers' personal, but rather a difficulty in understanding what they embody: a commitment without anything in return.

One testimony in particular illustrates this disconnect. A volunteer who accompanied Ukrainian refugees upon their arrival recounts:

"We really had to explain our role as volunteers to the Ukrainian people. They looked at us with great suspicion: 'Who are these people who come and talk to us like this, without being paid? They thought we might have been sent by politicians, or even that we were spies. We had to explain that we were there on our own initiative, just to support them. For some, it was unimaginable. A Ukrainian filmmaker, shocked by this reality, even decided to make a film about the volunteers in Geneva, because she couldn't believe that such a system could work.'" (EA).

This passage speaks volumes. It illustrates how, in certain cultures marked by different traditions of mutual aid, the very concept of volunteering can seem strange, even suspicious. Giving one's time without being paid, without official status, without tangible personal benefit, is not self-evident everywhere. What may seem obvious in Switzerland—citizen engagement—sometimes has to be explained, justified, and defended.

This is a paradox that few volunteers anticipate: having to defend the legitimacy of their own commitment. Yet this explanatory stance becomes crucial. It is an integral part of intercultural encounters. It allows us to set a clear framework, to reassure, to name what for others may remain vague or even disturbing.

From this perspective, volunteering itself becomes an intercultural object. It is not neutral ground, but a space charged with representations, norms, and sometimes misunderstandings. Recognizing this allows for a more accurate encounter and a trust that is built not on obvious facts, but on patient dialogue.

3.7.3. Differences in gender and social values

Sociocultural misunderstandings related to gender roles frequently appear in the testimonials. Volunteers note the reluctance of some refugees to accept norms of independence for women, as these can destabilize traditional representations in their own culture, as mentioned by this volunteer:

"At first, they couldn't believe that I lived alone and was independent." (ZA).

Tensions can also arise from issues such as wearing a veil. For example, the wife of an Afghan refugee whom I met during a support session refused to remove her veil to work, illustrating the difficulty of balancing religious or cultural values with Swiss professional expectations, as illustrated by this testimony:

"I also faced another problem. For example, the wife of the Afghan man I mentioned, who arrived two years ago: she could have had a job in a store, but she didn't want to remove her veil. [Consequence:] she didn't get the job. These are examples of specific difficulties. But otherwise, in general, I don't see many obstacles of this kind, because they are very keen to integrate." (ZA).

These differences in social codes are also reflected in the hierarchy of roles within refugee families. For example, testimonies report controlling behavior by male members towards women or girls, which can hinder their independence in administrative procedures or professional interactions.

The following testimony highlights the tensions between different representations of authority, education, and gender, while revealing the delicate position of volunteers, who must manage conflicts without always benefiting from a clear institutional framework:

"This summer, I organized outings for children, including a boy who had had a difficult life, without a mother, raised by his father. He hit a girl on the head. I tried to make him understand that this was not acceptable. The next day, he did it again, so I took him back to the shelter and deprived him of his outing, as I had told him I would do if he did it again. I wanted to talk to the father about it, but he refused to discuss it, denied the facts, accused the girl of making it up, and since then he has not spoken to me. However, he still allows me to bring things for his son." (HA).

Some refugee women show a marked preference for interacting with female professionals, which can complicate the organization of classes or appointments, particularly in a setting where gender diversity is the norm:

"There are many women who prefer to have a female teacher, for example for language classes." (JA).

Conflicts between cultural expectations and the realities of everyday life in Switzerland also emerge in testimonials relating to marriage. One case involves a young man whom the volunteer who gave the testimony considers to be well integrated, who married a woman who remained in his home country. Once in Switzerland, she found herself deeply out of step with her host society:

"He decided to marry a young Afghan woman who was still there. [...] We don't know for sure whether it was an arranged marriage or not. In any case, she came here, and things are going very badly. She had no idea what life would be like here. She doesn't want to learn French, doesn't want to work, and is very jealous, even of her husband's sponsor family. She is unhappy, isolated, and doesn't want to talk to anyone. She just goes to the mosque. There is a huge gap between what she imagined and reality. We are familiar with this situation, but there will be others, and we don't know what to do." (XA).

These testimonies highlight the complexity of gender dynamics in the context of migration and the impact of these cultural differences on social inclusion. They also underscore the often ambivalent role of volunteers, who, without specific intercultural training or a clear institutional framework, must navigate between respecting the values of the people they support and adapting to local norms.

3.7.4. Social pressures and past trauma

The psychological and social realities experienced by refugees profoundly influence their interactions with those supporting them. Trauma resulting from past violence, often amplified by current challenges such as financial pressures, creates extremely complex emotional situations.

For example, one volunteer recounts the helplessness of a young Afghan man whose obligation to send money to his family took precedence over any attempt at inclusion:

"He ate little, slept little, and saw absolutely no point in receiving psychological support." (IA).

These issues can also generate tensions within refugee communities themselves. Inter-ethnic or tribal conflicts, often carried over from countries of origin, sometimes continue in the host country, further complicating mediation efforts.

"There is a lot of inter-ethnic tension, and it's hard to manage." (AH).

Furthermore, excessive reserve, influenced by culture or mutual respect, prevents some young people from sharing their difficulties, requiring volunteers to take a cautious approach.

3.7.5. Logistical and organizational challenges

The practical challenges associated with cultural differences are particularly evident in organizational methods and priorities for action. For example, last-minute cancellations of appointments or last-minute adjustments to schedules are recurring issues mentioned by volunteers, as illustrated in this testimony:

"Sometimes they cancel at the last minute. Is this cultural or due to a lack of organization? It's hard to say." (AL).

Cultural differences relating to academic or professional requirements are also highlighted. Some refugees, due to interrupted schooling or a different education system, struggle to adapt to Swiss standards such as independent learning or proactive academic rigor, as illustrated by these testimonials:

"They are well looked after in terms of training at the reception school. After that, there is some tailor-made learning for those who have had little schooling. I learned this thanks to the support he [the refugee] received at the host school. He had a teacher who helped him a lot to [find/do] his apprenticeship." (FA).

"Because [we], since [elementary/primary school/school in Switzerland], have homework, we study in the evening. Without really noticing it, we acquire these habits, with varying degrees of rigor depending on the individual, but we have still learned 'how to learn' and how to study. The cultural difference [is that] he didn't have that learning experience; he left home at the age of 12." (AL).

Furthermore, as the volunteers point out, cultural differences can manifest themselves in concrete ways in the way refugee families arrange their private space, adapting their homes according to their own standards and priorities.

One illustration of this concerns the use of domestic space: a cultural practice such as gender separation may lead to the creation of separate living rooms for men and women, while the norms of the host society may prioritize differently, for example by assigning individual bedrooms to children.

This divergence in the organization of living spaces can lead to contrasting perceptions and misunderstandings among volunteers, as the following example shows:

"We have refugees in a residential center run by the Hospice Général, with families. When families get an apartment, they adapt it to their needs and culture. For example, as some cultures separate women from men, [one family] preferred to have two living rooms—one for

women and one for men. I found this completely normal, but one of my colleagues didn't understand why they didn't make an extra bedroom for the children instead. I thought this was a very good example [of cultural difference and perception]." (FA).

The decision to create two separate living rooms is perceived as "normal" by the volunteer who testified (suggesting an understanding or acceptance of this cultural logic), contrasting with the perspective of her colleague, who applies a different logic, potentially more focused on the individual needs of the children (an extra bedroom) according to the norms of the host society.

This difference in perception highlights how distinct cultural patterns influence not only the organization of living space but also the judgment made about these choices. The example thus underscores the importance for volunteers to understand and respect these differences in the use of private space, even when they diverge from local conventions, in order to promote respectful cohabitation and inclusion that takes cultural specificities into account.

Need for support in managing cultural diversity

These multiple challenges reinforce the need for increased assistance for volunteers, whether in the form of intercultural training, emotional support, or appropriate educational resources. Understanding cultural pitfalls in order to better adapt is essential, as one volunteer explains:

"Cultural diversity complicates inclusion. The further a culture is from our own, the more difficult integration is." (CA).

Volunteers express the need for greater coordination with institutional structures to navigate these differences. Dedicated intercultural modules or spaces could facilitate this transition, particularly in managing crucial aspects such as mental health, which is still taboo in many cultures (CA & JA).

Analysis of intercultural challenges highlights the complexity of interactions between refugees and volunteers. Language barriers, differences in values, the effects of past trauma, and interethnic conflicts all complicate adaptation and require rigorous preparation on the part of volunteers. Investing in intercultural training, providing collaborative spaces, and strengthening institutional resources will better support the diversity of refugees while helping volunteers navigate these multi-layered interactions. This requires a systemic approach, adapted to the cultural realities of the populations being welcomed.

3.8. Difficulties encountered by volunteers

Although extremely rewarding, supporting refugees comes with many constraints and difficulties for volunteers. Based on the testimonies analyzed, these difficulties revolve around five main areas: time management and organizational overload, complex relationships with institutions, emotional investment, intercultural and communication issues, and lack of resources and support. These challenges, which are often intertwined, highlight the deep commitment of volunteers but also the obstacles they face in carrying out their mission.

3.8.1. Time management and organizational overload

One of the major challenges reported by volunteers is time management. Many of them have to balance their commitment with their personal and professional responsibilities. This situation can lead to organizational overload, which is all the more significant given that certain volunteer activities, such as travel, meetings, and appointments with refugees, require constant adjustments to schedules.

"I do it when I have time, and as a result, all my spare moments are filled with it. Got five minutes? I send an email. Taking a break? I make a call. It can quickly become overwhelming." (IA).

This flexibility, which can sometimes be difficult to maintain, is compounded by the need for frequent and often time-consuming travel. For some, geographical distance is a major constraint, especially when the places where they volunteer are far from their homes.

"I don't live in Lausanne, and most of the activities take place there. It takes time to get there. It can be an hour there and back, and with already tight schedules, it's not easy." (IA).

Sometimes, these obligations even require adjustments to work or family schedules. Some volunteers dedicate part of their work breaks or take special leave to respond to the urgent needs of refugees.

"I sometimes take an hour or two off work to get to an appointment on time, or deal with important calls during my lunch break." (IA).

Planning certain activities is also complicated by last-minute cancellations, a frequent phenomenon linked either to unforeseen circumstances on the part of refugees or to differences in time management.

"Sometimes they cancel on the pretext that they are tired, or they forget about an appointment. This can be frustrating, because we have spent a long time planning for nothing." (AL).

3.8.2. Difficulties with institutions

As mentioned earlier from an intercultural perspective, interactions with Swiss institutions are also a source of frustration for many volunteers. These institutions, described as bureaucratic, impose administrative procedures that are often opaque and time-consuming. The language used in official letters is also problematic, demonstrating a lack of accessibility to non-initiates, whether they are refugees themselves or volunteers who wish to support them:

"Administrative letters are written in complicated technical language that even we volunteers find difficult to understand. Why not write more clearly instead of maintaining this administrative jargon?" (AG).

Many describe these experiences as Kafkaesque, a veritable institutional labyrinth in which disproportionate efforts must be made to resolve a situation or move a case forward.

"Sometimes you really have to fight to get things done. Public institutions are unreachable or incomprehensible, and it's demoralizing." (ZA).

In addition to administrative complexities, tensions sometimes arise between volunteers and social workers. Some volunteers feel mistrusted by social workers, who sometimes interpret volunteer support as an intrusion into their area of expertise.

"I sometimes feel that my presence bothers some social workers. Although I remind them that I am there to help and not to interfere with their work, it is difficult to achieve harmonious collaboration." (ZA).

3.8.3. Emotional investment and exhaustion

As mentioned in the subsection "Emotionally challenging or traumatic experiences," emotional investment is perhaps the most difficult challenge faced by volunteers. The stories of trauma experienced by refugees, combined with their current distress, plunge volunteers into a reality that is often difficult to bear. The emotional impact of these stories sometimes leaves volunteers feeling helpless or psychologically exhausted.

For example, one volunteer shares this experience:

"It's something I didn't expect: to suddenly be plunged into such dramatic realities. They often experience dramatic situations even here, and sometimes you feel completely overwhelmed." (IA).

Setting boundaries remains a delicate task for many volunteers. Some acknowledge that they tend to invest themselves beyond their capabilities, risking exhaustion and emotional overload.

"I invest a lot, sometimes too much, and those around me have noticed. It's a challenge to find the right balance between investing myself in what I do and not forgetting about myself." (IA).

This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the lack of resources to deal with these emotionally draining situations. Few organizations provide psychological support or debriefing spaces to allow volunteers to release this emotional burden.

"I sometimes lack the support I need to deal with emotionally difficult situations. We are left to deal with it all on our own, and it's not always easy to manage." (ZA).

3.8.4. Lack of resources and support

Another recurring challenge reported is the lack of resources and institutional support. Many volunteers complain about the lack of guidance to help them better navigate their responsibilities or address certain cultural aspects of the beneficiaries.

"The voluntary sector demands a lot, especially when it lacks resources: coordination, regular meetings, administrative tasks... It can sometimes be an unexpected investment." (IA).

