

Enhancing Students' Employability Via Extracurricular Service: Evidence from a Moroccan Public University

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Introduction

Moroccan universities have increasingly sought to enhance students' profiles to support the transition from higher education to professional life, notably through the integration of soft skills within academic curricula. While these initiatives mark important progress, their effectiveness depends on sustained engagement beyond formal coursework. Research shows that transferable skills are best developed through repeated, situated, and practice-based experiences, positioning extracurricular (EC) engagement as a key vector for soft skills acquisition (Lau et al., 2014; Hui & Ip, 2021). Through structured yet flexible participation, EC service fosters employability by cultivating adaptive competencies aligned with labour market demands (Preedy & Beaumont, 2024). In this context, student engagement in activities within Moroccan universities is particularly relevant, as such experiences extend learning beyond academic models and provide early spaces for translating social responsibility and ethical values – shown to shape professional attitudes among younger generations in Morocco – into concrete practices and competencies (El Mazoudi, Boutannoura, & Sbiti, 2016; El Mazoudi, Boutannoura & Sbiti, 2018).

In increasingly diversified and non-linear career landscapes, extracurricular activities (ECAs) provide students with practical, social, and cognitive resources essential for navigating heterogeneous professional paths (Boutannoura, 2011; Boutannoura & Bentaleb, 2017; de Prada Creo et al., 2021; Aliu et al., 2023; Boutannoura, 2023a; 2023b; 2024a; 2024b; 2025). ECAs strengthen self-efficacy and inform career decision-making by enabling experiential exploration and adjustment beyond academic requirements (Bentaleb & Boutannoura, 2013; Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017; Kanar & Bouckennooghe, 2021; Boutannoura, 2018; Olivares et al., 2019; Munir & Zaheer, 2021). In this context, and against evidence from Morocco highlighting the strategic role of human resource management in sustaining organisational resilience during crises (El Mazoudi & Boutannoura, 2024), EC engagement becomes particularly salient for entrepreneurial, freelance, and project-based pathways where resilience, teamwork, and leadership are critical (Boutannoura & Bentaleb, 2016; Boutannoura & Bentaleb, 2017; Boutannoura, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; de Prada Creo et al., 2021), a pattern further supported by evidence on the role of ECAs in fostering entrepreneurial and adaptive capacities in contemporary labour markets (Preedy & Beaumont, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the growing emphasis on employability calls for closer examination of how ECAs not only respond to labour market expectations but also enable students to actively construct their professional trajectories through competencies such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adapt-

ability (de Prada Creo et al., 2021). Employability thus extends beyond technical qualifications to the capacity to mobilize knowledge and skills across professional contexts (Barton et al., 2019; Evans & Yusof, 2023). By providing learning situations that remain difficult to reproduce within formal curricula, ECAs play a critical role in this process (Hui & Ip, 2021). As labour market demands evolve, Moroccan universities are therefore challenged to structure and evaluate ECAs more intentionally to enhance employability across disciplines, in line with broader shifts toward experiential and holistic higher education models (Boutannoura, 2011; Preedy & Beaumont, 2024; Boutannoura, 2023a; 2023b; 2024a; 2024b).

Activities, Lifelong Learning, and Employability

Recent literature converges on the idea that employability is increasingly shaped by transversal competencies rather than academic performance alone. As summarized in **Table 21.1**, recruiters consistently prioritize qualities such as curiosity, adaptability, and intercultural competence over formal credentials (Huang & Turner, 2018; Velasco, 2012; Hentschel et al., 2021). While this shift reflects changing labour market expectations, it also exposes the limited capacity of higher education curricula to systematically cultivate such attributes. In this context, activities are frequently positioned as a means through which students accumulate employability capital and differentiate themselves in competitive job markets (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017; Abelha et al., 2020; William et al., 2024). The emphasis placed on the visibility of EC engagement, also illustrated in Table 21.1, suggests that employers increasingly interpret these experiences as proxies for skills insufficiently developed within formal academic pathways (Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017).

