

The role of higher education institutions in engaging youth in environmental volunteering

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Abstract

Under continuing societal and ecological crises, supporting human agency formation becomes increasingly important challenge for higher education institutions. Environmental volunteering is one of the most urgent topics in this context. In the first stage based on the combination of automatic and manual tools, we analyzed digital traces left on Russian platforms, selecting 140 most active users in environmental activism (university students or graduates under 35 years), having the largest experience in organizing or supporting volunteering projects. On the second stage we conducted 30 interviews with them, aiming to reveal factors and mechanisms of engagement in environmental volunteering, with the focus on the role of higher education (along with other factors, including educational institutions, family, and peers). We also reveal the importance of the digital environment as a potential catalyst for participation in eco-volunteering, which deserves attention in the universities' initiatives.

Keywords: *Environmental volunteering; Agency; University students and graduates; Digital traces; Engagement factors*

1. Introduction

The escalating global environmental crisis underscores the urgent need to mobilize civic participation and grassroots action. Within this context, human agency—the capacity of individuals to act initiatively upon the urgent issues — is increasingly viewed as a critical driver of societal transformation. International research on eco-volunteering has explored various motivational drivers and structural factors, often highlighting the roles of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), family, education (including universities), and peer networks (Pickard, 2022; Scherman et al., 2022).

Educational institutions are universally recognized as key socialization agents, yet their precise role in fostering agentic, value-driven environmental engagement—beyond formal curricula or one-off events—requires deeper empirical investigation.

This study addresses this gap by examining the factors and practices of engagement in Russian environmental volunteering, with a specific analytical focus on the role of educational institutions, including higher education. Utilizing a novel methodology that combines digital trace analysis from major Russian online platforms (Dobro.ru and VKontakte) with in-depth interviews, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How do educational institutions (with a focus on higher education) facilitate the initial engagement and sustained participation of youth in environmental volunteering in Russia?
2. What specific practices and relationships within educational settings (formal and informal) are most influential in this process?
3. How does the role of education compare to other potential engagement factors (family, NGOs, peers, digital communities) in the Russian context?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Human Agency, Social Structures, and the Volunteering Landscape

The classic sociological "structure-agency" dilemma remains central to understanding civic engagement. While traditional approaches often emphasized the constraining or channeling power of social structures (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015), contemporary theories, such as neo-structuration, posit a more dynamic interplay, recognizing individuals' capacity to transform structural contexts through purposeful action that is not only "agentic" in its subjective representation but actually introduces novel practices of behavior, creates communities or transforms the existing ones (Sorokin & Mironenko, 2025). Volunteering, including environmental one, as an unpaid, goal-oriented activity (Wilson, 2000), serves as a prime empirical field for studying these processes.

2.2. Universities and other Educational Institutions as Catalysts for Civic Engagement

International literature identifies educational institutions—from schools to universities—as pivotal arenas for the development of civic skills, values, and identities (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014; Barton et al., 2019). Engagement is theorized to occur through both formal pathways (e.g., service-learning programs, eco-clubs) and, crucially, through informal mentorship, where educators act as role models and connectors (Kapoor & Rishbeth, 2024). Universities are often seen as central in providing positive impact on environmental activism (Schoffer and Meyer,

2021). Research in Western contexts often highlights the synergy between educational institutions and NGOs (Zollo et al., 2019).

The Russian Context: A Gap in the Literature

Studies on Russian environmental activism note its complex relationship with state narratives which sometimes contradict with the self-organized character of human agency (Lebedeva, 2023; Ermolaeva et al., 2021). While the role of state-supported youth programs and educational systems is acknowledged, there is a lack of fine-grained analysis on how educational settings operate as spaces for agentic engagement rather than top-down mobilization (Sorokin et al., 2025). Furthermore, the potential of digital platforms as both a mirror and a driver of volunteer activity in this specific institutional ecosystem is underexplored (Ibid.). This study aims to fill these gaps by providing empirical data on the lived experiences of active eco-volunteers (university students and graduates), placing the educational factor at the center of analysis.

3. Materials and Methods

To identify and analyze the practices of highly engaged environmental volunteers (university students and graduates), we employed a two-stage, mixed-methods approach grounded in digital sociology.

3.1. Stage 1: Identification via Digital Traces

We collected and analyzed open digital trace data from two dominant Russian platforms:

1. Dobro.RF: The national, formalized volunteering platform (>6.6M users), where activities are logged, quantified (volunteer hours), and often linked to educational incentives.
2. VKontakte: The largest Russian social network (>85M users), offering a less formalized but rich space for self-presentation, community building, and activism representation.

Using a combination of automated data collection and manual profiling, we developed criteria to identify users demonstrating significant and sustained environmental volunteering activity (see Table 1). The criteria differed between platforms and user types (e.g., project organizers vs. active participants) but consistently focused on metrics of intensity, longevity, and thematic focus. This process yielded a sample of 140 highly active users whose digital footprints confirmed deep involvement in eco-activism.