The lack of initial training on intercultural issues or on managing distressing situations exacerbates these constraints. In addition, there are few mechanisms in place to give volunteers access to resources to facilitate their work with refugees.

Working with refugees is a meaningful activity, but one that involves a multitude of constraints. Work overload, institutional tensions, emotional investment, intercultural barriers, and lack of institutional support are major challenges for volunteers.

These difficulties call for measures to better supervise and support these individuals, whether through initial training, psychological support, or better coordination with institutions. Investing in these areas would help improve the volunteer experience while enhancing the quality and effectiveness of their support.

3.9. Necessary resources, knowledge, and skills

Supporting refugees in an intercultural context requires a variety of resources, knowledge, and skills. Analysis of the data collected highlights several key areas: specific training, access to contextual information, personal and professional experience, collaboration between volunteers, and unmet needs. These elements reflect the diversity of approaches used and the challenges encountered, but also some of the solutions developed to promote effective intercultural support.

3.9.1. Specific training and structured learning

Many volunteers emphasize the importance of specific training to acquire the tools they need for their missions. Some associations offer formal sessions on topics such as mentoring (ZA), conflict management (FA), professional integration (IA), and knowledge of administrative procedures related to migration (ZA, FA). These training courses help to demystify administrative topics such as types of permits, refugee rights, and reception facilities.

"The training on sponsorship was very useful. Learning about the differences between permits and the stages of family reunification gave me a better understanding of how to support them." (ZA).

However, some gaps remain. Specific training on intercultural issues, for example, is often lacking or limited, leaving volunteers unprepared to understand and adapt to cultural differences.

"I would like to have more training focused on the cultures of origin of refugees. Understanding their traditions or social codes could help me build a better relationship." (FA).

3.9.2. Access to contextual information

Access to reliable sources of information is essential for enriching understanding of the cultural and administrative realities of refugees. Some volunteers turn to resources offered by their associations (NA), such as cantonal guides or thematic libraries.

Others rely on online resources, specialized conferences, or cultural events such as film screenings or thematic workshops (AG, AL). Still others create their own resources, such as one volunteer who has developed a library on Afghanistan with more than 200 books. Volunteers also mention the positive impact of training on other cultures on their volunteer work.

"I took part in an evening event organized around a film about Afghanistan. Understanding the historical and cultural context of this country through testimonials and speakers has helped me a lot in my support work." (AG).

Sometimes, information comes directly from exchanges with beneficiaries. Listening to their stories gives volunteers a more authentic view of their culture and experiences.

"The young people I support teach me the most. It is through them that I discover their cultural reality and challenges." (IA).

However, unequal access to specific resources is a challenge. Many volunteers regret the lack of concrete support available to them and often have to search for information themselves.

"If I want to understand their culture, I have to do my own research, either on the Internet or by asking them directly. A thematic library would be really useful." (AH).

3.9.3. Personal experiences and skills mobilized

Volunteers' existing skills play a key role in their ability to meet the needs of refugees. Some adapt their professional expertise, whether in administration, teaching, psychology, or human resources.

"In my work, I have learned to deal with emotionally complicated situations. This helps me to remain humane and humble, even when the beneficiaries' stories are very difficult to hear." (IA).

These skills enable them to respond appropriately to complex situations and provide practical assistance with administrative procedures, job searches, or psychological trauma management.

The personal experiences of volunteers, such as trips to the refugees' countries of origin or early exposure to cultural diversity, are also often mentioned as an asset.

"Traveling since childhood has allowed me to understand cultural diversity and to view things with curiosity rather than judgment." (CA).

3.9.4. Collaboration and sharing experiences

Sharing experiences between volunteers is a crucial resource. Meetings, informal discussions, and gatherings organized by associations facilitate the exchange of strategies and knowledge. These collaborations help overcome intercultural challenges and find common solutions, as illustrated in this testimony:

"Meals or events organized by the association are a great opportunity to exchange with other volunteers and help each other with the difficulties encountered." (AH).

Some volunteers even go beyond the association framework by participating in inter-association networks or collaborating with NGOs such as Amnesty International, which broadens their understanding of global migration contexts, as mentioned by one volunteer:

"Participating in Amnesty events on tensions in the Middle East helps me to better understand the cultural context of the refugees I support." (AL).

3.9.5. Limited resources

Despite the diversity of resources mobilized, volunteers identify several shortcomings, particularly in terms of structured support, intercultural training, and emotional support. Many face a lack of formalization in the management of the psychological impacts related to their commitment.

"It would be really helpful to be able to share with supervisors or psychologists, because some situations are emotionally very difficult." (AH).

In terms of intercultural practices, there is still a strong need for better resources to anticipate misunderstandings or facilitate relationships. For example, many volunteers would like to have access to specific training to better understand the religions, value systems, or social codes specific to refugee cultures.

"There is a clear lack of intercultural training that would help us anticipate misunderstandings or adjust our behavior." (FA).

Finally, efforts to mobilize personal or institutional networks to compensate for certain shortcomings are significant but uneven. While some benefit from institutional support to find quick solutions, others find themselves isolated, dependent on their own initiative.

The resources, knowledge, and skills needed to effectively manage intercultural exchanges rely on a combination of specific training, access to structured information, collaboration between volunteers, and the mobilization of personal experiences.

However, there are still persistent needs in terms of intercultural training, psychological support, and access to appropriate documentary resources.

To ensure effective intercultural support, it is essential that associations strengthen these areas, while promoting the sharing of experiences and the initiatives of volunteers. This will enable them to provide both humane and appropriate assistance in a complex multicultural environment.

3.10. Disadvantages of inclusion: the need for a balanced approach

The inclusion of refugees in Switzerland gives rise to a variety of perceptions regarding its challenges and even its disadvantages. While perspectives vary between nuanced analyses and marked concerns, certain common themes emerge with particular force.

3.10.1. Fears related to cultural identity and social cohesion

A significant number of concerns relate to the impact of inclusion on the cultural identity and social cohesion of the host society. Several testimonies (AI, HA, LA, AC, AL, AN) express concerns about a possible loss of Swiss or local cultural identity, a fading of traditions, or a "cultural leveling" that is considered problematic.

These concerns reflect a tension between openness to others and the need to preserve the specific richness of the host culture. For example, one volunteer warns against the danger of *"losing our own culture by including others"* and insists on the need to preserve Swiss cultural specificities while welcoming new arrivals. Another voice raises the risk of identity withdrawal and the formation of ghettos (AI).

The verbatim quotes reveal:

"The disadvantage, as I said earlier, is that everyone's culture is important and must not be erased. [...] Including new cultures does not mean suppressing our own or erasing or leveling something in the cultural mix." (AL).

These concerns are sometimes counterbalanced by a more pragmatic view:

"Some cultures are more compatible with ours... it's legitimate to make a choice so that people coming from outside have a good chance of integrating." (AG).

Intercultural and communication difficulties (MA, XA, AF, AK, BA, DA, HA) are also cited as a source of friction, which can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and frustrations. Some testimonials refer to populations that

"hurt themselves because they don't do everything right in relation to us" (AE)

highlighting the risk of judgment and rejection based on perceived cultural or behavioral differences.

Specific concerns, although less widespread, also emerge, such as fears of a rise in religious fundamentalism (AJ), tensions between different refugee groups (EA), or concerns related to crime, such as drug trafficking (AD).

One testimony points to the aspect of going underground as a consequence of the rejection of refugees:

"(...) not everyone shares my opinion and can put obstacles in the way. [...] when they are outright rejected, they go underground. And then it's a bit of a mess." (AG).

3.10.2. Perceived socio-economic pressures and tensions

Economic and social concerns are frequently mentioned. Fears of economic imbalance or a burden on society are expressed (FA), particularly if inclusion is not successful, although the cost of inclusion is sometimes weighed against the long-term benefits (AH).

A recurring concern is the increased pressure on limited resources, whether social services, housing, or available "space," as expressed by one participant who questioned the long-term capacity to accommodate.

The perception of increased competition in the labor market is a potential source of social tension (FA, AO). One volunteer expressed concern that locals might feel aggrieved:

"The downside of inclusion is probably that some people will feel, 'Oh, they're refugees. They've taken my job...'" (AO).

This perception may be fueled by the professional difficulties encountered by some locals (IA) and the feeling of possible injustice or favoritism toward refugees.

The cost of integration and the challenges of providing appropriate training are also raised:

"These young people who want to work, or even refugees from other countries, they all want to work and in fact we should allow them to get training, to integrate them fully. So I think it costs money, that's clear." (AH).

The **socio-economic pressures faced by refugees, combined with** the complexity of individual situations and intercultural challenges, contribute to volunteer burnout and professional overload (e.g., social workers) (MA, XA, EA, GA).

The lack of resources or appropriate structures, such as French language learning for older youth (HA), as well as the potential isolation of refugees (particularly young people or those in rural areas, AH), are also identified as weaknesses in the inclusion system.

In summary, the analysis of the perceived disadvantages and challenges related to the inclusion of refugees highlights a series of complex and interconnected concerns.

These concerns relate to the preservation of cultural identity and social cohesion, socio-economic balance, and the capacity of the integration system itself.

It is important to note that these perceptions vary in intensity and that some testimonies (ZA, CA) offer a more positive or nuanced view, sometimes highlighting successful or easier inclusions depending on origin (CA).

Recognizing this diversity of viewpoints and taking into account the challenges identified are essential for developing balanced and effective inclusion strategies aimed at mitigating potential tensions and promoting coexistence that is beneficial to both refugees and the host society. At the same time, the lack of a unified vision highlights the need for further analysis of this issue.

3.11. Benefits of inclusion : social and economic value

Analysis of the interviews reveals a general consensus on the multiple benefits of including refugees in Switzerland, although certain nuances and challenges remain. These benefits fall into two main categories: economic contributions and social and cultural enrichment.

3.11.1. A substantial economic contribution

Many testimonials highlight the positive impact of refugee inclusion on the Swiss economy. Successful integration helps to address labor shortages in several sectors, particularly for certain technical, social, or manual jobs (XA, AF, AJ, IA). One participant in the study explains that young refugees "*want to work*" and could actively contribute to the financing of pensions, which is a key issue for Switzerland's socio-economic balance (IA).

The analysis goes further, emphasizing that this contribution is often a "*profitable long-term investment*" (AH), going beyond the immediate reduction of dependence on social assistance. Rapid inclusion transforms refugees into productive members of society, thus avoiding their isolation and marginalization. In this regard, one participant clearly states:

"If we don't try to include them, it can be problematic: isolation leads to the risk of things going wrong" (ZA).

A poignant example illustrates the tenacity of refugees at work and in their integration journey:

"A young Afghan woman, who arrived alone, learned French, obtained her Federal Certificate of Competence (FCC) and trained as a nursing assistant in six or seven years thanks to her determination and the support of an employer" (AH).

This testimony illustrates the benefits, both individual and collective, when adequate support is put in place for refugees.

3.11.2. Social and cultural enrichment

The testimonials show that the inclusion of refugees also brings a valuable social and cultural dimension to Swiss society. Several volunteers (MA, ZA, AK) emphasize the mutual enrichment that diversity brings, whether in terms of new perspectives, cultures, or traditions. One participant describes this diversity as a "*natural resource*" and "*enrichment of our cultural soil*" (IA, AG), while another sums it up as follows: "*It opens up other realities, other cultures, other foods*" (IA).

Diversity also promotes better intercultural understanding and open-mindedness within the host society. According to several testimonials, inclusion can catalyze a reassessment of stereotypes and prejudices, thereby helping to transform *the "negative image of migrants"* into a positive perception (AL). This dynamic is seen as essential for strengthening social cohesion and establishing peaceful dialogue between communities.

3.11.3. A win-win process for society and refugees

Inclusion is described by interviewees as a win-win approach, beneficial both to refugees themselves and to the community. By offering them opportunities, refugees can become active and productive members of society (CA, ZA), which benefits society as a whole.

One volunteer explains that inclusion is necessary not only to prevent refugees from becoming a "*social burden*" but also to enable them to flourish (FA).

Furthermore, this dynamic helps prevent extreme situations, such as poverty or violence, which are often caused by prolonged exclusion. One participant sums it up:

"Training people to enter the labor market is a win-win situation for everyone" (CA).

3.11.4. Challenges that cannot be ignored

Despite these advantages, some participants recognize the need for balanced and thoughtful management of migration flows. Poorly planned inclusion could fuel certain social or economic resistance (AC, AG). One volunteer points out that:

"residents' hostility towards refugees can complicate their integration" (AC).

In addition, the importance of enhanced psychological and social support is emphasized in order to prevent tensions from arising (AH).

In summary, the inclusion of refugees in Switzerland appears to offer multiple benefits, ranging from essential economic contributions to significant socio-cultural enrichment.

However, the success of this process requires strong political will, adequate resources, and social awareness. Inclusion is not only a moral duty, but also an essential lever for building a society that is both richer in human terms and stronger economically.