Volunteering and EC service are widely portrayed as effective contexts for skills development, particularly in relation to teamwork, communication, and leadership (Chambré, 1989; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Handy et al., 2011; Nesbit et al., 2018). However, the prominence of these competencies in Table 21.1 also reflects a broader instrumentalisation of volunteering, where civic engagement is increasingly aligned with employability outcomes. Several studies indicate that voluntary work is often structured to maximize vocational returns, integrating employability objectives into ostensibly altruistic activities (Katz & Rosenberg, 2005; Prouteau & Wolff, 2006; Barron & Rihova, 2011; Paine et al., 2013). While such structuring facilitates skill transferability, it raises questions about the narrowing of learning experiences under labour market imperatives. Nevertheless, structured EC activities continue to operate as hybrid spaces linking academic expectations with employer-valued competencies, as reflected in the criteria summarized in Table 21.1 (Low et al., 2007; Handy et al., 2010; Manetti et al., 2015).

Table 21.1. Graduates' employability attributes sought by recruiters.

Study	Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes underlined
Hentschel, Braun, Peus & Frey (2021).	belongingness cues in recruitment / fit evaluation / career pursuit confidence
Otago Polytechnic, (Learner Capability Framework) (2019).	effective oral / written communication / teamwork / cultural competence / interpersonal skills / problem solving capacities

Study	Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes underlined
Huang & Turner (2018).	host-labour-market expectations / cross-cultural career navigation / proactive use of university support
Chhinzer & Russo (2017).	soft skills / functional skills / solving problems / pre-graduate experience / academic reputation.
Thompson et al. (2013).	self-confidence / communication skills / self-knowledge and personal awareness
Jones (2013).	communicative skills / curiosity / team-working capacity / effective interpersonal behaviour / self-awareness/ effective networking
Tymon (2013).	communication / effective teamwork / personal integrity / flexibility / commitment
Velasco (2012).	employer expectations beyond grades / transferable employability skills / professionalism & learning orientation

Positioning EC service within a lifelong learning framework further situates these activities within contemporary policy and scholarly debates. As Table 21.1 indirectly illustrates through its emphasis on adaptability and continuous development, lifelong learning has become a key mechanism for sustaining employability in dynamic labour markets (Singh et al., 2022). This orientation contributes to the emergence of the “pedagogicised subject,” expected to actively manage learning trajectories across formal and informal contexts, including volunteering and EC engagement (Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2018; Lees, 2021; Evans, 2023; Aliu et al., 2023; Maki, 2023; Papadopoulos, 2024). While EC participation may enhance agency and self-directed learning, it also reinforces normative expectations around individual responsibility for employability.

These dynamics resonate with ongoing debates surrounding employability in higher education. Employability is commonly defined as a combination of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance employment prospects (Yorke, 2006), yet Table 21.1 highlights the persistent gap between academic training and employer expectations. Divergent interpretations of employability among students, institutions, and employers contribute to misalignments in workforce integration (Tymon, 2013; Dinh et al., 2023). Although academic credentials remain necessary, evidence suggests they are insufficient to meet labour market demands on their own (Yorke, 2006; Russell & Kay, 2019; Kanuka & Gregory, 2024). Higher education programs continue to prioritize hard skills, while the soft and adaptive competencies emphasized in Table 21.1 – such as resilience, networking, and cultural awareness – are often developed primarily through EC engagement (Gleeson et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2013).

A Comprehensive Methodology for Exploring Pre-career Perceptions

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to examine how students perceive their service experiences in relation to employability development. Data were collected from 32 students aged 17 to 23 (mean age 20.3), enrolled in bachelor's and master's programs, with a predominance of female participants (75%). All participants were engaged in voluntary EC service activities – such as donation initiatives, blood donation campaigns, eldercare, and support for economically disadvantaged populations – without material compensation, allowing the analysis to focus on perceived learning and

skill development rather than instrumental incentives. The main characteristics of the sample and EC activities are summarized in Table 21.2.

Table 21.2. *Ingredients of the S.A.M. model (recapitulated from Mininni et al. 2014).*

S: Subjectivity	“Who” is the enunciator of the text?	<i>Agentivity</i> that reveals if the speaker is a subject or an object of action. <i>Affectivity</i> which emphasizes the emotion embedded in the text. <i>Embrayage and debrayage</i> strategies which inform about involvement and disinvolvement of the enunciator.
A: Argumentation	“Why” does he/she enunciate this discourse?	<i>Stake</i> which indicates the interests hidden behind the text. <i>Story</i> refers to scenes, protagonists and courses of action. <i>Network</i> designates the dialogic interplay between <i>logoi</i> and <i>antilogoi</i> that legitimates the text.
M: Modality	“How” is the discourse constructed?	<i>Genre</i> and discourse markers indicate the textual typology and the intertextual allusions. <i>Opacity</i> that points out to the use of metaphors, stylistics and rhetorics. <i>Meta-discursive markers</i> indicate the presence of comments, reformulations, and reflexive discourse.

