



**Studium
Lehre
Internationales**



Success through Volunteerism

- a Guide for International Students

THIS BROCHURE IS FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND AND THE STATE OF HESSEN



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1. What is volunteerism?

Volunteerism is a kind of social or civic engagement that is **performed voluntarily** and **not aimed at material gain**. It also **benefits society** and is **generally undertaken publicly** (German Bundestag 2002, 32). In Germany, there are a wide range of volunteer opportunities.

Volunteerism helps to strengthen society and fosters relationships between members of the community. It rarely takes place alone, but mostly through initiatives or in groups in which people come together and pursue a common goal. These goals vary depending on the interest group. For instance, there are associations and clubs for environmental protection, animal protection, sports or other leisure activities, childcare, cultural promotion, community support or social projects, and more.

Volunteerism usually begins with active participation in community events. Over the long term, such activities in clubs and groups often lead to the assumption of regular tasks. One example is working as a coach or board member as part of an amateur football club. Here, volunteers help the team to train

and compete by performing different organizational tasks of the club in their free time **without being compensated**. At the **university**, student volunteers are organized in various groups, e.g. in student councils, which advocate for the students of their department regarding university policy and can even influence personnel decisions.

There are countless other examples of volunteerism. But what makes volunteerism in Frankfurt and Germany special? What challenges do international students have in this area and how do they benefit from being volunteers? How can **you find a volunteering opportunity** that suits **your interests and lifestyle**? Our guide focuses on these questions with the aim to help you to get more involved in your community.

2. Volunteerism in Frankfurt and Germany

In Germany, volunteering has always been an important pillar of democracy. In Germany, 28.8 million people are engaged in volunteer work (BMFSFJ 2021, 4; as of 2019). The number of volunteers has grown steadily in recent years.

The most popular areas are sports, education, and culture. The proportion of people who volunteer is highest between the ages 14 and 49. Pupils, university students, and graduates are especially active in volunteer work.

Volunteerism is also playing an increasingly important political role in Germany. Since 2002, the subcommittee for civic engagement has regularly advised the Bundestag on successful volunteerism.



Since the referendum passed on October 28, 2018, the importance of volunteering has also been enshrined in the Hessian constitution: "Volunteering for the common good receives the protection and support from the state, municipalities and associations of municipalities." (Article 26f, Hessian Constitution).

Typically in large cities, unlike in rural regions and small cities, a smaller proportion of people is engaged in volunteer work. This trend, however, does not apply to Frankfurt (BMFSFJ 2021, 19). Charitable foundations and clubs with engaged citizens are closely linked to the city's history: 61.1% of the adult citizens have been engaged in some kind of volunteer work (Hauptamt und Stadtmarketing, 5). The city of Frankfurt itself also promotes volunteerism by holding regular events (e.g. the annual volunteer fair) and providing volunteer cards and certificates of competence.



Photo by U. Dettmar, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt: Aerial view Westend campus

3. Volunteerism for international students

Around the world, volunteerism has different forms and contexts. What is relatively unique to Germany is its widespread association (*Verein*) system. As a result, people born in Germany or with German citizenship are usually more involved in clubs or associations than people who move here from other countries (BMFSFJ 2021, 18). German citizens and people coming from elsewhere, therefore, have had different formative experiences with volunteerism.

According to surveys, foreign residents are highly motivated to volunteer. While the desire to engage in civic or social work is particularly strong among international students, they are currently not as active as their German peers. There are several reasons for this:

Limited time or a high workload is frequently the primary barrier to volunteerism among international students. They not only have pressure to meet high (examination) requirements in their studies, but many work part-time to finance their studies and afford the cost of living (Backhaus-Maul et al. 2018, 22). Other hurdles include a lack of language skills, as well as a lack of information about volunteer opportunities (ibid.)

This guide therefore gives you a quick introduction to the topic and an overview of the benefits of volunteering. Finally, we present an action plan called "five steps to getting engaged."



Photo by O. Schaffer, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt: Europe Day

4. The benefits of volunteerism

Many social institutions in Germany not only rely on volunteers, but would hardly be able to exist without them. Through their engagement, volunteers directly make a **positive contribution to society**. It's also worth noting that people who are socially engaged have a higher level of life satisfaction and are able to proactively shape their community.

Practicing your language skills

Some international students give up their plans of volunteering due to a lack of knowledge of the German language. It can certainly be difficult to take on volunteer work at the beginning, since general meetings and board meetings in some associations are often quite formal. Nevertheless, German associations both need and want to become more diverse!