3.12. Recommendations for improving inclusion practices

The observations gathered from volunteers and participants in the study highlight innovative approaches, priority needs, and concrete levers for strengthening the inclusion of refugees in Switzerland.

The following section presents a summary of the recommendations made by the volunteers interviewed, articulating concrete proposals, examples from the interviews, and nuances to reflect the diversity of perspectives on improving the reception and inclusion of refugees.

The recommendations are structured at the end of the section in a table taking into account the different actors involved: volunteers, political and associative institutions, and refugees themselves.

3.12.1. Intercultural training: a priority for all stakeholders

The need to offer accessible intercultural training, both for refugees and their support workers, has emerged as a key element of sustainable inclusion. Such training would serve as a lever to promote better mutual understanding and reduce misunderstandings.

Training on specific cultural codes and practices

One volunteer emphasizes the importance of practical learning of cultural and linguistic codes to avoid misunderstandings: *"I use images and audio—because images speak to everyone, regardless of language"* (BA). This helps to create an accessible framework for inclusion, particularly for illiterate learners.

Making the realities of migration visible

Volunteers mention a better understanding of intercultural issues after watching documentaries on the geopolitical contexts of refugees' countries of origin, such as films about Afghanistan. These elements can be integrated into training courses: *"It provides an understanding that goes far beyond words."* (AG).

Although the training courses are widely acclaimed, some insist on the complementary nature of human encounters. As one volunteer explains:

"It is through direct dialogue with my Afghan mentee that I learn to understand his culture best." (AD).

3.12.2. Support for volunteers: towards better support

Volunteers play an essential role in supporting refugees, but several participants emphasize the need to improve their supervision so that they can act effectively and sustainably.

Supervision and managing emotional stress

One participant recommended regular meetings to share emotional challenges: *"It is essential to have spaces to share the sometimes traumatic stories we hear."* (IA).

Clarification of roles and responsibilities

The same volunteer recounts her difficult beginnings: *"I was very eager, but had no idea about the specific needs of refugees."* She offers detailed welcome guides to help new volunteers find their feet (IA).

Facilitating the exchange of best practices

Several participants suggest setting up seminars or resource kits. *"A kit containing successful experiences would help harmonize our approaches."* (BA).

However, some participants are wary of overly structured organization: *"We mustn't stifle volunteers' creativity and spontaneity by making processes too cumbersome"* (AL).

3.12.3. Valuing the contributions of refugees

Recognizing the talents and contributions of refugees seems to be a crucial lever for inclusion. This involves combating stereotypes and making concrete efforts to improve access to employment.

Highlighting the successes of refugees

One volunteer tells the story of a young Afghan man who, thanks to his internship in auto body repair, landed an apprenticeship: *"He integrated into the team thanks to his motivation and work ethic."* (ZA).

Recognition of foreign qualifications and training opportunities

Refugees often encounter administrative obstacles. One volunteer points out: *"All the jobs we target require a license to practice or recognition of qualifications, which is costly and not directly accessible."* (AD).

Although there are examples of individual success stories, volunteers point out that not all refugees will be able to integrate quickly. In fact, sometimes the process is either a clear failure or can take a very long time. According to some testimonials, despite the efforts of the state and volunteers, *"Trauma and language difficulties often slow down this process."* (FA).

3.12.4. Tailoring approaches to needs: customized inclusion

Testimonials emphasize the need to personalize support to respond to the specific contexts of refugees.

Taking cultural and religious differences into account.

For example, one volunteer explains how she adapts her French lessons for Muslim women: *"I make sure that there is no content that could offend their cultural sensibilities."* (BA). Another volunteer points out that he makes sure that conversations, including jokes, never have sexual connotations: *"This is essential so as not to hurt others"* (AA).

Support tailored to young refugees. For example, one volunteer mentions the importance of structures that promote peer-to-peer exchanges: *"I enrolled two young girls in sports activities, which transformed their relationship with their new life."* (ZA).

Although inclusion must be tailored to individuals, taking into account their differences but also their talents and achievements, some testimonials emphasize that excessive personalization risks reducing refugees solely to their origin.

It is therefore a question of finding a balance in order to help everyone find their place in society: *"We must be careful to consider refugees as unique individuals, and not reduce them to their origins."* (AH).

3.12.5. Strengthening civic and social participation

Successful inclusion goes beyond language learning and employment to engage refugees in enriching and rewarding social interactions.

Shared and inclusive spaces

The inclusion of refugees appears to be a two-way process, relying as much on the openness of the host society as on the gradual involvement of newcomers. Upon arrival, it is considered important to make refugees aware of the concept of volunteering in order to reduce misunderstandings and clarify expectations.

Then, once their situation has stabilized, these same refugees should be encouraged to become actively involved in community life.

This commitment can take various forms, ranging from sharing skills such as cooking, crafts, and languages. This prospect of future reciprocity, of giving and receiving, can foster a sense of belonging and strengthen ties with volunteers who are already involved. The recognition and gratitude expressed by beneficiaries can also play a key role, offering volunteers direct feedback that values and gives meaning to their investment.

In this dynamic, shared and inclusive spaces become privileged places for meeting and dialogue. Several participants highlight intercultural events, such as "the screening of a film about a culture very different from Swiss culture [which] enabled intergenerational exchanges between refugees and residents" (AG).

These initiatives promote better mutual understanding and show that concrete opportunities for encounter can transform perceptions. In the same vein, volunteers suggest: "We should organize campaigns to show their human and professional potential" (XA).

However, the limitations of these initiatives should be highlighted. A particularly sensitive point of tension lies in the moral distress that some volunteers may feel when faced with the sometimes strict contours of their role.

It is sometimes difficult for them to accept that they cannot get more involved, or even that they have to remain in the background, almost indifferent, in the face of the concrete and urgent needs expressed by refugees. This need to maintain a distance, to not "cross the line," is accompanied by a constant question: to what extent is their commitment compatible with the legal and ethical framework of volunteering?

For example, some volunteers express a desire to pay refugees for small jobs (such as chopping wood or running errands), or to offer them direct financial assistance to cover essential needs for their inclusion, such as training or obtaining a driver's license.

However, such an approach fundamentally deviates from the mission of volunteering, which is based on selfless commitment and not on a commercial relationship. Introducing some form of remuneration would blur the distinction between volunteering and paid employment, risk creating inequalities between refugees, generate internal tensions, and make it difficult for institutions to regulate this type of "exchange." ."

That is why we recommend encouraging a logic of reciprocity, formulated here as a "gift for gift" approach (Mauss, 2023), which makes it possible to value the commitment of refugees without falling into the pitfalls of monetization or direct assistance.

Finally, it appears that the effectiveness of many initiatives still relies heavily on the individual commitment of volunteers, which makes it difficult to roll them out on a wider scale and uncertain whether they can be sustained over time. As one participant put it: "Volunteering, although essential, remains a stopgap measure to compensate for institutional shortcomings" (IA). This remark highlights a crucial point: while volunteering is a valuable resource, it cannot replace the structural responsibilities of the state and institutions.

The need for a collective effort

The recommendations thus converge on the need for a collective effort involving the state, associations, and volunteers, centered on appropriate training (interculturality, psychological support), increased support for those involved, and approaches that are flexible enough to adapt to individual contexts.

The emphasis on recognition, valuing each contribution, and building coordinated and sustainable mechanisms reflects a consensus on what works, while incorporating the nuances and caveats raised by the testimonies. The central challenge remains to ensure that inclusion remains a human, flexible, and shared process.

Table 1: Recommendations for improving practices for the inclusion of refugees

<i>Actors</i>	<i>Key recommendations</i>	<i>Examples/Nuances from interviews</i>
<i>Volunteers</i>	Recognize and value their role	Volunteers are intercultural mediators, not "mere helpers."
	Create peer networks	Spaces for discussion, talking circles → "Sharing sometimes traumatic stories" (AI).
	Continuous training	Training in interculturality/trauma, visual/audio tools.
	Clarify roles and responsibilities	Required welcome guides or kits → "I was very eager, but had no idea what refugees needed" (IA).
	Set boundaries	Learn to say no, avoid emotional exhaustion.
<i>Institutions/policies</i>	Consultation programs and involvement	Include volunteers in consultations: involvement, listening, and public recognition of volunteers (certificates, events).
	Invest in training and psychological support	Continuing education, debriefing spaces with psychologists/mediators.
	Clarify access to resources	Welcome guides or kits needed → "I was very eager, but had no idea what refugees needed" (IA).
	Consistency of inclusion policies	Volunteering complements the state, but does not replace it.
<i>Refugees</i>	Raising awareness of volunteering	Explain the concept of volunteering upon arrival → reduces misunderstandings.
	Encourage reciprocity (gift/counter-gift)	Sharing skills (cooking, crafts, languages).
	Value and thank volunteers	Recognition from beneficiaries gives volunteers feedback.
	Get actively involved	Once they are settled, encourage them to get involved in associations or volunteer work.

Source: Nestea & Lambelet

4. Discussion: Volunteering as a lever for social change

This study highlights the essential but still under-recognized role of volunteers in the process of including refugees in French-speaking Switzerland.

Their position at the intersection between the institutional world and civil society places them as intercultural mediators, or "*boundary spanners*" (Williams, 2002), capable of translating, explaining, and providing daily support in contexts where state mechanisms show

their limitations. This role, which is central in Switzerland, resonates with several contemporary works on intercultural communication, civic engagement, migration policies, and perceptions of inclusion.

Intercultural training as a prerequisite for effective volunteering

One of the major findings of this research concerns the lack of specific training in interculturality, which is nevertheless essential for understanding and managing cultural differences, misunderstandings, and identity tensions. In this regard, the IncluKIT project by Bousquet, Cummings & Poersch (2021) provides valuable insight: it offers concrete educational tools designed to train volunteers in inclusive and appropriate communication from the moment they first meet volunteers.

This approach is consistent with the thinking of Davoine (2015), who views intercultural competence as a dynamic process that integrates knowledge, skills, and the ability to reflect on one's own cultural biases. In multicultural organizational environments, such as reception centers or refugee support associations, managing otherness becomes a strategic skill (Davoine, 2015).

In the Swiss context, where volunteers often have to explain implicit social norms (punctuality, waste sorting, gender roles), these skills are particularly crucial.

Volunteering as an identity and political commitment

The motivation of volunteers is not limited to humanitarian aid: many express a desire to give meaning to their commitment and to work towards a more just society. This is in line with Bousquet's (2019) interpretation of the militant action of citizens with immigrant backgrounds, who draw on their own experiences to transform their environment.

Even though the majority of volunteers in this study are not from immigrant backgrounds, their involvement reflects a broader political commitment: they implicitly challenge the shortcomings of the state and propose an alternative model of social cohesion based on solidarity and recognition of others.

Identity tensions and intercultural misunderstandings

Fieldwork reveals that some refugees view volunteer work with suspicion or incomprehension, particularly in cultures where unpaid work with no material reward is uncommon, or where forms of assistance are based on other social logic. This clash of perceptions is echoed in the analyses of Bousquet (2018), who shows how intercultural interactions are shaped by processes of identity negotiation.

In this context, Davoine (2015) emphasizes the importance of empathetic listening and awareness of implicit power dynamics in exchanges between people from different cultural backgrounds. Volunteers are therefore not just administrative or linguistic guides: they are actors in everyday micro-diplomacy, which requires patience, reformulation, and acceptance of misunderstanding as a starting point for dialogue.

A compensatory role in an ambivalent institutional system

Volunteers' recurring criticisms of bureaucracy (opacity, slowness, technical language) are part of a broader issue: the structural duality of Swiss migration policy, analyzed by D'Amato (2006, 2011, 2012). He emphasizes that Switzerland oscillates between symbolic closure (discourse on preserving identity, tightening asylum conditions) and pragmatic openness (economic needs, management of migration flows).

In this context, volunteers play a buffering role: they mitigate the symbolic violence of institutions, translate their requirements, and attempt to humanize a system that is often perceived as "Kafkaesque."

These informal functions are consistent with Davoine's (2015) observations on how non-institutional actors help maintain organizational coherence in complex multicultural contexts,

sometimes outside formal hierarchical channels. Volunteers fill the gray areas of inclusion, where public policies fail to create cohesion.

Perceived inclusion: between openness and fear of identity dilution

The ambivalence of representations of inclusion (recognized contributions *versus* fears about identity or the economy) also echoes D'Amato's (2008) analyses of the public construction of otherness in Switzerland. Fears of "cultural levelling," "ghettos," or pressure on resources reflect social resistance to inclusion, even though refugees are also perceived as a potential asset.

This is where the European comparative study by Genkova et al. (2024) provides additional insight: it shows that interculturality does not automatically reduce prejudice, and that the effectiveness of tools such as the *Cultural Intelligence Scale* varies depending on the context.

Moreover, Davoine (2015) emphasizes the need for intercultural initiatives to be locally rooted in order to avoid a universalist approach that is disconnected from social realities. In Switzerland, as elsewhere, inclusion policies must therefore be adapted to local realities and accompanied by a genuine strategy to combat hostile representations.

