

Universities of the Third Age for Communities

*What Are the
Results of Our Study?*





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The program "Universities of the Third Age for Communities" ("UTAs for Communities") has been held since 2013 by the Association of Creative Initiatives "ę" in collaboration with the Polish-American Freedom Foundation. 5 editions of the program have already been organised offering support in building internal volunteer groups to 50 universities of the third age all around Poland.

Introduction

In mid 2017 the Association of Creative Initiatives "ę" commissioned a study of the program "Universities of the Third Age for Communities" held since 2013. The study was meant to summarise past editions of the program; to accumulate experience from 40 UTAs from across Poland and to use that knowledge to learn how the program works: the benefits it offers to seniors, the support it gives universities, and the effects it brings to local communities. The Association also intended to use the study to identify changes the program needs so that it can be even better and more efficient in answering the needs of seniors-volunteers and UTAs.

The study was conducted by Ośrodek Ewaluacji (Evaluation Centre). Phone conversations were held with program participants from 36 UTAs. 6 study visits were organised in selected UTAs from different regions. The main conclusions of the study are presented below.

More and more UTAs

The project "UTAs for Communities" is aimed at Universities of the Third Age. It accommodates the needs of these institutions. And the number of them is growing! Currently it's 614 (as of March 2017, <http://zdrowy-senior.org/universytety-trzecie-go-wieku-w-polsce-w-liczbach/>) and counting. The goals of universities of third age include improving life quality of senior citizens, mostly through intellectual, psychological and physical stimulation. UTAs cater for the needs of those who have no more professional ob-

ligations by offering them the opportunity to learn, to develop their hobbies, to take care of their health and fitness. They also offer opportunities for social activities and contact with other people.

Just as stated, the goals of most UTAs in Poland usually focus on education, development, health, spending time actively and seniors being "sociable". The students of UTAs are usually educated, with rich life and professional experience. Moreover, they are curious about the world and they like people. It is clear that the goals of UTAs are consistent with the needs of senior citizens.

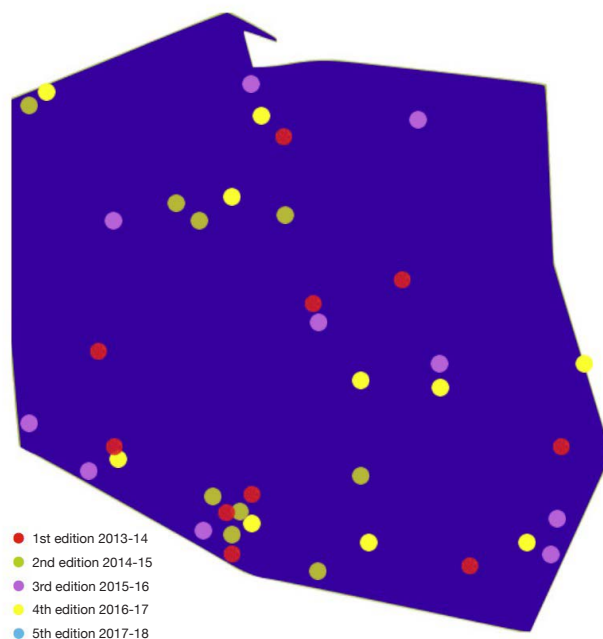
The missing link in UTA development

People are social creatures, and as such, they have a conscious or unconscious need of doing something good for others or for the so-called common weal. But only 1 UTA in 10 pays any attention to activism among seniors - their students - in the field of socially useful work and doing things for others. Seniors who enter UTAs are often burdened with a negative attitude towards social work. Or they think that they have worked enough throughout their lives and now they want to do something just for themselves. Or they have unpleasant ideas about voluntary work. Seniors often say: We had social work in socialism. We've done our bit of working for free.

And so, on the one hand, we can be glad that Poland has a growing number of UTAs. On the other hand, however, our country is among those with the lowest social engagement rate among senior citizens. The Active Ageing Index - a regular study conducted in all EU member states since 2010 (Active Ageing Index 2014, http://www.age-platform.eu/images/stories/Publications/AAI_2014_Report.pdf, p.21, UNECE, 2015) places Poland in the 28th position (out of 28!).