Medium- and long-term volunteering actually gives you the opportunity to **improve your language skills**. Many clubs and initiatives even offer help in overcoming language difficulties, for example, through the support from mentors. However, at Goethe University and in Frankfurt, you can also participate in international initiatives where English or other languages are spoken.

Connecting with others at the university, in Frankfurt, in the region

International students will often notice that most of their **friendships** during their studies are with other foreign students. In English-language courses, in particular, many have difficulty getting to know their fellow German students.

Volunteer work in university policy or in student initiatives contributes to your own personal growth, as it allows you to join together with other students from different disciplines. In the student council, you also work side-by-side with German students from your own department and degree program.

This kind of volunteerism enables you to develop new social skills, such as dealing with different points of view or learning to motivate others. Knowledge of public relations or budget management acquired in student initiatives will be an advantage when you start looking for a job. **Making contacts** with people outside the university is a challenge for many international students. Nevertheless, volunteering in Frankfurt in clubs and initiatives offers an excellent opportunity to get to know and work with a diverse range of people.

Acquiring and training key competencies

Clubs and student initiatives face many challenges: How should their various activities be financed? How can new members be recruited? How should the project's target group be addressed?

Your volunteer work will introduce you to new problem-solving approaches and methodologies. At the same time, it offers you the opportunity to leverage your strengths and develop important **key competencies** that can significantly enhance your career development and help you to expand your networks. When choosing volunteer work, pay attention to the competencies you can contribute in a meaningful way and the fields you would like to learn more about. Ideally, you will be able to put the knowledge you gained during your study into practice through volunteering.

Preparing for the job market

It may sound far off, but it is important in the early stage of your bachelor's or master's degree to become familiar with the job market and prepare for it.

Volunteerism in the context of starting a career will permit you to **build up a broad network** of acquaintances, friends and potential employers, which will serve you well later on when you begin looking for a job in Germany. Studies show that volunteerism strengthens your competencies when embarking on a profession, as well as your knowledge of German and understanding of the labor market (Lokande 2016, 17).

Volunteering can be key to launching a **successful career**, because many human-resources managers view it as a valuable addition to the final grades on your academic transcript. Volunteerism is more than a part of your CV; it provides information about your qualifications, problem-solving skills, and ability to interact with different kinds of people.

Becoming involved in your community

Volunteering strengthens social ties. It therefore greatly reinforces the **feeling of belonging** of international students and the desire to stay in Germany after graduation. The close social contacts help reduce prejudices and promote open-mindedness. Volunteerism therefore plays a key role in social integration.

5. Five steps to getting engaged

Let's now look at **how you can identify** volunteer programs that are right for you. The options mentioned here are only intended spark to your own ideas and to help orient you during your initial search.

Step 1: What am I interested in?

The volunteer work you choose should be interesting to you and include activities that make you want to get involved. Volunteerism should not be an additional burden to your studies. Therefore, it is important that you consider ahead of time what field captures your imagination. It may make sense to think about your hobbies and interests. For example, if you are a passionate volleyball player, you might enjoy supporting youth teams as part of local sports club; if you like to write short stories, you could contribute to a student literary magazine. Your own particular interests are a good starting point to look for volunteer opportunities in initiatives and clubs.

Step 2: What do I want to learn?

Volunteering can also help you learn something completely new. Before your start, therefore, it makes sense to reflect on the skills that you might be able to develop through your volunteer work. Here are just a few examples:

- In child and youth work, you can develop pedagogical skills
- As a referee, you can develop your decision-making skills
- As fire-brigade volunteer, you can develop your ability to work in a team and deal with stressful situations.

As a volunteer, you can also put your existing knowledge into practice. In short, every volunteer activity will help you develop yourself in meaningful ways. Keep this in mind when choosing to volunteer and make the most of the opportunity!

Step 3: How much time do I have?

Alongside studying and possibly a part-time job and hobbies, there is often little time left for other things. It is therefore important to think about how much time you can dedicate to volunteering and for how long. Do you have a certain number of hours per week or would you rather volunteer on an irregular basis?

No matter your time commitment, there are opportunities for everyone:

- In clubs and associations, there are often weekly or monthly meetings and regular activities
- Other organizations, like animal shelters, are happy to receive spontaneous help and do not expect a firm commitment over an extended period
- At events or festivals, support is often needed only for a few days, e.g. during the semester break or on weekends

There are medium, long-term as well as one-off volunteer opportunities, so you can choose an activity that best fits your schedule.