This research confirms the key role of volunteers as agents of inclusion, capable of compensating for certain structural shortcomings, but exposed to a significant emotional and organizational burden.

For their action to be sustainable, it must be thought of as a lever for social transformation in its own right, and not as a low-cost adjustment variable.

Conclusion: Multidimensional inclusion

This exploratory study, based on interviews with 30 volunteers working with refugees in French-speaking Switzerland, highlights the complexity and richness of their role, particularly as intercultural mediators or *boundary spanners*. The results confirm the crucial importance of volunteer engagement in a formal context, particularly through associations, to overcome the limitations of institutional systems and facilitate the social, administrative, and cultural inclusion of refugees.

The profiles of volunteers are varied, often experienced women but also men and younger people, motivated by a desire to take action, give meaning to their commitment, and mobilize their skills to support vulnerable people. Their interventions, ranging from administrative support to cultural mediation, give them a key position at the interface between refugees and the host society.

However, this commitment faces several challenges: language barriers, administrative complexity, the emotional burden of being exposed to stories of trauma, and a lack of specific training—particularly in intercultural issues—or structured institutional support. These factors undermine the sustainability of volunteer engagement.

Among the intercultural issues raised, volunteers sometimes mentioned a certain lack of understanding on the part of refugees regarding the nature of their commitment. In certain cultural contexts, volunteering without remuneration or compensation can be surprising or even cause mistrust. This misunderstanding, although occasional, can create a certain distance at the beginning of the relationship. This highlights the importance of taking the time to explain what volunteering is, particularly in a structured associative framework.

Raising awareness among those receiving support about this civic commitment not only reassures them, but also highlights the essential contribution volunteers make to a fairer society. Recognizing and publicizing this contribution promotes greater mutual understanding

and strengthens the foundations of an inclusive society that respects people regardless of their origins.

Perceptions of refugee inclusion also reveal tensions: while their economic and sociocultural contributions are recognized, fears remain about pressure on resources, social cohesion, and the preservation of identity markers. This calls for a balanced and contextualized approach to inclusion.

With this in mind, several recommendations emerge from the interviews. For volunteers, it is essential to better recognize and value their role, which goes far beyond that of "simple helpers" and is more akin to true intercultural mediation.

The development of peer networks, such as discussion groups, would provide them with spaces to share their experiences and recount the sometimes traumatic stories they encounter. Continuing education—in interculturality, trauma management, or the use of visual and audio tools—also appears necessary, as does clarification of roles and responsibilities through practical guides or kits, in order to prevent initial goodwill from being undermined by a lack of understanding of real needs. Finally, learning to set boundaries and say no is essential to preventing emotional exhaustion.

On the part of institutions and policymakers, it is important to create **consultation programs that directly involve volunteers**, publicly recognize their commitment (certificates, events), and invest more in their training as well as in psychological support and debriefing spaces. Providing clear resources such as welcome guides, procedures, and contacts would facilitate their work, while more consistent inclusion policies should emphasize that volunteering complements the work of the state without ever replacing it.

Finally, with regard to refugees themselves, it seems essential to raise their awareness of the meaning of volunteering as soon as they arrive, in order to reduce misunderstandings about this civic engagement. Encouraging forms of reciprocity, for example through the sharing of skills (language learning, cooking, crafts), can also reinforce a dynamic of balanced exchange. Recognition and gratitude expressed towards volunteers have a powerful effect in terms of valuing and encouraging them, while the gradual involvement of refugees, once they have settled, in community or volunteer activities could promote their inclusion and strengthen the social fabric.

Ultimately, this research highlights that while volunteers are essential agents of inclusion, their potential cannot be fully realized without increased institutional support and greater recognition of their complex role.

Investing in the training, supervision, and well-being of volunteers, while developing more coherent and interculturally sensitive inclusion policies, appears essential to building a truly inclusive host society that benefits both refugees and the community as a whole.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the volunteers who participated in this study. Without you, this work simply would not have been possible. You already give so much of yourselves—your time, your skills, your energy—to contribute to a more inclusive society, and yet you agreed to take part in this research. You responded with patience and intelligence to questions that were often repetitive and asked in French with a strong foreign accent. Your kindness and openness were as valuable as the data collected.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide



SIETAR SWITZERLAND
SCHWEIZ SUISSE SVIZZERA SVIZRA

Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research

Questionnaire for SIETAR Switzerland research project interviews Intercultural experiences of volunteers supporting refugees (with a focus on French-speaking Switzerland)

Preamble

Research context: The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the experiences of volunteers involved in refugee support activities. The results will serve as a basis for reflection aimed at formulating recommendations to improve volunteer training and support mechanisms with a view to promoting inclusion and facilitating the cultural inclusion process for refugees.

The following questions are intended to describe your experience. Their purpose is to understand your experiences, without making any value judgments. Therefore, none of the questions should be perceived as a "test." There are no right or wrong answers; we simply wish to gather a description of your experience as a volunteer.

Request for signature of an ethics charter in duplicate, one copy of which remains with the volunteer:

- **Confidentiality**
- **Anonymity / Use (publication)**
- **Authorization to record**
- **Option to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequences.**

Dimension	Themes	Questions: WHO, WHY, WHAT, HOW
1. BACKGROUND		<p>1.1. Could you briefly describe your volunteer experience?</p> <p>1.2. What is your educational background?</p>
2. VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES	Activity	<p>2.1. Could you describe your current volunteer activity? What do your current tasks involve in practical terms?</p>

		<p>2.2. In your case, what are the main differences between your expectations at the start of your activity and the reality of your experiences as a volunteer? Could you give three examples?</p>
	<p>Constraints</p>	<p>2.3. What are the main constraints you encounter in your volunteer work? Could you give one or two examples?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships with refugees? • Relationships with state institutions? • Organization of your activities? • Time and pace of activities? • Emotional investment? • Distance between your home and the volunteer location? • Schedule conflicts? <p>2.4. Could you specify any constraints related to intercultural aspects? Could you give one or two examples?</p> <p><i>(By cultural interactions, we mean all exchanges between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, aimed at overcoming the lack of knowledge of each other's cultural codes or norms. They focus on the relational dynamics between these groups, promoting mutual understanding, appreciation of different cultural perspectives, and effective communication across cultural boundaries, with the aim of developing authentic and respectful intercultural competence.)</i></p>
<p>3. WHY</p>	<p>Reasons</p>	<p>3.1. What are your reasons for volunteering? Are there any family stories or origins that might explain this?</p> <p>3.2. How is your role as a volunteer perceived by your immediate family?</p> <p>3.3. How is your role as a volunteer perceived by your wider circle of acquaintances?</p> <p>3.4. Do you have any prepared responses to protect yourself from overly strong opinions about your commitment to volunteering?</p>

4. WHO	Beneficiaries	<p>4.1. Who are the refugees you support? Can you give an example?</p> <p>4.2. Do you have a say in who you support? For example: women, young people?</p> <p>4.3. Do you have access to resources to learn about the cultural aspects of the countries of origin of the refugees you support?</p>
5. WHAT	Nature of intercultural exchanges/Needs	<p>5.1. Have you encountered situations marked by significant cultural differences? Can you give an example?</p> <p>5.2. Have you experienced or heard of conflicts arising from cultural differences between volunteers and refugees? Can you give an example?</p> <p>5.3. How do you react in situations involving significant cultural differences? Can you give an example of your behavior?</p> <p>5.4. Who decides how to resolve a situation of significant cultural conflict in such cases?</p> <p>5.5. What are your opinions regarding intercultural differences with refugees?</p> <p>5.6. Do you have any cultural boundaries or sensitivities that should not be crossed? For example, do you have difficulty accepting a dish that you don't like?</p>
6. HOW	Positive points/areas for improvement/	<p>6.1. What do you consider to be the positive intercultural experiences you have had as a volunteer? Can you give an example?</p> <p>6.2. What intercultural experiences have you had as a volunteer that went badly or left you feeling uncertain about how to perceive the situation? Can you give an example? For a negative intercultural experience:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think this happened? • How did you react? • How did the other party react? • Why do you think the other party reacted that way? • What could both sides have done differently to avoid/improve/reduce tensions? <p>6.3. What intercultural experiences have you had as a volunteer that went well, or for which you received positive feedback? Can you give an example?</p> <p>For a positive intercultural experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? • Why do you think it went well? • How did you react? • How did the other party react? • Why do you think the other party reacted that way? • Why do you think the interaction went well? <p>6.4. What resources did you have access to when you first started volunteering?</p> <p>6.5. What resources do you consult or have access to in order to manage intercultural exchanges (guides, networking with other volunteers, experience-sharing seminars, etc.)? Can you give an example?</p>
<p>7. IDEAL LESSONS LEARNED /</p>	<p>Personal learning experiences / Advantages-disadvantages</p>	<p>7.1. Have you had any intercultural exchange experiences that you think are relevant to share from the perspective of refugee inclusion? Can you give an example?</p> <p>7.2. In your opinion, do cultural differences play a role in the inclusion of refugee ? If so, how should these differences be taken into account?</p> <p>7.3. Do you think that the inclusion of refugees has advantages for the societies that welcome them? If so, what are they?</p>

		<p>7.4. Do you think that the inclusion of refugees has disadvantages for the societies that welcome them? If so, what are they?</p> <p>7.5. Is there anything else you would like to add about the inclusion of refugees that has not been covered in this interview?</p>
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Appendix 2: Ethical Charter



SIETAR SWITZERLAND
SCHWEIZ SUISSE SVIZZERA SVIZRA

Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research

Ethics Charter for the Study on Volunteering with Refugees

1. Confidentiality

We are committed to treating your responses as strictly confidential. All information you share will be protected and used solely for the purposes of this study.

2. Anonymity and Publication

Your data will be anonymized for any use or publication. This means that your identity will never be revealed in reports, articles, or other communications resulting from this study.

3. Recording Permission

To ensure the accuracy of the information collected, we may wish to record the interviews. However, this will only be done with your explicit prior consent. You will be informed before any recording takes place, and you will have the right to refuse or interrupt the recording at any time.

4. Right to Withdraw

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to provide a reason and without any consequences. Your withdrawal will in no way affect your future participation in other initiatives or services offered by our organization or our partners.

5. Two Copies

This charter is drawn up in two copies: one for you, the interviewee, and one for the researcher. This allows you to keep a copy for your personal reference and ensures complete transparency regarding your rights and our commitments.

Signature of Interviewee:

Date, place:

Signature:

Signature of researcher:

Date, place:

Signature:

Your participation is valuable and will help improve support mechanisms for volunteers and refugee integration processes.

APPENDIX 3: MAXQDA CODE MEMOS – VOLUNTEERS' EXPERIENCES IN SUPPORTING REFUGEES

Memo code: Volunteer activities

Definition

This code covers all passages where volunteers **describe the specific activities** they carry out as part of their commitment. This includes **tasks, missions, types of interactions**, the people they support, and the frequency and location of activities.

It refers to what **the person actually does** as a volunteer, beyond their motivations or perception of their role.

Inclusion criteria

- Description of specific tasks: teaching classes, accompanying people to appointments, organizing events, helping to fill out paperwork, etc.
- References to the types of interactions with beneficiaries: moral, administrative, logistical support.
- Details on the regularity or duration of activities: "I see them every Saturday," "it's been three years," etc.
- Mention of locations: home, associations, community centers, etc.

Exclusion criteria

- Elements relating solely to **the reasons for the commitment** (→ code under "Motivations")
- Elements related to **how others perceive** the role (→ "Perceptions of the role of volunteer")
- Reflections on **intercultural or relational challenges** (→ "Intercultural challenges")
- Purely biographical information unrelated to the specific activity (→ code according to relevance, or do not code)

Typical examples

- "I go to their house once a week to help them with their French homework."
- "I accompany them to their doctor's appointments or to the town hall."
- "I liaise with the school and sometimes talk to the teachers when there is a problem."
- "I found them furniture and helped them move into their apartment."

Code: Who are refugees?

Definition

This code includes all excerpts in which interviewees **describe or mention the characteristics of the refugees** they accompany or interact with in their volunteer work. This may include **objective information (origin, age, status)** as well as **representations, perceptions, or generalizations** about them.

This code helps to identify **how volunteers perceive refugees**: who they are, where they come from, what their living situations are like, what their needs are, and how they are perceived to behave.

Inclusion criteria

- Geographical or cultural origins: "They mainly come from Afghanistan or Syria."

- Mentioned migration status: "They are in the process," "they have just arrived," etc.
- Social realities: age, family situation, level of education, language skills, health status.
- Elements of their migration journey or flight context.
- Representations expressed by volunteers: "They are often very dignified people despite everything," "they are very motivated to learn," etc.

Exclusion criteria

- Descriptions of volunteer activities (→ code under "Volunteer activities")
- Comments focused on the **volunteer's personal motivations** (→ "Motivations")
- Reflections on the **difficulties of intercultural relations** (→ "Intercultural challenges")
- Reactions or judgments of others about the volunteer's commitment (→ "Representations of the volunteer role")

Examples

- "They are mostly young men, most of them between the ages of 18 and 25."
- "They came without their families; they are alone here."
- "They have often experienced very difficult situations in their country or on the road."
- "Women are often less visible, but there are also some who are very committed."
- "They don't speak French very well at first, so it's complicated."