Participants were recruited through targeted social media calls addressed to university students with relevant EC experience. To ensure analytical relevance, inclusion criteria required recent involvement in EC service (within the previous one to three years), enabling participants to reflect on short-to medium-term effects on employability perceptions and career orientations, as detailed in **Table 21.2**. Data collection combined a reflective self-assessment form with semi-structured interviews. The self-assessment served both as an elicitation tool and as a means of encouraging reflexivity, while interviews enabled a deeper exploration of how participants interpreted the skills, competencies, and professional meanings derived from their EC engagement.

Data analysis was conducted using diatextual analysis (DTA) (Mininni et al., 2014), a discourse-oriented framework that examines how meaning is constructed through language in situated interactions. Drawing on the S.A.M. model – Subjectivity, Argumentation, and Modality – the analysis focused on how participants articulated their identities, justified the value of their EC experiences, and positioned these experiences in relation to employability and professional futures. The analytical dimensions and coding logic guiding this process are presented in **Table 21.2**. This approach made it possible to move beyond declarative skill inventories and instead capture how students discursively reconstruct EC service as employability capital and as a component of emerging professional identities.

Findings of the Research: Three Key Perceptual Themes

The analysis of participants’ narratives reveals three interrelated empirical patterns that structure how service is perceived and interpreted: (1) EC service as a site of identity transformation, (2) EC service as a process of early career self-management, and (3) EC service as a context for the development

and capitalisation of employability resources. Rather than functioning as discrete categories, these patterns emerge through recurring discursive configurations that reflect how students make sense of their experiences and position themselves in relation to future professional trajectories.

EC Service as a Catalyst for Identity Transformation

Participants' narratives consistently frame EC service as a formative space of identity reconfiguration rather than as a simple accumulation of activities. Volunteering is not described as peripheral to academic life but as an experience that alters how students perceive themselves, their responsibilities, and their place within broader social relations. Importantly, this transformation is neither immediate nor homogeneous; it unfolds gradually through exposure to unfamiliar situations, emotional demands, and collective constraints.

Across accounts, students position themselves as active contributors to their experiences, emphasising choice, commitment, and responsibility. Such positioning reflects a form of self-authorship through which participants present their engagement as intentional rather than circumstantial. As one participant notes, "I didn't join just to show up once. After a few sessions, people were expecting me, asking if I was coming, and counting on me to handle specific tasks – and that's when I started feeling accountable, not just for what I did, but for the people I was there for." (P7). This sense of accountability signals a shift from passive participation to active self-definition, suggesting that EC service functions as a site where identities are tested and renegotiated.

Emotional engagement plays a central role in this process. Participants frequently evoke feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, and pride when recounting their experiences, indicating that identity change is closely tied to affective exposure. One student reflects, "At first, I was afraid of not being useful, but later I felt proud, like I had found my place" (P12). Such statements illustrate how emotional transitions accompany the reworking of self-perceptions, reinforcing the idea that identity transformation is inseparable from lived experience rather than abstract reflection.

Narratives of transformation are often structured around sequences of challenge and adjustment. Initial disorientation, confusion, or perceived inadequacy are not presented as failures but as formative moments that legitimize subsequent growth. For example, a participant explains, "At the beginning, I felt completely lost, but that forced me to adapt quickly – much more than in class" (P5). By framing difficulty as productive, students construct a narrative of earned transformation that confers legitimacy on their personal development.

At the same time, participants rely on symbolic language to articulate experiences that resist straightforward description. Metaphors such as the "labyrinth" or the "time capsule" are used to convey complexity, acceleration, and exposure to social realities that exceed academic settings. As one student puts it, "It's like a time capsule – you suddenly see things people face every day, and you grow up faster" (P2). These metaphors condense emotional and moral meanings, allowing students to communicate transformation without reducing it to measurable outcomes.