Step 4: How do I find a volunteer opportunity?

After considering your schedule and interests, it's time to look for an appropriate activity. Here are some ways to find volunteer work:

- Ask friends and acquaintances already involved in clubs how they volunteer and why. If you have similar interests, pay a visit to the club in question to get a sense of the environment and how things work.
- The city of Frankfurt and the AStA organize the volunteer fair and a so-called market of opportunities. At such events, you can quickly learn about different clubs and initiatives and talk to people who are already involved in related volunteer activities.
 - Frankfurt volunteer fair (Ehrenamtsmesse Frankfurt): About 50 projects are presented along with information about what they do and their need for volunteers; details on the next volunteer fair will be published soon on the city's website. In recent years, *Ehrenamtsmesse Frankfurt* has been held from August to September
 - Market of opportunities (Markt der Möglichkeiten): AStA (general student committee) at Goethe University organizes a market with selected initiatives once a semester; information is announced via Facebook (@astafrankfurt)
 - UNISTART: Central institutions of Goethe University, student initiatives and university groups are presented as part of "UNISTART": www.uni-frankfurt.de/48370161/unistart-frankfurt
- You can also use databases and online platforms to get an overview of clubs and organizations looking for volunteers. There, you'll find the contact details of organizations that interest you.
 - "Studentische Partizipation" website: The platform lists opportunities for Goethe University students to get involved in university groups and student initiatives: www.uni-frankfurt.de/stud-partizipation
 - "Engagement und Ehrenamt" website: This platform lists opportunities to get involved in initiatives and groups outside the university: www.uni-frankfurt.de/128956370/Engagement_und_Ehrenamt
 - www.ehrenamtssuche-hessen.de (search engine for volunteering in Hessen)
 - www.betterplace.org (Germany-wide donation platform, highlighting different current projects)
 - www.caritas-frankfurt.de (Catholic charity with volunteer projects)
 - www.diakonie-frankfurt-offenbach.de (establishment of the Evangelical Church with volunteer projects)
- There are also volunteer agencies in Frankfurt, which not only offer an overview of existing volunteer opportunities, but can also advise you personally and answer any questions:
 - www.freizeit-helden.de (volunteer platform for Frankfurt and Rhein-Main)
 - www.freiwillig-agentur.de (volunteer agency of workers' welfare association AWO Frankfurt)

If you have any questions about volunteerism or would like more information, you can email us: engagement@uni-frankfurt.de

Step 5: Am I satisfied with my experience?

It is important that you regularly reflect on your volunteer experience:

- Am I satisfied with my volunteer work?

- What competencies have I developed? What knowledge do I want to acquire in the future?
- Can I achieve my goals through volunteering?
- Besides my volunteer work, do I have enough time for my studies and hobbies?
- Do I want to invest more or less time in volunteering?
- Would I be able to contribute or learn more in different initiative?
- Did I get to know other people in my volunteer work?
- Did my volunteer work allow me to meet my career-related goal or learn more about the German job market?

6. Other volunteer opportunities

Goethe University offers a range of opportunities in volunteerism, skill development, and professional networking. There are a number of options specifically designed for international students.

Buddy Program

The Buddy Program provides international first-year students with a “buddy,” i.e. a student in a higher semester who helps them to get settled at the university. Buddies can share their experience and receive a certificate for their volunteer work. The goal of the Buddy Program is to help ensure that international students get off to a good start in their studies and to encourage cultural and linguistic exchange at the university. Go to: www.uni-frankfurt.de/120954202/Buddy_Programm

Support service for international students

The support service at Goethe University assists international students in dealing with authorities, finding an accommodation, and filling out forms. It also offers translation assistance. The support service is always looking for more students to get involved. Go to: www.uni-frankfurt.de/120954068/Begleitservice_zu_Beh%C3%B6rden

Kompass International

In the program, international students have the opportunity to attend a variety of workshops and seminars to develop various skills that will help them in their studies and ultimately start their career. Go to: www.uni-frankfurt.de/120847310/Kompass_International

International Career Service

Key competency workshops, seminars, and training sessions communicate information about what is required to be successful in your studies and on the job market. You also receive practical tips on part-time jobs, internships, and scholarships, along with professional application advice. The main goal of the program is to support international students in various ways from the start of their studies to their entry into the job market. Go to: www.uni-frankfurt.de/94784790/International_Career

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