Code: Who are the volunteers?

Definition:

** This code groups together all the information needed to draw up a **sociodemographic, personal, identity, and educational profile** of the volunteers interviewed. This includes the elements mentioned in their responses, **as well as metadata from the document name** (for example, gender and age group indicated in titles such as 10_F_50-55 or 26_M_30-35).

Inclusion criteria:

- **Gender and age group**, deduced from the file name.
- **Autobiographical and identity** information shared by volunteers:
 - Cultural or national origins.
 - Family situation (e.g., parent, single, married, etc.).
 - Personal characteristics or personality traits (e.g., hypersensitivity, empathy, need for reparation, etc.).
 - Life history or significant events influencing commitment.
- Current or previous **professional situation**.
- **Initial or continuing education**:
 - Studies completed or abandoned.
 - Professional or community training.
 - Qualifications related or unrelated to their volunteer role.

Exclusion criteria:

- Specific **motivations** for their volunteer work (see *Motivations* code).
- The **specific roles and tasks** performed as part of their volunteer work (see code *Volunteer Activities*).

- **Social representations** of the volunteer role by others (see code *Representations of the volunteer role*).
- Elements concerning the **people supported** or benefiting from volunteering (see code *Who are the refugees*).

Code memo: Disadvantages of inclusion

Definition

This code groups together passages in which participants express **reservations, fears, or negative perceptions** related to the inclusion of refugees in the host society. These may include perceived risks to cultural identity, social cohesion, economic resources, or other forms of potential tension.

Inclusion criteria

- Reflections on a **possible loss of national cultural identity** or **erosion of local traditions** due to the integration of refugees.
- Fears of **cultural leveling** or homogenization deemed problematic.
- Perception that inclusion could lead to **social divisions, conflicts of values, or communitarianism**.
- Mention of **economic or structural imbalances** attributed to the arrival or integration of refugees.
- Discourse emphasizing the **need to preserve** local culture, norms, or reference points in the face of otherness.

Exclusion criteria

- Passages that value cultural diversity without mentioning any disadvantages.
- Expressions of personal discomfort without a direct link to the idea of a negative effect on **society as a whole**.
- Criticisms of inclusion that relate solely to **institutional or political** problems without mentioning any perceived social or cultural impact.

Example

"Switzerland must preserve its culture. It can include other cultures, but it mustn't change everything around that culture. [...] Including new cultures doesn't mean eliminating our own [...] Perhaps that's the danger of including too much: losing our own culture."

Code memo: Advantages of inclusion

Definition

This code groups together passages in which participants mention the **perceived benefits** of including refugees in the host society. These are positive contributions in **economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian** terms, as perceived or experienced by the respondents.

Inclusion criteria

- Mention of potential **economic gains**, such as **addressing labor shortages, contributing to the labor market, or reducing dependence on social assistance**.
- Emphasis on **social benefits**, such as **reducing marginalization, preventing exclusion or poverty, and strengthening social cohesion**.
- Cultural or human contributions related to inclusion, such as **mutual enrichment, intercultural openness, or diversity of perspectives**.
- The idea of a **win-win** process, in which inclusion is seen as beneficial for both refugees and the host society.

Exclusion criteria

- Benefits mentioned only for refugees without any explicit link to positive effects for the host society.

- Abstract or general responses that do not include **concrete reasoning or examples**.
- Exclusively humanitarian or moral discourse without mention of **benefits for the host society**.

Example

"I think that the sooner we include people, the better they will be able to participate in society. [...] It would also provide labor, because we always say that we shouldn't give jobs to foreigners, but in reality there are many jobs where there is a labor shortage in Switzerland."

Code memo: Verbatim examples

Definition

This code groups together **concrete, striking, or illustrative stories** shared by participants, highlighting **situations of intercultural differences** encountered in the context of supporting refugees. These verbatim accounts often illustrate **cultural misunderstandings, differences in reference points, or mutual surprises**, and bring to life the intercultural dynamics mentioned in the analysis.

Inclusion criteria

- Narrative of a **specific event or interaction** between the volunteer and the refugee, revealing a significant cultural difference.
- Concrete examples of **cultural misunderstandings, mutual discoveries, or intercultural learning situations**.
- Situations may relate to **holidays, customs, behaviors, social norms, eating habits, religious calendars, etc.**

Exclusion criteria

- General reflections on interculturality without reference to a real example or situation.
- Vague references without mention of context or specific dialogue.
- Testimonials that are more **abstract analysis** than **real-life accounts**.

Example

"He saw, um, fireworks. He wondered what they were. And then it turned out to be August 1. He had no idea what it was, so I explained it to him. He doesn't know what Christmas is either. I explained to him that we celebrate the birth of Jesus, and then I told him a little bit, very vaguely, about our public holidays."

Code memo: Difficulties and constraints of volunteering

Definition

This code groups together elements of the participants' discourse in which they express the **obstacles, limitations, frustrations, or concrete challenges** they encounter in their volunteer work with refugees. These constraints can be **practical, relational, institutional, emotional, or organizational** in nature.

Inclusion criteria

- Explicit mention of **time issues** (availability, workload, pace, overlaps, travel).
- Problems related to **linguistic communication** (language barriers, misunderstandings).
- Difficulties with **state or administrative institutions** (complexity, slowness, inaccessibility).
- Feelings of **frustration, fatigue, emotional exhaustion**, or overload related to personal investment.

- Constraints related to the **management of activities** or the **functioning of associations**.
- Tensions or misunderstandings in **relationships with refugees**.
- References to **specific situations illustrating** one of these points.

Exclusion criteria

- General comments on volunteering without mention of constraints or difficulties.
- Positive reflections or fluid descriptions of the commitment.
- Challenges perceived solely from the perspective of refugees (to be coded elsewhere if relevant).

Examples

"I would say mainly in terms of time management. And then travel time, because I don't live in Lausanne."

"When your French is very poor, it makes it difficult to understand each other properly."

"I have to fight a bit to get things done with the institutions."

"I invested a lot, a lot, a lot of time in my godchild. It took up a lot of my time."

"Institutions are unreachable or incomprehensible... it's a bit Kafkaesque."

"There are issues with punctuality."

Code memo: Questions from volunteers

Definition

This code covers instances where volunteers express **doubts, uncertainties, questions, or personal reflections** about their role, the expectations of refugees, the nature of the sponsorship relationship, or the real impact of their commitment.

Inclusion criteria

- Doubts about the **expectations or needs of refugees**.
- Questions about the **relevance or usefulness** of their actions.
- Uncertainty about their **personal or relational position** in the support process.
- Reflections on the **framework, objectives, or limits** of their commitment.
- Questions about **changes in the pace, availability, or interest** of the person being supported.

Exclusion criteria

- Descriptive accounts with no trace of questioning or doubt.
- Reflections focused on practical difficulties (to be coded under "Volunteering constraints").
- Evaluations or observations made without any questioning or reflection.

Examples

"I don't know exactly what they expect."

"What do they really expect from this sponsorship? I don't know."

"I find it hard to know if what I'm doing is useful."

"We don't always know where to draw the line."

Potential links to other codes

- *Difficulties and constraints of volunteering* (when questions are triggered by concrete obstacles).
- *Relationships with refugees*.
- *Motivations/questioning of commitment*.
- *Evolution of the volunteer-refugee relationship*.

Code memo: Gap between expectations and reality

Definition

This code groups together passages in which volunteers **retrospectively compare their initial expectations with the reality of their commitment**. These may include **similarities, surprises, disappointments, or changes in perception** related to the actual experience of volunteering.

Inclusion criteria

- Explicit references to **initial expectations**, even if vague or non-existent.
- Comparisons between what they **imagined or anticipated** and what they **actually experienced**.
- Reflections on **discrepancies, adjustments, or confirmations** of their representations.
- References to **changes in their attitude or understanding** of volunteering.

Exclusion criteria

- Reflections on surprising elements not explicitly linked to prior expectations.
- Observations on the reality of volunteering without mention of the initial expectations.
- Testimonials focused solely on motivations (to be coded elsewhere if relevant).

Examples

"I didn't expect to get so involved, but I'm doing it willingly."

"I wasn't sure what to expect... I was a little afraid of not knowing what to talk about with the volunteers."

"Actually, we didn't really have any expectations, we just went with the flow."

"I thought it would be more structured. In reality, it's very informal."

Possible nuances

- **No expectations:** Some testimonials express an initial openness or uncertainty.
- **Confirmation of expectations:** When volunteers find that the experience matches what they hoped for.
- **Positive gap:** The experience turns out to be more rewarding, intense, or engaging than expected.
- **Negative gap:** Frustration, difficulties, or feeling unprepared.

Potential links to other codes

- *Initial motivations*
- *Surprises or unforeseen events*
- *Evolution of commitment*
- *Volunteer attitude*
- *Questions from volunteers*

Code memo: Lessons learned

Definition

This code includes excerpts where volunteers express **lessons learned from their experience, insights, or changes in perspective** resulting from their engagement with refugees. These lessons may be personal, intercultural, social, or institutional in nature.

Inclusion criteria

- Reflections on **redefined personal boundaries, clarified values, or greater self-awareness**.
- Awareness of **intercultural dynamics, gender relations, or social functioning**.
- Recognition of **the supplementary role of volunteering** in relation to institutions.

- Reflections on **practical learning** or **behavioral adjustments** in response to certain cultural realities.
- Development of a **critical view** of reception systems or inequalities.

Exclusion criteria

- Descriptions of facts or observations without reflective distance or awareness.
- Testimonials expressing only emotions or feelings without linking them to learning.
- Generalities unrelated to personal volunteer experience.

Typical examples

"I'm going to set my own limits by saying: I don't work that way... but I'm not going to try to change the other person."

"What I take away from this is that we are doing the work that institutions should be doing."

"We've noticed that certain interactions are easier depending on gender, because of cultural norms."

Possible nuances

- **Personal learning:** rediscovering one's own values, reactions, or attitude in intercultural situations.
- **Practical lessons:** concrete adaptations in interactions (e.g., who should knock on the door, how to broach a subject).
- **Structural learning:** awareness of the role of volunteering in filling institutional gaps.

Potential links with other codes

- *Volunteer attitude*
- *Difficulties and constraints*
- *Questions from volunteers*
- *Intercultural practices*
- *Evolution of engagement*

Code memo: Recommendations for improving practices for the inclusion of refugees

Definition

This code brings together **suggestions, concrete proposals, and critical reflections** formulated by participants with a view to improving policies, social practices, and concrete measures for the inclusion of refugees in the host society.

Inclusion criteria

- Explicit or implicit proposals aimed at **strengthening the integration** of refugees.
- Recommendations concerning **intercultural relations, gender dynamics, socialization spaces, and institutional mechanisms**.
- Reflections encouraging a **change in** the host population's **perspective**.
- Suggestions **for investment in** appropriate **structures, projects, or training**.
- Testimonials illustrating **practices observed to be effective**, which could be replicated or systematized.

Exclusion criteria

- General observations without a prescriptive or transformative aim.
- Isolated criticisms that do not lead to proposals for improvement.

Examples

"We need to invest; these people are here... leaving them without anything to do is not in our interest."

"Hairdressers play a key social role in certain cultures... training them could have a

significant impact."

"It's easier if it's a woman knocking on the door. This should be taken into account when organizing visits."

Possible nuances

- **Systemic recommendations:** advocacy for changes in public policy, social investment, or recognition.
- **Pragmatic recommendations:** adjustments in field practices, taking into account cultural, logistical, or emotional realities.
- **Relational recommendations:** raising public awareness or developing intercultural skills.

Potential links with other codes

- *Intercultural practices*
- *Lessons*
- *Difficulties and constraints*
- *Volunteer attitude*
- *Benefits of inclusion*

Code memo: Role of volunteers as "boundary spanners" / intercultural mediators

Definition

This code refers to the role played by certain volunteers as **intermediaries between different cultural or social worlds**, facilitating **mutual understanding**, the **translation of norms**, expectations, and practices, and the **circulation of resources** (information, social codes, emotional support, etc.).

Inspired by the concepts of *boundary spanners*, *transversal enablers* (Wise, 2009), or *creators of third spaces* (Chen, 2017), this role **involves active**, often implicit, **mediation** between the reference systems of refugees and those of the host society.

Inclusion criteria

- Volunteers who **accompany, translate, explain, decode, or contextualize** procedures, rules, or standards (e.g., administrative, educational, professional, cultural).
- Support actions that go **beyond simple assistance** to help refugees navigate a complex environment.
- Highlighting **differences in representations** or practices, which volunteers help to mitigate or make understandable.
- Support for **the gradual empowerment** of refugees.

Exclusion criteria

- One-off assistance without cultural or systemic interpretation.
- Support that is purely emotional or friendly, without mediation between two social worlds.