Number of UTAs in Poland



We consider this a serious problem, as the lack of senior activity makes it impossible to balance local communities and the whole society - seniors will continue to be left out.

UTAs undoubtedly shape a positive image of seniors and ageing. They also establish proper conditions for active ageing. But many refuse to or are unable to include seniors in the life of the society.

The Polish-American Freedom Foundation, the initiator and financing party of the program "Universities of the Third Age" and our program "UTAs for Communities" organised within its framework, has been collaborating with the Association of Creative Initiatives "ę" for many years now to find ways to support universities of the third age so that they can fully use the potential of their students and make them part of the development of their own UTAs. Most of all, it teaches them ways to engage students in activities aimed at their local communities and the common weal in broad sense - which always results in the improvement of the well-being of seniors in the end.

The program "UTAs for Communities" was established to address the problem of insufficient social activity of senior citizens. 10 UTAs take part each year. At first, the project offers

a series of several-day-long workshops, where teams representing their UTAs (each UTA sends a team of 3 students) receive material and technical support in the field of organising voluntary services and running social activities. Each "trio" defines their own project, works out an activity aimed at the local community. UTAs receive micro-grants and support to prepare and effect projects. At the same time tutors (from the Flying Cultural Animators network) watch over each UTA, visit them, suggest tested solutions or organise workshops regarding relevant subjects. The program ends with a summary of all local activities and a presentation for all UTAs and all participants of the program edition.

What needs does the program "UTAs for Communities" answer?

UTAs applied for the program with hopes and expectations. Some UTAs wanted to use the knowledge and experience of their students who do work for the sake of others already. They expected that the program will prove helpful in using the seniors' potential to organise activities for the community.



Other UTAs applied in order to grow as an organisation. They wanted to gain new knowledge and to receive support so that they can then use their developed potential to serve their students better. They also expected that the project can activate UTA students, teach them to plan and run activities.

Other UTAs decided to participate because they understand the social benefits of voluntary service. The students themselves declared a need to participate in such activities. They were aware that this would give them the feeling that they are needed and/or new acquaintances.

Who is this program for?

Until now, 50 UTAs from around Poland took part in the project. They were all very different - some from big cities, other from small towns. There were UTAs operating from within universities, community centres and associations. Some had 60 students, while others had 3000. A significant percentage of the UTAs had experience with senior voluntary service prior to the project, but for some it was a brand new area of interest.

Despite all differences, all UTAs applying for the project had one thing in common. They saw value in senior activism and they decided to send 3 students each to the Association's training. At some UTAs students were willing to go because they were curious about the details of the program and they wanted to try something new. In other cases, students had to be talked into participating. But after the training, all participants were satisfied with their participation in workshops and in the whole program.

Who is a UTA volunteer?

The vast majority of UTA representatives participating in the program were female. They had personal experience in working for the sake of others, such as taking care of an older neighbour or giving someone a hand with shopping. Throughout their lives they often participated in a number of undertakings: they were scouts, they took part in estate council meetings, in grassroots organisations or the parish council.

There is one interesting finding regarding their professional experience - it turns out they used to work mostly as teachers or other professionals who require specifically soft social skills -

like in commerce and human resources.

They are from 60 to 70 years old. Their grandchildren are usually quite big; their parents have gone, leaving the time devoted to them in the late stages of their lives free. Most of them have lived an active lifestyle. They kept open to novelties, aware of their own passions, even when they had to move them aside for some time

I have always been active - I liked new things, I liked overcoming obstacles. I like travel, I do sport. I like doing things for others. What I dislike is a dull life. I was looking for something to keep me busy after my husband's death and so I ended up at the UTA - Elżbieta tells us. Her UTA took part in the second edition of the project. She collaborated with other seniors to establish a peer support network for former UTA students.

But there are other volunteers in the project - who had only just found the courage to try new challenges - and all thanks to workshops. Urszula tells her story: *I always believed that I was meant for cleaning and doing the dishes. I never engaged in activism before. I found the courage to try when my husband died.* The project "UTAs for Communities" let Urszula "find" her place at her UTA.