Collective dimensions are also central to identity reconstruction. Several participants describe EC service using imagery associated with discipline, coordination, and mutual dependence, often liken-

ing their group to a “commando.” One participant states: “We were like a commando – everyone had a role, and no one could leave when it got difficult” (P21). Such representations suggest that identity change is not solely individual but is produced through participation in a regulated collective governed by shared norms and expectations.

Importantly, this transformation is not portrayed as unambiguously positive. Beneath narratives of growth and commitment, moments of fatigue, doubt, and emotional strain are discernible, particularly when EC engagement intersects with academic pressures. One participant acknowledges, “There were times when I was exhausted and wondered if I could keep going” (P18). These hesitations reveal the fragility of identity reconstruction and challenge celebratory accounts of volunteering as uniformly empowering.

Taken together, these findings suggest that EC service operates as a complex and ambivalent space of identity work. Students do not simply acquire new attributes; they engage in an ongoing process of self-reinterpretation shaped by emotional exposure, collective discipline, and moral negotiation. While EC service enables the emergence of more socially aware and responsible self-conceptions, it also places individuals in situations that demand resilience and sustained commitment. This tension underscores the need to approach EC engagement not as a guaranteed catalyst of personal growth, but as a contingent and demanding process whose outcomes remain context dependent.

EC Service as a Process of Career Self-Management and Reflexivity

Participants’ narratives frame EC service as a space of progressive career reflexivity rather than as a direct or instrumental pathway toward predefined professional outcomes. Career trajectories are not presented as stable plans awaiting execution, but as evolving orientations shaped through experience, exposure, and reassessment. EC engagement appears as a moment of interruption within these trajectories, prompting students to question initial assumptions and reconsider their professional horizons in light of lived social realities.

Across accounts, students portray themselves as actively involved in managing their emerging careers. Rather than attributing vocational direction to institutional prescriptions or external constraints, they emphasize choice, intention, and personal responsibility. As one participant explains, “Before, I thought my path was already decided. Volunteering made me realize that I still had choices to make” (P11). Such statements suggest that EC service fosters a sense of ownership over career development, even when outcomes remain uncertain or provisional.

Temporal references play an important role in how this reflexive process is narrated. Participants frequently distinguish between a “before” and an “after” EC engagement, positioning volunteering as a transitional phase that destabilizes prior expectations. One student reflects, “Before volunteering, I was focused only on getting a degree. After, I started asking myself what kind of work I actually want to do” (P4). This temporal framing highlights the exploratory function of EC service, not as confirmation of predetermined plans but as a space for re-evaluating direction.

Career reflexivity is further legitimized through narratives anchored in concrete encounters rather than abstract projections. Participants repeatedly link moments of reassessment to specific situations

experienced during EC service, such as interacting with vulnerable populations or assuming unexpected responsibilities. As one participant notes, "Working with people in difficulty made me question whether my career choices really matched my values" (P16). These experiential references function as justificatory anchors, grounding vocational reflection in practice rather than speculation.

In several cases, EC service triggers more explicit reorientations. Participants describe internal negotiations between previously dominant career scripts and alternative possibilities revealed through volunteering. These shifts are rarely framed as abrupt conversions; instead, they emerge through gradual comparison, doubt, and experimentation. One student recounts: "I always thought I would work in management, but through volunteering I discovered I enjoyed teaching more than I expected" (P8). Such accounts underline the provisional and revisable nature of career construction, shaped through accumulation rather than rupture.

At the same time, reflexivity is marked by uncertainty and ambivalence. Participants often articulate their future orientations using cautious formulations that signal openness rather than closure. Metaphors such as "opening new doors" or "waking up" appear frequently, indicating moments of awareness without implying immediate decision-making. As one participant puts it, "It opened doors in my mind, but I'm still figuring out which one to take" (P14). These expressions reveal that career self-management is experienced as an ongoing process, characterized by exploration rather than resolution.

Importantly, the depth and intensity of reflexivity vary across narratives. While some participants describe significant shifts in orientation, others report more subtle adjustments or confirmations of existing intentions. These differences suggest that EC service does not produce uniform career effects but instead offers a flexible space for individualized meaning-making. In some cases, volunteering reinforces prior aspirations by providing experiential validation; in others, it introduces doubt and alternative imaginaries.