Examples

"We helped him write his cover letter, decode professional jargon, and understand what companies here are looking for."

"He thought he could drive with his license from his country. We explained how it works here."

"We showed him that he needed to study at home, that school here requires personal work... It wasn't easy for him."

Possible nuances

- **Practical mediation:** Helping with integration by explaining the education system, job hunting, and administrative procedures.
- **Implicit cultural mediation:** Decoding implicit behaviors or expectations (politeness, autonomy, gender, etc.).
- **Emotional and social mediation:** Reassuring presence that allows refugees to feel legitimate, supported, and confident in their efforts.
- **Potential tension with the limits of the role:** Volunteers sometimes feel overwhelmed or uncertain about how far to go.

Potential links with other codes

- *Lessons*
- *Questions from volunteers*
- *Volunteer attitude*
- *Difficulties and constraints*
- *Recommendations for inclusion*

Code memo: "Negative experiences – intercultural exchanges"**Code description:**

This code covers situations in which volunteers report **intercultural exchanges marked by tension, misunderstanding, or distress**, resulting from **difficult interactions between their role, refugees, and the cultural, social, or geopolitical contexts** of the latter.

The stories coded here refer in particular to **experiences of powerlessness, intense emotional stress, confrontation with violent realities (sometimes outside Switzerland)**, or feelings of inadequacy or questioning of the volunteer role in the face of intercultural complexity. These experiences are not related to "ordinary" intercultural conflicts (misunderstandings, differences in customs), but to **critical or extreme** situations (threats, violence, transposed trauma, unrealistic expectations).

Inclusion criteria:

- Reports of **shocks or discomfort experienced by volunteers** in intercultural situations.
- References to **situations of violence or danger experienced by the people being supported**, with an emotional impact on the volunteer.
- **Profound misunderstandings** due to differences in cultural references or extreme realities reported by refugees (war, threats, death of loved ones).
- Volunteers' feelings of **powerlessness, uselessness, or frustration** in the face of unrealistic expectations set by beneficiaries.
- The need to **call on a third party** (translator, intercultural mediators) to validate or better understand a situation that is too far removed from one's own frame of reference.
- Situations where **interculturality exacerbates the** volunteer's **emotional or moral vulnerability**.

Exclusion criteria:

- Intercultural exchanges that are simply **difficult or awkward**, without any dramatic or crisis-related components.
- Situations where the **difficulty is administrative or logistical** (e.g., language or procedural issues) without significant emotional impact.

- Testimonials that involve **cultural judgments** (e.g., about eating or clothing habits) without intense emotional dimensions.
- **Interpersonal conflicts not related to profound cultural differences or external trauma.**

Examples:

"[...] young people who have been victims of serious violence by other people in their community [...] the conflict that is happening there is having repercussions here [...] they are threatening me and if they tell them that, they will kill my father [...]."

"[...] he said to me, 'You have to call the police, the police have to protect my father over there' [...], I said, 'There's nothing we can do over there,' he said, 'Then what are you good for?' [...] he was absolutely right, at that moment I was absolutely useless."

"[...] I needed a translator [...] to understand if it was true or completely delusional [...] then to accept my limitations, to tell him about them, and just be there for him."

Memo code: "Positive experiences – intercultural exchanges"

Code definition:

This code covers **positive, enriching, or rewarding experiences related to intercultural exchanges**, as reported by volunteers. It includes testimonials where **encounters between different cultures are perceived as a source of personal reflection, constructive questioning, learning, or positive emotions**.

These exchanges can manifest themselves in **gestures of hospitality, the sharing of cultural values, inspiring successes among the young people being supported, or even in a feeling of personal openness** experienced by the volunteer. They can also take the form of **moments of mutual recognition or solidarity**, experienced as rich and meaningful.

Inclusion criteria:

- Testimonials highlighting the **richness of cultural diversity** and mutual enrichment.
- Situations in which volunteers **learn, evolve, or reconsider their own cultural reference points** through exposure to other ways of thinking or value systems.
- **Amazement or admiration** for certain cultural aspects (hospitality, resilience, worldview, etc.).
- Positive feedback from experiences marked by **recognition, respect, or intercultural harmony**.
- Descriptions of **personal or professional successes** of young people being supported, perceived as a source of hope or gratification for the volunteer.
- **Feeling of connection or mutual transformation** in the intercultural relationship.

Exclusion criteria:

- Testimonials focused solely on the **individual successes** of young people with no connection to the intercultural dimension.
- Positive exchanges that are **strictly organizational or administrative** (e.g., good coordination with an institution) without a cultural component.
- **General discussions about diversity**, without any experience directly related to the volunteer.
- Accounts that are more of a **personal or professional assessment** than an intercultural exchange or learning experience.

Examples:

"That's what I think is great, it allows us to question ourselves about cultural issues [...] it's the only time we really get to do that."

"[...] we want to cook for you, we'll make you a meal... We do that in Switzerland too, it's true, but not as intensely or sincerely. [...] These are things I never imagined I would learn so much about."

"[...] we saw young people who are thriving, who make music, who have become truly incredible people. [...] They've had very difficult lives, but they've managed to pull through, so yeah, that's nice."

"[...] we've always found it very enriching, actually. It's always enriched us."

Code memo: "Resources, knowledge, and skills required – intercultural exchanges"

Definition of the code:

This code groups together passages where participants express or describe the **resources, knowledge, tools, training, personal experiences, or skills** they consider necessary to **act appropriately, sensitively, and effectively in intercultural exchange situations**. It also includes **references to support, learning, documentation, or mediation needs** to better understand cultural contexts and manage complex intercultural situations.

Inclusion criteria:

- **Explicit references to training courses**, events, readings, or tools offered or followed in connection with interculturality.
- Testimonials on **personal or professional skills used** to better navigate diverse cultural contexts (e.g., travel experience, community involvement, geopolitical knowledge).
- **Practices of collaboration or discussion among volunteers** to share strategies for dealing with intercultural challenges.
- **Internal or external resources** made available (e.g., intercultural mediators, psychological support, cantonal guides).
- Examples of **cultural events or exchanges** that provide useful contextual knowledge (films, discussions, thematic projects).

Exclusion criteria:

- Accounts focused solely on **intercultural experiences**, with no explicit link to the acquisition or use of resources or skills.
- Passages dealing with the **volunteer-beneficiary relationship** without reference to a need or contribution in terms of knowledge or tools.
- General comments on interculturality **not related to a specific action, approach, or need**.
- Descriptions of **personal values** (e.g., openness, tolerance) **not related to learning or a skill used** in a specific context.

Examples:

"I offered training to all volunteers in Neuchâtel because I think it's important to have opportunities to exchange ideas with other associations."

"The entire canton of Geneva publishes a ton of guides... we took a copy of all these guides so that everyone could refer to them."

"I strongly believe in training volunteers."

"I've been lucky enough to travel a lot... maybe that gives me a certain sensitivity."

"These activities in other organizations such as Amnesty allow me to learn about Middle Eastern culture."

"We also had access to another person who was more psychology-oriented, to help resolve intercultural issues."

"We watched a film shot in Afghanistan... it gave us cultural information other than that provided by migrants."

Memo code: "Representations of the role of volunteers"

Subcode: "Close circle"

Definition:

This subcode groups together the **perceptions and reactions expressed by members of the volunteer's close circle** (immediate family, spouse, children, parents, etc.) about their commitment. It highlights **the support, criticism, misunderstanding, or indifference** coming from the immediate family environment.

Inclusion criteria:

- References to **the opinions, attitudes, or behaviors of close family members** (family, partner, children) towards volunteering.
- Testimonials about **the concrete or symbolic support provided** by close family (e.g., participation in events, donations, discussions).
- Reflections by the volunteer on how **their role influences or is integrated into their family life.**

Exclusion criteria:

- Opinions of the wider social circle (friends, neighbors, colleagues).
- Volunteer's personal reflections on **their own commitment**, not influenced by family perceptions.

Example:

"My children... they are very sensitive, they support me a lot, they bring me clothes at Christmas."

Subcode: "Wider circle"

Definition:

This subcode concerns **perceptions of volunteering by people outside the inner circle:** friends, colleagues, neighbors, members of other associations, etc. It identifies **social recognition** (or, conversely, judgments or misunderstandings) of volunteer involvement in the public or community sphere.

Inclusion criteria:

- Explicit references to how **volunteering is perceived by friends, acquaintances, social or professional networks.**
- Reactions from the wider circle in the form of **positive feedback, encouragement, criticism, comments, or suggestions.**
- Supportive actions or involvement on the part of the wider circle (e.g., donations of items, passing on information).

Exclusion criteria:

- References only to close family.
- Internal reflections not related to concrete social interactions.

Example:

"Even people in the neighborhood know I do this. Then when they have things for me, they bring them to me."

Subcode: "Prepared responses"

Definition:

This subcode includes the **discursive strategies, defensive attitudes, or standardized**

discourse that volunteers use to protect themselves, justify their actions, or **avoid conflict** when faced with critical or controversial judgments about their commitment.

Inclusion criteria:

- References to **previously formulated** responses to criticism.
- Strategies for **creating emotional or argumentative distance** (e.g., not trying to convince others, avoiding certain conversations).
- Reactions to **political, moral, or social disagreements** surrounding the reception of refugees.

Exclusion criteria:

- Raw emotional reactions without perspective or strategy (e.g., spontaneous anger, sadness).
- Reflections on the perception of volunteer work **without mention of protection or preparation**.

Example:

"I'm going to set a very clear boundary... I'm absolutely not going to get into any discussions."

Code memo: **Motivations**

Definition:

This code covers all **personal, emotional, social, or contextual reasons** that motivate people to engage in volunteer work, particularly in the area of welcoming or sponsoring migrants or refugees. It also includes **references to life history, personal values, world events**, or a **personal need for meaning, redemption, or contribution**.

Inclusion criteria:

- Motivation linked to **personal sensitivity** (empathy, hypersensitivity, sense of injustice).
- **Reaction to current events** (wars, disasters, forced displacement, etc.).
- Desire to **take concrete action** at the local level in response to a feeling of global powerlessness.
- Reference to a **personal history** or **need for emotional healing**.
- Desire to **serve, help, and participate in a more just society**.
- **Absence or explicit presence of family influence**, or the role of personal origins in shaping the commitment.

Exclusion criteria:

- Practical or organizational reasons (e.g., availability of time, geographical proximity).
- Emotional reactions not directly related to the **initial motivation** for the commitment.
- Reflections on the role or effects of volunteering **after the fact** (what it brings), without any explicit link to the initial motivation for getting involved.

Examples:

- "It's about taking **small, concrete action** to help the victims of these disasters."
- "I think I'm a **very sensitive** person, I've always been very shocked by wars..."
- "I had to do **something here**, so I committed to sponsoring."
- "I needed to **make amends for something**, probably something that was unbearable for me."
- "We are so lucky here... that I **need to do this**."

Memo Code: Challenges related to intercultural situations

Definition:

This code covers all the stuff that volunteers find **tricky, confusing, or stressful** when working with migrants, like **differences in culture, values, social norms, or how things work** (e.g., attitudes toward time, gender, authority, food, work, etc.). These challenges may relate to **values, daily practices, or mutual expectations**. They may be experienced on a **relational, organizational, or emotional level**.

Inclusion criteria:

- Difficulties related to **perceived cultural differences** (values, norms, practices).
- **Culture shock** or misunderstandings (e.g., gender, role of women, authority, religion, punctuality, eating habits).
- **Mutual misunderstandings** in expectations or communication.
- Challenges in **organizing time, activities, and the mentee's commitment**.
- Volunteer reflections on **how to set their own boundaries or adapt their approach** in an intercultural situation.
- References to **the complex psychological and social realities** of migrants (trauma, family pressure, material emergencies).

Exclusion criteria:

- Challenges not directly related to the **intercultural** dimension (e.g., administrative, logistical, coordination with the association).
- Overly general reflections on **cultural differences** unrelated to a specific experience or difficulty.
- Reflections on the **richness of intercultural exchange** (these elements fall under a more positive code, such as "Intercultural learning").

Examples from the corpus:

- "We need to explain to them that in Switzerland, you can't find a job right away, you have to build a plan, get training..."
- "It's a challenge to get on the same level, they're caught up in so many things..."
- "There are certain things I'm not necessarily going to agree to eat..."
- "I don't work that way, and if that's not okay, it's fine, but then we'll stop."
- "Swiss punctuality is a bit difficult."
- "There are inconsistencies in the relationship that are sometimes difficult to understand."
- "It's a shock to them that women can live alone..."

The Last Slice of Cake: Relationships and Meaning Making in Intercultural Competence: A Constructivist Study from the FORTHEM Alliance.