As you can see, the project attracts people who have things in common. Their outlook on life and their professional experience usually provide a fertile ground for new challenges related to voluntary service at the UTA.



What do UTA volunteers do?

Each participating UTA is encouraged to try social activism in the local community. They receive a small grant to fund the idea. What do senior volunteers do in these projects? It's easier to say what they don't do!

They organise sports contests in community parks or Nordic walking for people from their neighbourhood. There are trips - short and long - organised by the volunteers for children from a rural school or a group of people with disabilities. There are balls at the community centre - seniors bake cakes and lead the dance. Volunteers help kids with homework at the day-care room and they organise art activities or story time reading at the kindergarten. The majority of projects is addressed to children and the youth. Seniors like it. They are happy to share their knowledge and experience with young generations. But UTA volunteers also remember about the elderly and the lonely. They visit nursing homes to give theatre shows or to sing with the inhabitants. Some UTAs took to gardening activities, such as taking care of gardens or communal parks.

Seniors become more visible in their towns and cities. Their activities are appreciated. In-





stitutions and organisations turn to UTAs to establish collaboration. For instance, a kindergarten wanted to make their offer for children more attractive so it invited UTA students to run a chess and board game special interests group. Organisations specialised in food collection turn to UTAs because they know they can count on the seniors' support.

These may seem minor activities. But they are growing in number. 36 UTAs subject to this study organised more than 80 events of different kinds. Thanks to them the civil society gradually gets stronger - seniors muster up courage and take part in solving local problems, such as the elderly living in isolation in nursing homes, children and youth missing parental support, the existence of architectural barriers for seniors and people with disabilities at a city park.

Voluntary services also add to bolstering democratic attitudes and behaviours among senior citizens. From the very first training session we pay attention to group work and group decision-making. Participants learn how to be leaders of volunteer groups and how to collaborate with others at the same time. A UTA volunteer group becomes a conscious entity. It defines its own goals and the scope of its actions.

Of course, we often face crises or conflict for "power". But this confirms the view, that our program enhances the development of democracy and that groups become more and more conscious and that they learn through action. Volunteer groups often influence relationships across the whole UTA as they show that collaboration between students is important and that co-deciding gives good results.

We learn to listen to one another - says Jadwiga. Her UTA volunteer group has 20 members. They organised, among other projects, a trip for people with disabilities.

Our program, though aimed at professionally inactive seniors, does in fact develop their entrepreneurial skills. Take the example of all promotional and marketing activities undertaken by volunteer groups in order to reach audiences and to promote their events. Many groups reach out to sponsors as well, in order to acquire additional funds or in-kind contributions for their projects. Volunteers also manage to utilise the skills and talents of people in their surroundings. One of the seniors remarks: *Money is scarce, but if you organise well, everything works out just fine.*



You have to find sponsors. I took the effort and found them. A friend sewed aprons and each child received one with their names embroidered on them. Another volunteer, whenever there is a ball or another celebration at the community day-care centre, asks UTA students to bake cakes.

Benefits from the project

According to the results of the study, regardless of initial motivation of seniors coming to the first training session, they are all satisfied with their participation in the program. Training sessions teach them why senior social activism is so important. Participants learn ways to activate other seniors, to reach the general population of their areas and to organise valuable projects for them. Lectures and exercises empower them and boost their self-confidence. This program also gives them the opportunity to get to know more about themselves. It teaches them the best strategies of participating in their UTAs, volunteer groups and in life in general. Participants acquire lots of ideas and experience. They get to know other UTAs and their students, they begin to realise that they are not alone - there are people with similar views all around Poland.

Often it isn't easy for them to point out what they particularly liked about the project:

Every hour gave me something good – says Maria, who came to our workshop because the leader of her UTA talked her into it – I opened up thanks to the training and integration sessions. Now I know that I have to help others to improve my own well-being. We have to engage.

A senior from another UTA remarks - Such workshops make you think about yourself: I have skills, I can do stuff, too.

Training is intensive but interesting - it takes the form of workshops. Those who conduct them can encourage seniors to try new things: acting out scenes, taking part in debates. The mood is casual. Tutors and participants are on first name terms, which makes breaking the ice easier.