Altogether, these findings indicate that EC service functions as a critical arena for career self-management at a pre-career stage. Rather than delivering ready-made vocational answers, EC engagement creates conditions for reflexivity, negotiation, and provisional orientation. Students emerge not as passive recipients of career guidance, but as actors engaged in the ongoing construction of their professional trajectories, navigating uncertainty, values, and responsibility in relation to future work.

EC Service as a Context for Developing and Mobilising Employability Resources

Participants' narratives frame service as a space in which employability resources are not simply acquired but progressively constructed, interpreted, and negotiated. Rather than presenting skills as predefined assets accumulated through participation, students describe a more uncertain and reflexive process in which competencies emerge through practice, interaction, and exposure to demanding situations. Employability, in this sense, appears less like a stable outcome than as an evolving interpretation of what counts as valuable and transferable for future professional contexts.

Across accounts, students emphasize learning through responsibility and interaction. They refer to qualities such as communication, adaptability, cooperation, and reliability, not as abstract attributes

but as capacities forged through concrete encounters. One participant explains, “You don’t learn how to communicate in theory; you learn it when you have to deal with people who don’t think like you” (P6). Such statements suggest that employability resources are experienced as situated and relational, shaped by engagement with others rather than by formal training alone.

Communication occupies a central place in these narratives. Participants frequently describe learning how to initiate dialogue, manage tension, and adjust their discourse to different audiences. However, these skills are rarely framed in purely instrumental terms. Instead, they are associated with confidence, emotional regulation, and the ability to navigate uncertainty. As one student notes, “I learned how to speak, but also when to stay quiet and listen” (P10). This formulation points to a nuanced understanding of communication as a social practice rather than technical competence.

Relational resources are similarly foregrounded. Participants describe EC service as a space where cooperation, mutual dependence, and informal leadership are learned through collective action. These experiences foster awareness of group dynamics and personal positioning within teams. One participant reflects, “You realize quickly that you can’t do everything alone; you have to rely on others, and they rely on you” (P15). Such accounts indicate that employability resources are co-produced within collective settings rather than individually accumulated.

At the same time, participants demonstrate an emerging – though uneven – capacity to translate these experiences into employability-related language. Some explicitly connect their EC involvement to future professional contexts, while others remain hesitant or ambiguous about how such competencies will be recognized beyond volunteering. As one student admits, “I feel I gained a lot, but I’m not always sure how to explain it when people ask what I learned” (P22). This hesitation reveals a critical tension between experiential learning and its external validation in labour market contexts.

Symbolic language further shapes how employability resources are narrated. Metaphors related to discipline, endurance, and commitment – often drawn from collective or quasi-military imagery – are used to convey the intensity of engagement. These metaphors emphasize effort and constraint, suggesting that competencies are forged through sustained involvement rather than spontaneous participation. Yet they also imply a normative dimension, where commitment and resilience are implicitly valued as markers of professional worth.

Importantly, the construction of employability resources is not portrayed as uniformly empowering. Beneath narratives of skill development, traces of pressure and self-expectation are discernible. Some participants express concern about the need to “make something useful” out of their experiences, hinting at an internalisation of employability norms. As one student notes, “Sometimes you feel that if you don’t turn it into something professional, it’s almost wasted” (P17). Such remarks point to the ambivalence of EC service as both a learning opportunity and a site of implicit obligation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that EC service functions as a complex arena for the construction of employability resources, where competencies are learned, interpreted, and valued through experience rather than predefined frameworks. Students do not merely accumulate skills; they engage in an ongoing process of sense-making, negotiating what these resources mean and how they might be mobilized in uncertain professional futures. This process highlights both the potential and the limits of EC engagement as a pathway to employability, underscoring its contingent and context-dependent nature.

Taken together, the findings indicate that EC service functions as a multifaceted experiential space in which identity construction, vocational reflexivity, and the development of employability resources are closely intertwined. Participants do not describe EC engagement as an isolated or marginal activity, but rather as an experience that permeates their personal and professional self-understanding. Through their narratives, EC service emerges as a site where students actively negotiate who they are, what they value, and how they envision their future roles in society and the labour market.