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Abstract: This article explores intercultural competence as a relational and co-constructed process within the context of the FORTHEM Alliance, a European network of universities engaged in transnational collaboration. Drawing on a constructivist framework, the study examines how meaning making, trust, and belonging emerge through everyday interactions rather than from predefined cultural knowledge or fixed skills. Through semi-structured interviews with administrative and academic staff, the analysis highlights how organizational structures provide orientation, while emotional and relational dynamics shape the quality of collaboration across institutional, linguistic, and professional boundaries. The findings show that friendship, trust, and informal encounters play a central role in sustaining cooperation and navigating complexity. Rather than viewing intercultural competence as an individual attribute, the study demonstrates how it develops through shared practices, negotiated identities, and the ongoing effort to build common ground. The article offers insights relevant for educators, practitioners, and institutions seeking to strengthen inclusive and collaborative environments in international higher education.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Meaning Making, Relational Approach, Constructivism, Higher Education Alliances, Transnational Collaboration, FORTHEM Alliance

Introduction

The title of this paper originates from a brief interaction that unexpectedly illustrated the relational nature of intercultural learning. After a small event with classmates from my master's program, a single slice of cake remained on the table. What appeared trivial revealed three different cultural readings: one colleague believed the last piece should be left for children, another felt it would be impolite to take it, and, drawing from an Ecuadorian custom, I remarked that whoever ate it might soon be married. This everyday exchange highlighted how meaning is not simply perceived but co-constructed. Communicating in a shared foreign language, we negotiated interpretations through curiosity, humour, and empathy. Such moments reveal that intercultural encounters unfold less through fixed skills and more through the dynamic processes of meaning-making that arise when people engage across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Early developments in intercultural communication anticipated constructivist thinking, particularly in Hall's (1959) view of culture as communication, a formulation that, while not articulated in constructivist terms at the time, foreshadows later perspectives that understand meaning-making as a relational and co-created process. Contemporary globalization has further underscored the relevance of these orientations: international cooperation today requires more than administrative alignment; it depends on the capacity to build trust, negotiate meaning, and engage reflectively with difference across institutional, professional, and linguistic boundaries. This article draws on research conducted for my master's thesis at the University of Burgundy, carried out within the context of an international university alliance. By examining the

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experiences of alliance members, the paper explores how empathy, affection, and everyday interaction contribute to the relational processes that make cooperation possible.

Contextualising Internationalisation in European HE

The internationalisation of higher education (HE) has become a central priority in Europe, with the European Union promoting increased collaboration and mobility across national systems. A major driver of this process has been the Erasmus programme, which for over 25 years has facilitated student and staff mobility and fostered deeper institutional cooperation across borders (Beerens & Vossensteyn, 2011).

This direction was reinforced in President Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech, which called for a more integrated European education space and proposed the creation of European Universities, transnational networks that would enhance academic collaboration and mobility, with students studying abroad and learning in at least two languages (Macron, 2017). The European Commission later translated this vision into policy initiatives focused on building a European Education Area (European Commission, 2017).

In 2019, the first 17 European Universities Alliances (EUAs) were selected, involving 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States. These alliances aim to strengthen collaboration by creating inter-university campuses where students and staff can move freely and engage in shared programmes (European Commission, 2019). Within these alliances, diverse groups work together across national, disciplinary, professional, linguistic, and generational lines, forming the environment explored in this study (Frame et al., 2025, p. 19).

Justification of the Study

This study addresses the growing academic interest in how individuals make sense of diversity in everyday collaboration within European higher education. Frame et al. (2025) note that the European University Initiative opens multiple avenues for research across disciplines and levels of analysis, including microsocial exchanges such as face-to-face and online interactions within international university settings, which constitute a particularly relevant area of inquiry for scholars of interpersonal and intercultural communication (p. 19). Examining these dynamics within the FORTHEM Alliance offers insight into how participants interpret their experiences, negotiate roles, and create shared understandings in transnational settings.

By focusing on the lived experiences of alliance members, this study contributes to current discussions on Europeanisation, particularly the interplay between bottom-up interaction and top-down structures (Frame et al., 2025). It also responds to calls for research that examines how individuals construct meaning and cooperation in their everyday work. In this way, the study offers an experience-based perspective on how collaboration is sustained through participants' interpretations, interactions, and evolving relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist Approaches to Culture and Meaning

This study adopts a constructivist framework in which intercultural competence is understood as a socially constructed process that develops through interaction rather than as an inherent trait residing within individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1991/1966; Gergen, 2009). For instance, culture and intercultural competence is socially constructed and context dependent. Cultures

are viewed as shared interpretive frameworks that are shaped through socialization and yet remain internally diverse (D'Iribarne, as cited in Romani et al., 2018). From this perspective, culture functions less as a stable variable and more as a dynamic resource for making sense of situations, practices, and relationships (Brannen & Salk, 2000; Geertz, 1973).

Within this constructivist orientation, knowledge is seen as socially constructed and emic: the focus lies on actors' own sense-making and on culture-specific understandings of communication and cooperation that emerge in particular contexts. Such meanings are contextualised and cannot simply be transferred to other settings (Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021). Yet, the same study highlights the tension between the context-specific nature of social sense-making and the aspiration to derive more general insights. While interpretations are always situated, it remains possible to develop broader understandings of how people engage in sense-making across cultural boundaries, insights that can inform practice without reducing cultural complexity to static categories.

This constructivist lens provides the conceptual grounding for analysing how members of the FORTHEM Alliance describe their experiences of working together across institutional, linguistic, and national contexts and also attending to the affective and relational dynamics that emerge as part of their collaborative work. A key implication of this framework is that constructivist approaches emphasize naturalistic and participatory forms of inquiry that recognize the complexity of the social world and the fact that human interpretations change over time, without making the kinds of universal generalizability claims typical of positivist paradigms (Phothongsunan, 2010). This understanding provides a logical transition to the following section on the development of intercultural competences, as it foregrounds the dynamic, evolving, and context-dependent nature of meaning-making in interpersonal encounters.

Relational Perspectives on Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is understood here in line with the relational paradigm expressed in the collective article collective article "*Transculturality – of course, a Relational Paradigm*" (Baumann Montecinos et al., 2025), where Bennett argues that competence is not a fixed trait, but an ongoing process enacted within relationships. Rather than something one "has," competence is something one does: a performance shaped by interaction, context and the co-construction of meaning (Baumann Montecinos et al., 2025).

This view resonates with Deardorff's (2006) process-oriented perspective, which emphasizes that the development of intercultural competence is continuous and cannot be achieved through a single experience. Together, these approaches highlight the emergent, dynamic, and long-term nature of intercultural competence.

Holliday (2016) further illustrates this complexity, noting that intercultural competence requires constant work to weave together familiar and unfamiliar "small culture formations" (p. 12). In line with this relational view, Kokkonen and Natri argue that culture is not an objective entity but an abstract construct, and that what appear as "cultural differences" are in fact intersubjective interpretations co-created between interlocutors (2024, p. 21).

Spitzberg's (2015) assertion that "cultures do not interact — people do" (p. 24) provides an important conceptual anchor for this study. It shifts attention away from cultural categories and toward the interpersonal encounters through which interculturality is actually enacted. This perspective is particularly relevant here, as the analysis focuses on human interactions and the affective perspectives that participants bring into them. From this viewpoint, what becomes

meaningful in intercultural settings is not culture as a static entity, but the ways individuals perceive, feel, and respond to one another within situated communicative moments.

Research Design

Building on this orientation, the study adopts a constructivist framework in which intercultural competence is understood as a socially constructed process that develops through interaction rather than as an inherent trait residing within individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2009). This perspective is consistent with relational approaches to intercultural communication that emphasize the co-creation of meaning, the emergence of shared understandings, and the transformative potential of interpersonal relationships in culturally complex settings (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2022). Rooted in this constructivist orientation, the study seeks to explore how participants make sense of their experiences, focusing on the subjective meanings they construct rather than on quantifying behaviours or outcomes.

The empirical context of this study is the FORTHEM Alliance, a European network of nine universities created in 2019 to promote collaboration, mobility, and innovation across borders (FORTHEM, n.d.). Its organizational framework is structured through a set of technical work packages (WPs), which delineate specific objectives and responsibilities within collaborative projects (FORTHEM, n.d.). Through these WPs, staff from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds work together across institutional and national boundaries, providing a rich context in which intercultural interaction unfolds as meaning, roles, and cooperation are negotiated in everyday work.

Data for this study were collected within the FORTHEM Alliance through semi-structured online interviews with ten administrative and academic staff members from different partner universities. The participants represented diverse nationalities, professional roles, and institutional backgrounds, reflecting the heterogeneity of the alliance. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The study received academic approval from the supervising faculty at the University of Burgundy. All participants were informed about the aims of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. In line with good research practice, anonymity and confidentiality were carefully maintained throughout the process.

Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings across the interviews, following established approaches to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process was iterative and reflexive: codes and emerging categories were compared, refined, and reorganized into broader themes in a non-linear and recursive manner (Nowell et al., 2017). In keeping with the constructivist orientation of the study, the analysis emphasized participants' meaning-making processes, with ongoing reflexive engagement to remain attentive to the emotional and relational dimensions present in their accounts (Finlay, 2002).

Findings

Organizational Dynamics as Experienced by Participants

The analysis of the interviews showed that organizational aspects within the FORTHEM Alliance, such as work packages (WPs), project phases, and hierarchical structures, serve as foundational frameworks that guide collaboration. While these organizational elements are fixed, their meaning and significance are shaped through participants' interactions, adapting to

the dynamic nature of intercultural cooperation. To contextualize the findings, the following table presents an anonymized overview of the participants included in this study.

Table 1: Overview of Participants' Roles and Engagement in the Alliance

<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Experience in Alliance</i>	<i>Engagement in FORTHEM</i>
P1	~2 years	Part-time
P2	~2 years	Full-time
P3	~5 years	Part-time
P4	~5 years	Full-time
P5	~3 years	Part-time
P6	~2 years	Part-time
P7	>5 years	Full-time
P8	~4 years	Part-time
P9	>5 years	Part-time
P10	~4 years	Part-time

Source: Andachi

Experiencing Work Packages and Project Phases

The data collected from FORTHEM participants shows that work packages (WPs) function as key social constructs that help members make sense of responsibilities and collaboration. They provide shared reference points that support coordination across disciplines. As Participant 9 explains, WPs enable multidisciplinary problem-solving by linking different fields of study: "What we do in the different work packages is that we explore the connections between different fields of study. For example, when we have these complex challenges, what we do is that we approach them through a multidisciplinary lens" (P9). One interviewee also noted how WPs connect individual tasks to broader objectives. Participant 2 highlights this interdependence:

If I give you an example, I work on the certification FORTHEM, and credit recognition and my colleague is working on the skill and competences. So, everything is related, because we need to identify the skills in order to recognize them. (P2)

Project phases similarly structure participants' experience of the alliance by marking temporal progression and shifting responsibilities. Participants describe these phases as reference points that help them make sense of how the alliance evolves over time. As Participant 7 explains, they perceived a clear shift from the initial establishment of FORTHEM to the current stage of transnational team management. Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder argue that shared practices can create new commonalities in collaborative settings (Baumann Montecinos et al., 2025). This perspective resonates with how participants interpret WPs: not merely as administrative tools, but as relational spaces that support connection, coordination, and a shared sense of orientation within the alliance.

Bureaucratic Practices Across Contexts

The analysis of bureaucratic interactions within FORTHEM reveals the complexity of how hierarchies and norms shape work dynamics. Participants indicated that bureaucratic processes are not uniform across countries, and these differences influence the way tasks are approached

and decisions are made. For example, in Participant 7's testimony, the Norwegian context is described as more immediate and informal, where direct communication with senior leadership is possible, contrasting with the more formal procedures experienced in Spain:

For example, when I have something, I call my Vice President and I tell him, OK? How should we do it now? This is absolutely impossible in Spain. There you have to write an official note to address the Vice President in a very polite and respectful manner. (P7)

This contrast is further elaborated by Participant 1 from Romania who highlights the negotiation of communication styles based on urgency, adding another layer to the understanding of bureaucratic dynamics: "If it's really urgent, then we can call them, but otherwise, we will try to take the official way[...]" (P1). These differences reflect how participants' experiences of bureaucracy are socially constructed, shaped by their national and organizational contexts. The testimonies illustrate how the negotiation of communication within bureaucratic settings reflects both personal and institutional priorities, influencing participants' social understanding of what constitutes appropriate to navigate the bureaucracy within the alliance.

Understanding Conflict in Collaborative Settings

The understanding of conflict within FORTHEM reflects the interplay of individual perceptions and institutional structures. Participants described different sources of tension. For some, difficulties arose from situational factors such as work overload and limited time. As Participant 6 explains: "I think the person who was in charge, she was overwhelmed. She had too many things on her plate[...] But for me the time is not enough" (P6). Others framed conflict in more interpersonal terms. Participant 4, for instance, emphasized personality rather than cultural or organizational factors: "I don't think that the conflicts I've seen have to do with interculturality[...] more it's how the people are" (P4).