These meetings are also an opportunity to reconsider the idea of voluntary service together and to come up with ways seniors can engage. Preparing local projects so that they reach their full potential takes up a lot of the time - participants will later bring them to reality in their own UTAs. Volunteers experience joy

and satisfaction as they feel their work is useful for others. They learn that they can benefit as well:

All you give gets back to you eventually. Better go out than sit at home - says Irena who participated in the 4th edition of the program. Irena collaborates with other senior volunteers to organise logic puzzles for the local communities. That way everyone can develop memory and intellectual skills.

Participants of the study stress that "UTAs for Communities" is unique among other training programs and projects. Most of all, it is an opportunity for personal development of participants, but it also brings benefits to the UTAs. Volunteer groups integrate, they are willing to meet and share ideas. The program is an energy shot and the energy spreads among other UTA students. One of the volunteers noticed that the atmosphere of the UTA got warmer after the program. Female seniors felt the spirit of community: *We became more integrated, we became friends. Now we can count on one another and we take responsibility.* Teresa confirms that. Her UTA continued to organise more projects after the program and each of them had volunteer participation: *Voluntary work brings people together, unlike going to lectures*

The program allows seniors to try the knowledge from training in practice. UTAs learn to organise projects from scratch taking into account the actual potential of seniors as well as local needs. Positive experiences encourage many UTAs to reach out for more grants for other projects. That way the financial standing of UTAs is improved.

Usually, vivid volunteer groups become live advertisements of the UTA in its local community. Senior engagement is noticed by locals, including the local authorities. If their actions receive positive attention of the local community, the UTA reaches the position of an important entity, and a potential partner for collabora-

tion. Other seniors, who have kept away from the UTA, begin to notice that old age does not have to be lonely and wearisome.

The study proves that the program changes its participants. Afterwards, they have positive impact on their UTAs in collaboration with volunteer groups. Group work makes UTAs change their surroundings. As a result, seniors and UTAs themselves gain a new image. Moreover, social perception of voluntary work and of the importance of social engagement changes. This influences other seniors, as well as the local community.

When the program ends...

The program ends after one year. It has to, as other UTAs want to work for their communities with the support of the Association. But UTA voluntary work doesn't stop. At a striking majority of the 36 studied UTAs, volunteers continue their activities. Participants continue to use their newly acquired experience. Some seniors became encouraged to do even more and they feel really well in their newly established groups. Some volunteer groups go beyond their initial projects and take on new challenges.

As the program ends, their perception of voluntary work is completely different than before. If the volunteer group is active and visible, it draws the attention of other UTA members and shows them that voluntary work is not a sad and heavy burden. To the contrary, it holds a multitude of activities that bring joy, satisfaction and a sense of mission to life.

At some UTAs volunteer groups become formalised - they pop up in statutes and regulations. A new, outstanding section is created, where empathy and selfless support for the weaker come to the foreground, alongside the joy and satisfaction of volunteers who can finally do something good for the sake of others. UTAs develop their offer - next to education

and hobby development for the elderly, they can also answer their needs in the realm of social work.

Not everything is always perfect. Volunteer groups do experience sickness and conflict. Some groups fall apart and new volunteers have to be found. In such cases the Flying Cultural Animators offer the UTAs substantial support - they visit UTAs "assigned" to them, organise workshops and facilitate problem solving processes. And there is the Association of Creative Initiatives "ę" which keeps in touch with the UTAs and tries to keep inspiring seniors to continue their activities.

Before applying

In the application process for the "UTAs for Communities" program, the Association makes effort to select the most motivated and engaged UTAs. That determines if projects succeed and whether UTAs will really benefit from them.

That is the reason why even before applying for the program (both as a group and individually) it is a good idea to consider whether the UTA is ready to participate. We suggest a short quiz with questions resulting from the experience of former participants of "UTAs for Communities". The first part is meant for those who would like to apply to participate in our training and to become volunteers. The other part holds questions regarding the UTA. They will make it easier to make a conscious decision about applying.



INDIVIDUAL QUIZ

Answer each of the following questions according to your personal opinion.