The empirical patterns identified across the three themes suggest that learning within EC service is neither linear nor uniform. Identity transformation unfolds gradually through immersion, emotional engagement, and collective participation, while career reflexivity is shaped by moments of questioning, reassessment, and tentative reorientation rather than definitive decision-making. Similarly, the development of employability resources appears as a cumulative and uneven process, in which competencies are progressively recognized, named, and projected into future contexts, but not always with equal clarity or confidence. These dynamics highlight the situated and contingent nature of pre-career development within EC service.

Importantly, the findings reveal a dual movement within participants' discourses. On the one hand, EC service is associated with empowerment, expressed through increased agency, self-awareness, and confidence in one's ability to navigate complex social and professional environments. On the other hand, participants implicitly position themselves as responsible for interpreting, valuing, and mobilising these experiences in relation to future employment. This tension suggests that while EC service provides meaningful opportunities for growth, it also places the burden of translation and capitalisation largely on individuals, particularly at a stage where professional identities remain in formation.

Taken as a whole, these findings offer an empirically grounded understanding of how students at a pre-career stage make sense of EC service as a learning and developmental experience. By foregrounding participants' own constructions and interpretations, the analysis provides a nuanced foundation for examining how EC engagement intersects with broader employability discourses and institutional expectations. This synthesis thus prepares the ground for a critical discussion of the role assigned to EC service within contemporary higher education and its implications for students' trajectories.

Discussion, limitations & perspectives

Voluntary service is widely recognized as a multifaceted social phenomenon, encompassing a broad range of practices, motivations, and meanings (Handy et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012). While it is commonly defined as freely chosen activity aimed at benefiting others without financial remuneration (Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Edwards, 2002), such definitions only partially capture its complexity. Voluntary engagement also operates as a relational and symbolic space where individuals negotiate values, identities, and social belonging, thereby contributing to the maintenance of civil society (McAllum, 2017). As Wuthnow (1991) argues, volunteering often responds to intrinsic psychological and moral needs, allowing individuals to experience purpose, coherence, and contribution. Our findings suggest that these dimensions remain central, but they are increasingly entangled with concerns related to employability and career construction.

The diatextual analysis (DTA) of students' narratives reveals that engagement in service is not experienced as accidental or purely altruistic. Rather, participants construct their involvement as a deliberate choice that responds simultaneously to personal aspirations, social commitments, and emerging career concerns. Through *subjectivity*, *argumentation*, and *modality*, students position themselves as active agents navigating multiple expectations. This confirms prior research showing that volunteering can enhance self-awareness and support informed academic and vocational decision-making (Barton et al., 2019; Kim & Morgül, 2017; Evans & Yusof, 2023), but it also nuances these findings by showing how reflexivity is discursively produced rather than simply reported.

A key contribution of this study lies in its critical illumination of how employability resources are constructed and legitimized through EC service. The findings support existing literature highlighting the role of volunteering in the development of soft skills such as communication, interpersonal competence, and value-driven attributes (Knepper et al., 2015; Păceșilă, 2015; Khasanzyanova, 2017). However, the analysis also reveals that the translation of these experiences into employability capital is neither automatic nor uniform. Students assume a significant degree of responsibility for identifying, articulating, and projecting their acquired competencies into future professional contexts. This observation resonates with broader debates on the individualisation of employability, where responsibility for career success is progressively shifted from institutions to individuals.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce the relevance of conceptualising EC service as a form of lifelong learning, particularly at a pre-career stage. They extend earlier work on early-stage career management (Bentaleb & Boutannoura, 2013) by demonstrating how identity transformation, vocational reflexivity, and employability construction are intertwined processes rather than sequential steps. Importantly, the study shows that EC service does not simply confirm pre-existing career intentions; it often destabilizes them, opening spaces for doubt, reassessment, and alternative professional imaginaries. This challenges linear models of employability development and supports more dynamic, constructivist perspectives.

Methodologically, the use of narrative data and DTA proved particularly effective in capturing these dynamics. By focusing on how students *talk about* their experiences rather than merely *what* they report, the analysis reveals the affective, symbolic, and argumentative dimensions of career construction. The emergence of metaphors – such as the recurring “commando” image – illustrates how participants draw on culturally loaded symbols to make sense of discipline, collective engagement, and responsibility (Chambré, 1989; Aydinli et al., 2016). Rather than treating such metaphors as rhetorical embellishments, the DTA framework allows them to be interpreted as meaningful indicators of how employability and commitment are subjectively framed.