Participant 8 adds another layer by noting that disagreements frequently originate at the institutional level rather than between individuals: "It's not the people that disagree, it's the universities that disagree in most cases. But we, the people, are the faces of the university" (P8). This distinction between personal and institutional identity highlights how participants see themselves as mediators who represent their universities while looking to preserve positive relationships. Their accounts show that conflict is understood through factors such as workload, expectations, and institutional pressures rather than cultural difference. Managing disagreement often involves reframing tensions to protect relationships and maintain cooperation. This dynamic shapes how conflict and collaboration unfold within FORTHEM, where resolution depends on communication and the flexibility to adapt strategies to context and individuals.

Relational Dynamics Around Roles and Team Arrangements

The team structure within the FORTHEM alliance highlights the co-construction of meaning through experiences and roles within the organization. Testimonies show that the structure is shaped by a division of roles and identities, which illustrates the complexity and dynamism inherent to the alliance. As first, the separation between academic and administrative staff is often seen as a practical necessity, but it also plays a significant role in shaping power dynamics and influencing task approaches. For many participants, this division of roles is functional, as

each group contributes specialized knowledge. However, this separation can also create barriers to communication and limit cross-functional collaboration. As Participant 3 notes:

Whenever we're dealing with pedagogical things, it's always good to have professors on board because they know what they're talking about. Like they're actually living the thing up, and when you're talking about admin things, it's better to have admin people with you and not just professors because we don't know. (P3)

Another factor is the varying levels of dedication across full-time, part-time, and temporary contracts, which introduce an interesting dynamic into the team's operational effectiveness. This pattern reflects what Curyło and Frame (2025) describe more broadly across EUAs: "These are typically elected or nominated representatives of the university in a particular capacity, for whom the EUA is generally not their main job, or part-time or full-time employees funded directly through the initiative itself" (p. 188). As Participant 5 explains:

For FORTHEM there are some people in the Research and Innovation Division, so we have three people working there, one full time, and two about 20% in the Research, Innovation Department. Then we have one person full time in the International Education Office and several people who work just a little bit on FORTHEM. (P5)

Full-time employees may have a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility for the project's success, which can influence their approach to tasks and interactions with colleagues. Conversely, part-time staff and interns may face challenges balancing their roles in FORTHEM with other commitments, leading to potential feelings of exclusion or unequal contribution. This discrepancy in time commitment affects how responsibilities are allocated. As Participant 2 notes:

People are really focusing on FORTHEM or trying to get all their energy into FORTHEM and try to make sure that what they're doing in their daily job, because a lot of our colleagues in the other university are not 100% on FORTHEM[...] they have few people, two or three working 100% FORTHEM and the other colleagues that we work with are just people during their daily job and they added FORTHEM element into it. (P2)

The team's structure is not only operational but deeply relational. Participants from diverse countries bring varied professional experiences and cultural backgrounds, which create both opportunities and challenges. While this diversity enriches the team's problem-solving capacity, it can also introduce tensions when professional norms and cultural expectations clash. The fluidity of the team's composition where roles are not strictly defined by nationality or background can foster greater collaboration, but also leads to identity negotiation within the team.

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making process within FORTHEM emerges as a hybrid model, balancing democratic deliberation with hierarchical authority. The approach adapts to the problem's nature and the required decision-making level. Participant 10 highlights the collective discussion of proposals and agreements, but emphasizes that the final decision rests with the team leader. This structure demonstrates how inclusivity in decision-making coexists with

hierarchical oversight. Similarly, Participant 8 emphasizes that while debate is highly valued, leadership intervention becomes essential when it's time to conclude discussions and make decisions. In this context, authority figures step in to guide the decision-making process, thereby ensuring a balance between democratic participation and effective leadership.

As Participant 10 explains: “So, the decision-making process is like each one can propose something and we can have an agreement, but the last decision is by the task manager” (P10). Participant 8 adds: “We value discussion, discussion, discussion. But at least somebody needs to be in the managing role. Somebody needs to say, enough of discussion. Now we need to make a decision” (P8).

The findings also suggest that strategic decisions within FORTHEM are made at various levels of authority. For instance, Participant 7 describes major decisions being handled by higher authorities such as the steering committee or the presidency, while Participant 5 elaborates on how decisions at the university level often involve the rector and vice-rectors. For more operational decisions, individuals directly responsible for tasks make the necessary decisions, reflecting the adaptability of the decision-making model depending on the scale of the issue.

Participant 5 states:

Most of them, the major strategic decisions are made jointly with the rector and the vice rectors. If there is a kind of a big decision, we present the issue at the correct level of governance in our university [...] And at the level of work packages management and task management, it's the people that have responsibility for those tasks, they make those decisions. (P5)

This division of authority within FORTHEM supports efficient decision-making by delegating operational matters to those directly involved in the work, while reserving strategic decisions for higher levels of governance. This model ensures that local expertise is respected and that day-to-day decisions are made at the level where they can be addressed most appropriately, contributing to the organization's functioning in a complex collaborative environment.

Relational Foundations of Collaboration: Human Connection, Emotion, and Trust

While the previous section showed how organizational structures provide orientation for collaborative work, the interviews also reveal that these frameworks alone do not explain how cooperation actually takes shape. Participants emphasized that collaboration within FORTHEM emerges from relational processes rather than predefined competences. Human connection precedes professional roles, with participants describing how initial interpersonal warmth, humour, and informal exchanges helped reduce hierarchical distance and create a sense of mutual presence. As Participant 6 noted, “The person who initiated this group was so wise to first make us connect as human beings and then as colleagues and working fellows. So, I think it's a human connection before” (P6).

These initial interpersonal connections created a sense of familiarity and lowered relational distance, which in turn made room for more open and genuine exchanges. Once this basic connection was established, participants described how emotional cues such as warmth, humour, or simple acknowledgment helped them interpret intentions, clarify misunderstandings, and develop a shared sense of orientation. Early uncertainty often shifted into comfort as members felt seen and valued.

In this context, emotions did not function as “soft” additions but as part of the relational process through which people made sense of each other’s actions and sustained collaboration over time. This aligns with relational approaches that argue that individuals or organizations are not merely entering relationships but are shaped by them (Baumann Montecinos et al., 2025). Through repeated micro-interactions, trust accumulated and became the basis for navigating challenges, understanding intentions, and maintaining engagement.

Friendship as an Intercultural Practice

A clear expression of these relational dynamics is the role of friendship in shaping collaboration. Although established models of intercultural competence offer conceptual guidance, participants emphasize the relational and emotional aspects of their lived experience. Friendship appears as a meaningful element of collaboration. As Participant 4 explains: “I feel very close to my colleagues from the Coordination Commission, and we are very happy. I mean the relation is even close and this friendship is more than working colleagues” (P4). Participant 10 similarly links motivation and belonging to these affective ties: “So, it was really good for me to know all this personal from FORTHEM. I know a lot of them and it's really motivating. It's one of the reasons why I really enjoy FORTHEM” (P10).

These friendships did not arise instantly; they developed gradually through repeated encounters. Participants described how getting to know colleagues beyond formal roles created the relational ground on which trust could grow. This temporal dimension of connection forms a crucial part of how collaboration deepens within FORTHEM.

The Temporal Growth of Trust

Time plays a crucial role in the formation of emotional bonds. Early interactions were marked by hesitation and low familiarity. Participant 6 recalls: “When I joined for the first time, it was a bit weird[...]I didn't know what to expect” (P6). Participant 9 experienced a similar entry phase: “Everybody knew each other already[...] it took some time to build those relationships” (P9). Informal, face-to-face encounters such as meals, humour, and unstructured moments became key in shifting from initial distance to relational ease.

As Participant 6 explains: “When I got a chance to meet the people face to face and have dinner or lunch together and make jokes [...], then it was much easier for the online communication” (P6). This progression echoes findings that highlight the importance of early and ongoing interpersonal contact in international teamwork (Comfort & Franklin, 2014). Participant 10 describes how recurring encounters further deepened connections: “We usually have another social part after the official meeting [...] It's like a kind of family and it's really good to have this meeting and meet all together” (P10).

As these relationships solidified, digital interaction became more fluid, reflecting growing interpersonal familiarity. Overall, collaboration relied less on formal competences and more on the continuity of human connection and mutual recognition. While digital tools maintain contact across distance, it is the in-person encounters that allow trust to take root and shape the quality of intercultural work.

Identity, Belonging, and Collaboration

After examining both the organizational structures that frame collaboration and the relational dynamics that sustain it, a third dimension becomes visible: the ways participants understand their place within the alliance. The interviews reveal that participants make sense of their

position in FORTHEM through different identity markers, particularly education and generation. This process can be understood through a combination of social identity and relational perspectives. Social identity theory conceptualizes categories as tools people use to orient themselves in social environments (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Building on this, Frame (2016) emphasizes that identities are continually shaped through interaction. This relational view aligns with Bennett's observation that "meaning emerges through the interaction of the observer and the observed" (Baumann Montecinos et al., 2025, p. 45), highlighting belonging as something co-created rather than fixed.

Academic background frequently appeared as a reference point for mutual recognition. Participant 4 noted that working with "well educated" colleagues reduces perceived hierarchy and facilitates ease of collaboration. Their comments suggest that shared educational experience provides a common ground that supports legitimacy and smooth communication. Participant 8 illustrates this when describing collaborative dynamics: "We're just dealing with this multilingual and multidisciplinary teaching [...] learning from one another, not just from teachers [...] but also the teachers and the students learning from one another" (P8). At the same time, such shared identity markers may also create invisible boundaries for those who feel they do not fully match the dominant perception of "high academic level," raising questions about whose forms of knowledge are implicitly valued.

Generational Identity: Cohesion and Differentiation

Generation operates as another interpretive lens. For Participant 1, working with peers of similar age created familiarity and ease. "I would say that this adds because we are the same generation and because we believe in the same things and also because most of us at some point work together on one or different projects" (P1). Here, generational identity becomes a shorthand for shared cultural references, values, and work histories. It is perceived as a factor that strengthens collaboration, creating a sense of intuitive understanding.

Others, like Participant 3, described wide age diversity without viewing it as an obstacle; instead, generational differences simply form part of the group's everyday reality: "They were pretty much all ages [...] from people about to move to retirement [...] And I've always worked with people older than me [...] except for some admin girls [...] in their 20s" (P3). In this perspective, generational difference is not foregrounded as a barrier; rather, it becomes part of the group's descriptive landscape. Still, age may operate implicitly as a marker of hierarchy or experience, even when not explicitly articulated.

Across accounts, participants draw on education, expertise, or generational reference points to position themselves relationally, foster connection, and navigate difference. Belonging in FORTHEM emerges through these ongoing negotiations, showing how identity markers can simultaneously support cohesion and delineate subtle boundaries within an international academic community.

Conclusions

This study shows that intercultural competence within the FORTHEM Alliance develops through interaction, illustrating that the challenges of intercultural collaboration do not stem from diversity itself, but from the dynamic generation of new events, expectations, and meanings. Organizational structures such as work packages and project phases provide necessary orientation, but their practical meaning is shaped in everyday collaboration. These

structures offer shared reference points, yet how they are interpreted and enacted is continually reshaped as participants coordinate across institutional, linguistic, and professional boundaries.

In this study, what enables cooperation to take root is the quality of the relationship's participants build over time. Trust, familiarity, and informal encounters create a sense of continuity that supports collaboration in a context where roles, expectations, and goals are constantly changing. Face-to-face meetings, humour, and small moments of recognition help participants navigate uncertainty, clarify responsibilities, and maintain engagement across distance.

The findings respond to Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder's call to move "beyond merely tolerating or respecting each other, toward actively developing things in common" (Baumann Montecinos et al., 2025, p. 42). Shared practices within FORTHEM do not arise automatically from diversity; they are built through everyday interaction, listening, coordinating tasks, explaining procedures, and supporting colleagues. These ordinary exchanges create common ground that cannot be prescribed through policy alone.

Intercultural competence in this context thus appears as a relational and ongoing effort, the continuous work of making sense together, adjusting to one another, and sustaining collaboration amidst change. While the insights presented here are context-specific, they underscore the broader importance of relational and interpersonal processes in transnational university alliances.

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several directions for strengthening intercultural collaboration within European university alliances. First, as the European University Initiative continues to expand and generate new institutional and interpersonal challenges, further research should focus on the everyday social dynamics that shape cooperation. Understanding how people interpret roles, adapt to shifting expectations, and construct shared meaning is essential for grasping the lived complexity of transnational cooperation. Such inquiry should also explore how HEIs adjust their internal structures to function effectively within alliances and how different stakeholders perceive and respond to the intercultural dimensions of transnational collaboration.

Second, the study highlights the value of actively creating common ground rather than simply acknowledging diversity. Strengthening shared reference points through joint tasks, collaborative practices, or co-created project phases helps participants navigate complex organizational environments. Training efforts can support this by encouraging a relational engagement with cultural information, treating it as a basis for interaction rather than static knowledge.

Finally, the study shows that meaningful cooperation depends on relational and emotional foundations. Trust, familiarity, and the experience of being valued provide stability in contexts of constant change. Encouraging regular face-to-face encounters, informal interaction, and relational onboarding can create the conditions under which teams not only work together but thrive together.

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