- ☐ Have you ever helped other people?
- ☐ Have you ever engaged in any projects, dedicated you free time without remuneration?
- ☐ Have you ever engaged in any projects, dedicated you free time without remuneration?
- ☐ Do you like meeting other people?
- ☐ Do you see people around you who need help?
- ☐ Do you like to work in a team, to do things together, even if sometimes it requires conceding or accepting decisions made by the majority?
- ☐ Do you want your UTA to do something for other people, not just for UTA students?
- ☐ Are there people at your UTA that you can count on?
- ☐ Do you like it when a lot is happening around you?

If you answered **YES** to at least one of the questions, the program "UTAs for Communities" can be the right place for you. Apply to join us!

GROUP QUIZ

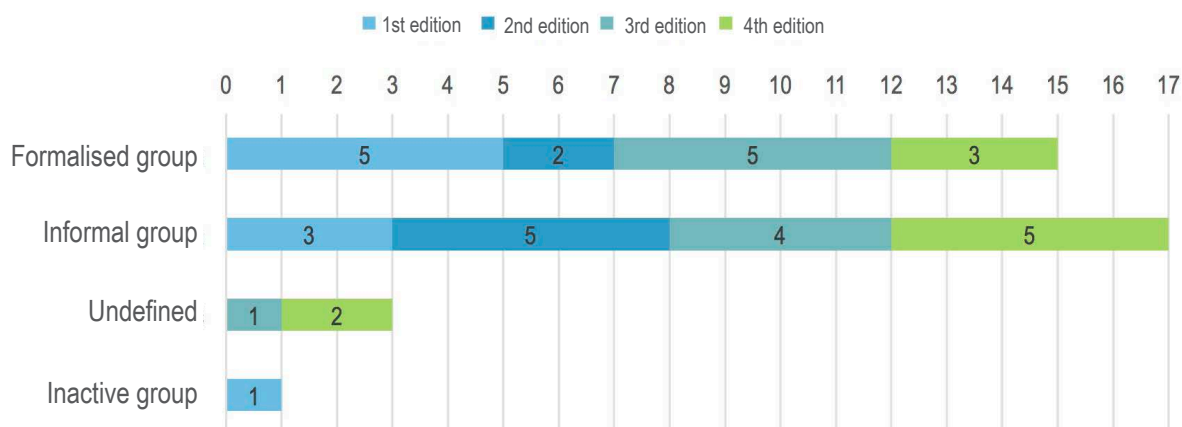
Below you will find a set of questions. Answer each of them according to your personal opinion. Try to discuss these issues with other UTA students.

- ☐ Is the management of your UTA open to change?
- ☐ Is the management of your UTA open to suggestions coming from students?
- ☐ Do you want your UTA to do something for other people, not just UTA students?
- ☐ Do you notice people and institutions around the UTA that need support?
- ☐ Among the students of your UTA - are there people who do things for others? Individually or as a group within the UTA?
- ☐ Among the students of your UTA - are there former teachers or professionals who used to work with people?
- ☐ Among the students of your UTA - are there people who engage in UTA events more often than others?

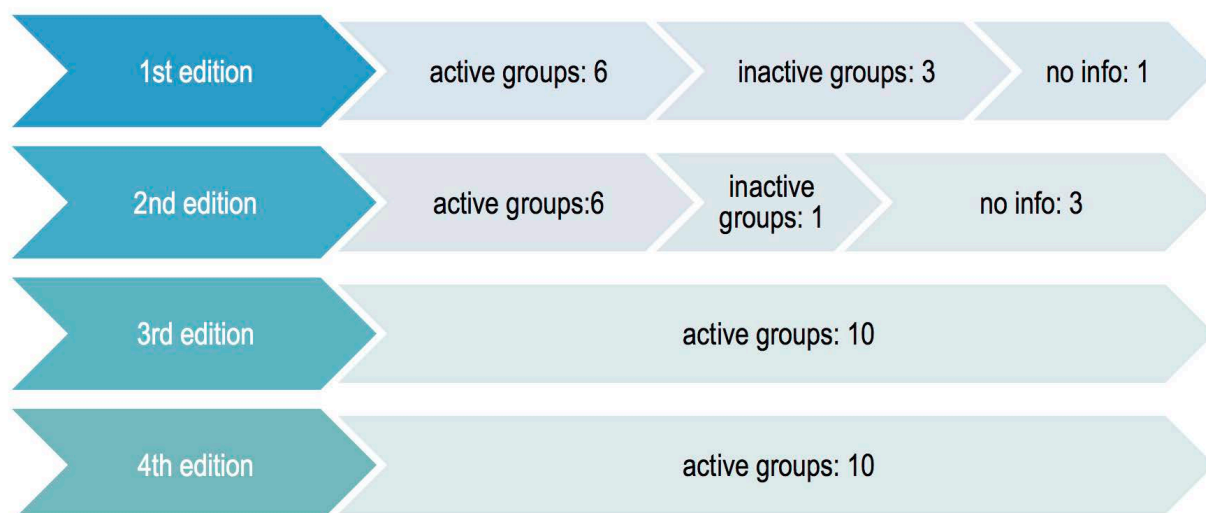
If you answered **YES** to at least one question, we want to encourage your UTA to join the "UTAs for Communities" program.