At the same time, the findings invite a more cautious interpretation of the growing enthusiasm surrounding EC service as a lever for employability. While participants report empowerment, confidence, and skill development, they also implicitly internalize the expectation that they must continuously self-optimize and capitalize on their experiences. This tension raises important questions about the boundaries between learning, civic engagement, and market-oriented self-management. The risk, as suggested by several narratives, is that volunteering may become subtly instrumentalized, valued primarily for its employability returns rather than its social or ethical significance.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, combined with a relatively small and self-selected sample, limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, the reliance on retrospective narratives may amplify positive reinterpretations of experience, particularly in contexts where employability discourse is already salient. Third, the study focuses on perceived outcomes rather than objectively measured career trajectories, which calls for caution when extrapolating long-term effects.

These limitations nonetheless open promising avenues for future research. Longitudinal narrative designs could capture how meanings attributed to EC service evolve over time and across career transitions (Fugate et al., 2004). Further studies might also explore how external disruptions – such as the coronavirus pandemic – reshape the relationship between volunteering, employability, and career construction (Boutannoura, 2023a). Finally, mixed-method approaches combining qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative indicators could deepen understanding of how experiential learning is differentially recognized and rewarded in the labour market (Cortini & Tria, 2014).

In summary, this study highlights voluntary EC service as a complex and ambivalent space of learning, identity work, and employability construction. Rather than offering a simplistic solution to graduate employability, EC engagement appears as a site where empowerment and responsibility, opportunity and constraint, coexist. Recognising this complexity is essential for higher education institutions and policymakers seeking to valorise EC service without reducing it to a mere employability instrument. Understanding how students themselves make sense of these experiences provides a critical foundation for more balanced and reflexive approaches to career preparation and lifelong learning.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how higher education students engaged in service interpret their experiences in relation to identity development, career reflexivity, and employability construction. The findings reveal three interrelated empirical patterns: EC service operates as a site of identity reconstruction, as a space for early-stage career self-management, and as a context for the development and capitalisation of employability resources. Together, these patterns highlight the centrality of EC engagement in students' meaning-making processes at a pre-career stage.

Beyond the acquisition of practical skills, participants' narratives demonstrate that EC service fosters reflexivity, self-awareness, and an expanded understanding of professional and social roles. Rather than merely reinforcing predefined career trajectories, EC engagement often prompts students to question initial assumptions, reassess priorities, and explore alternative vocational possibilities. Employability, in this sense, is not constructed as a static outcome but as a dynamic and interpretive process shaped through experience, discourse, and social interaction.

At the same time, the study draws attention to important tensions embedded in the growing valorisation of EC service. While participants report empowerment, confidence, and a strengthened sense of agency, they also implicitly assume responsibility for translating their experiences into employability capital. This finding suggests that EC service simultaneously functions as an opportunity for learning and as a mechanism through which expectations of self-management and self-optimisation are

internalized. Recognising this ambivalence is essential for avoiding overly instrumental readings of volunteering that reduce its educational and civic value to labour market utility alone.

The scope of the study nevertheless presents limitations. The focus on specific forms of volunteering within higher education contexts restricts the diversity of experiences examined and may not fully capture the range of informal learning processes associated with other types of civic or community engagement. In addition, the cross-sectional and narrative-based design privileges perceived outcomes over long-term career effects, calling for caution in extrapolating the durability of employability gains.

These limitations point toward several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies would allow for a more robust examination of how competencies and dispositions developed through EC service are transferred, reinterpreted, or contested over time within formal employment contexts. Further research could also explore a broader array of voluntary practices and institutional settings, as well as the role of organisational actors, educational managers, and external disruptions – such as the Coronavirus pandemic – in shaping the conditions under which employability capital is recognized and valued.

Overall, this chapter underscores the importance of approaching service not merely as a supplementary activity, but as a complex learning space situated at the intersection of personal development, career construction, and employability discourse. By foregrounding students' own interpretations, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how EC engagement shapes early professional trajectories. In doing so, it provides a reflective foundation for higher education institutions and human resource stakeholders seeking to engage with employability in ways that are both developmentally meaningful and socially responsible.

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