Table 1. Criteria for selecting universities students and graduates, actively engaged in volunteering via digital traces

VKontakte	Dobro.RF
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Vkontakte volunteers	"Volunteers- participants on the Dobro.RF platform"	"Volunteer-organizers on the Dobro.RF platform"
Self-declaration of engagement in volunteer activity on the personal profile on VK since December 2023 (minimum 5 posts/photos/videos over 6 months)	More than 3000 volunteer hours on the personal profile on Dobro.RF platform	More than 1800 volunteer hours on the personal profile on Dobro.RF platform
More than 600 friends and subscribers	Completion of more than 5 volunteer- oriented educational courses on Dobro.RF platform	At least 4 projects launched or organized on Dobro.RF platform OR more than 1 project and 4+ organized events
	Rank in top-100 volunteers in the region	Rank in top-100 volunteers in the region
Direct indication of engagement in at least one concrete thematic field of volunteering on the personal profile	Rank in platform top- 1000 on the national level	Rank in platform top- 1000 on the national level
Subscription to at least one volunteer-related group	Registration on platform for more than 2 years	Registration on platform for more than 2 years
	Participation in no less than 5 volunteering events, reflected on the platform ("charitable acts")	

3.2. Stage 2: In-Depth Interviews

From the identified sample, we recruited and conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with volunteers aged 18-35. Recruitment was conducted via VKontakte messages. The interview guide aimed at reconstructing personal trajectories into and within volunteering, with specific probes on the role of educational institutions (with a particular interest in universities) at different life stages, the nature of interactions with teachers/mentors, and the interplay with other factors like family, friends, NGOs, and digital communities. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, narratives, and causal attributions related to engagement.

4. Results

The findings outlined further refer to the whole sample, representing students and young graduates of 15+ different universities from 10+ Russian regions. It means that they apply to HEI (higher education institutions) of different selectivity, locations and different subject fields. This is itself a very interesting finding, confirming the image of university as a universal institution, proposed by JW Meyer in his well known “World Society” theory (Schoffer and Meyer, 2021).

4.1. Education as the Primary "Gateway"

For the majority of respondents (21 out of 30), educational institutions — more often schools than universities — were cited as the primary and most influential entry point into volunteering. This influence was not typically described as a result of compulsory assignments, but rather as an informal process of mentorship and value contagion. A teacher, club supervisor, or university professor often acted as a "bridge," recognizing a student's potential or interest and offering a concrete opportunity to join an existing initiative or start a new one.

"I had a teacher at my after-school center. She simply suggested, 'We're setting up a volunteer group here, would you like to join?' I didn't think twice. It felt like a natural invitation to something meaningful." (Respondent 02.01.05)

Thus, students, interested in engagement in volunteering, — are not “tabula rasa”; in the majority of cases, they have previous experience connected with concrete educational institutions and people beyond universities. However, interviews showed that these connections are not systematically supported and generally remain ignored by universities.

4.2. The Informal (yet Vertical) Mechanics of Engagement within Education

The mechanism of influence was consistently characterized by informality, personal connection, and shared values. Respondents emphasized the voluntary nature of their choice, even within the school/university context, distinguishing it from forced "subbotniks" (community work days). The educator's role was that of a facilitator and role model, not an administrator.

"No one is forced. People who stay are those who find satisfaction in it and share our values, that's the key." (Respondent 01.02.10)

4.3. Non-educational factors are of less importance

Consistent with the Russian context described in the literature, other factors commonly emphasized in international literature as important drivers played a less pronounced role:

- Family was mentioned as an initial influence by 6 respondents, often through the example of socially active parents.
- NGOs were a primary entry point for only 4 respondents. They were more frequently encountered after initial engagement through higher education, serving as platforms for deepening involvement.
- Friends' ties (beyond immediate university context of classmates) were a minimal direct recruitment channel (3 respondents), with some volunteers even reporting resistance from peers to their ecological values.

4.4. Higher Education as a universal space for practicing agency - but with a “local” emphasis

Higher education system appeared a crucial institutional field for engaging in volunteering for more than a third of our respondents (see also 1.1.). Even when nor formal stimulation, neither informal support by the university staff is mentioned – the lived experience of being in university, of contacting with other students, of exploring the new subject fields and physical environment of the local space (where students live or study) provides significant boost for searching for and engaging in various types of socially oriented agency. At the same time, in contrast to World Society theory argument (Schoffer and Meyer, 2021), the motivation, articulated by the respondents, has little to do with “global culture”. Students and graduates do not recognize their potential contribution to solving the ecological crisis of the “planetary scale” – but rather aim to improve their concrete environment.

4.5. Digital environment – as a universal tool but not an agent

We also found that digital environment (and related digital communities) does not act as an independent force in engaging in volunteering. It is rather a very important tool for supporting participation in eco-volunteering of those who are already interested in it. Thus, digital environment deserves attention in the universities' initiatives aimed at supporting various forms of human agency including eco-volunteering. Critically important is that digital environment where real projects on activism are initiated and represented - is principally beyond the control of universities policies. This is helpful to explain why we found little differentiation between the respondents in terms of their trajectories of engagement in eco-activism in terms of the characteristics of their HEI.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study refers to the neo-structuration theory argument that sees human agency as an important factor for societal well-being (or even learning outcome, in some respect) - and applies it to the field of environmental activism (Sorokin, P. S., & Mironenko, I. A., 2025). We

empirically demonstrate that educational institutions do not always “direct” these activities in a deterministic way; they may also serve as spaces for initiative choice and implementation of various initiatives. Somewhat paradoxically, this mechanism co-exists with informal vertical mobilization practices where educators serve as mentors and role models.

Furthermore, the digital environment operating as a tool but not an agent shifts the analytical focus. It moves the discussion away from the manipulative or mobilizing potential of algorithms and toward an analysis of how digital platforms mediate and amplify already-formed offline agency, serving an instrumental rather than a generative function.

The data also challenge the universality of engagement models, where NGOs and horizontal peer networks play a key role. This highlights the necessity of considering local institutional architecture and cultural models of authority when developing theories and programs to foster volunteering.

The practical implication is that policy aimed at developing youth volunteering as an education-mediated agency should focus less on creating new external structures (platforms, grant programs for NGOs) and more on supporting and scaling the informal pedagogical practices and informal self-organization of university students. Future research should focus on comparative analysis of the long-term trajectories of volunteers engaged through different institutions to assess not only recruitment effectiveness but also the sustainability and depth of the emerging civic identity.

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