Formalisation of participating volunteer groups

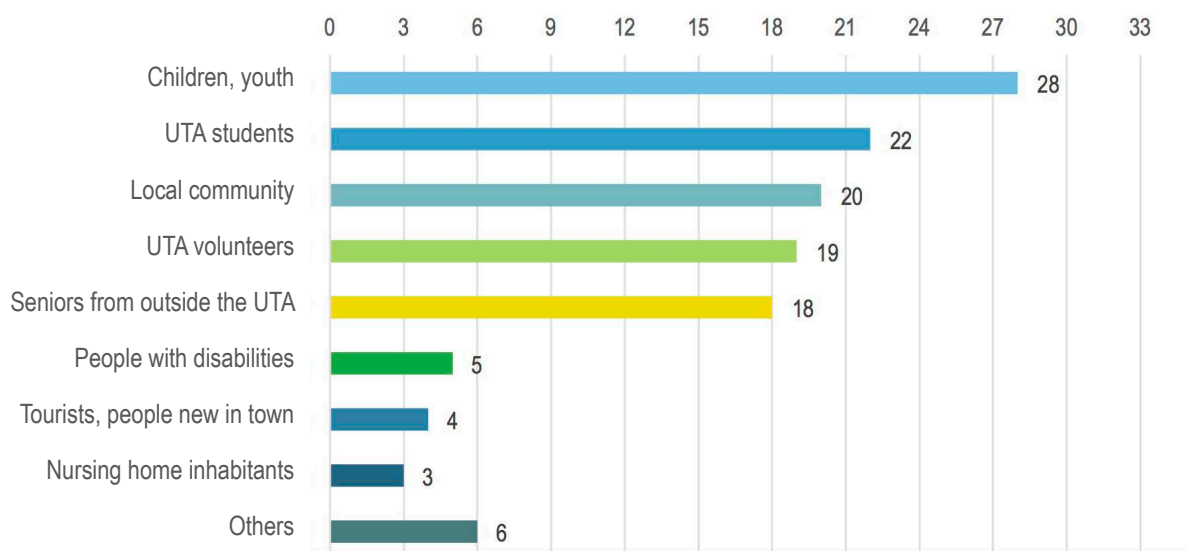


1. The number of UTAs taking part in each edition that formalised voluntary groups by mentioning them in statutes and the number of informal groups.



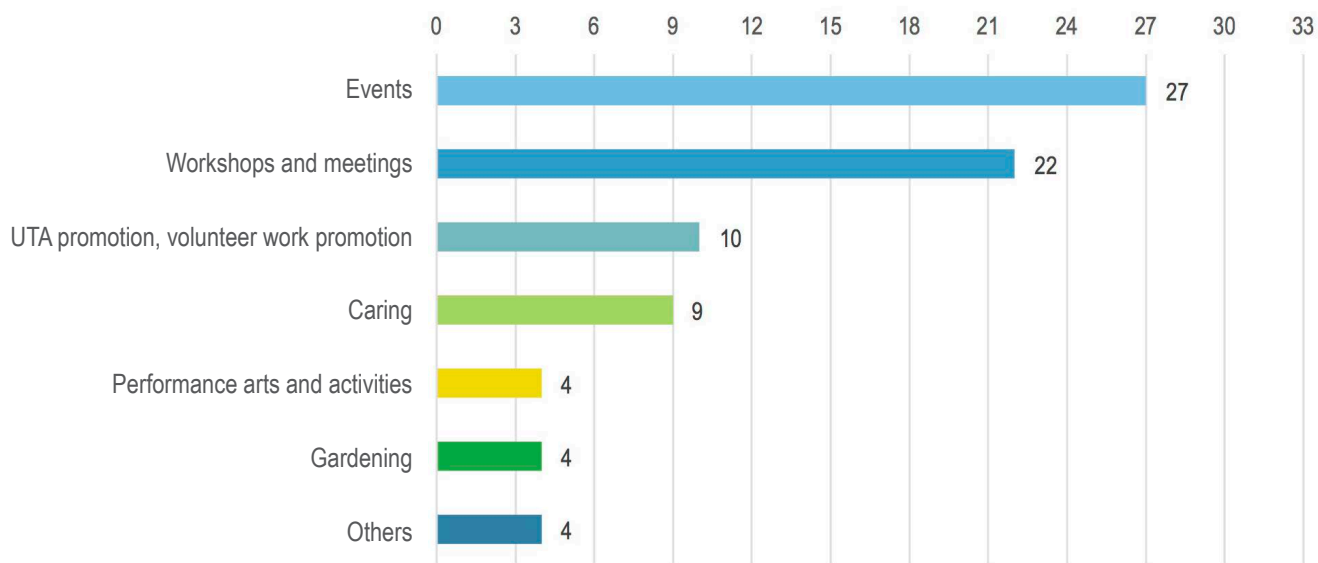
2. Volunteer groups taking part in each edition and their current activity

Beneficiaries of volunteer work



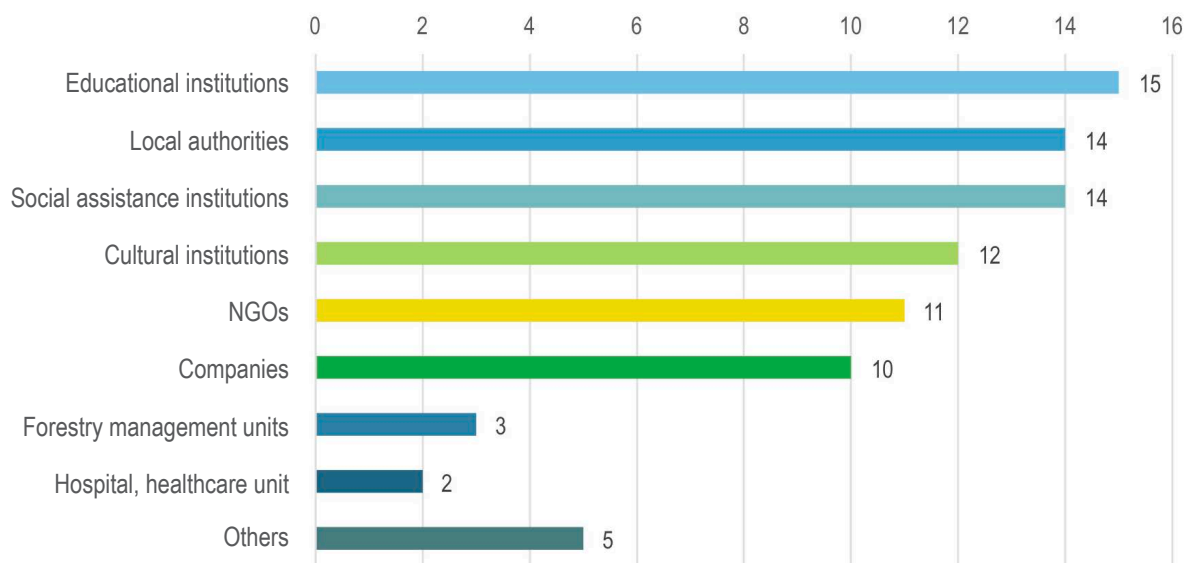
3. Volunteer groups answer the needs of a variety of beneficiaries

Forms of activity of volunteer groups



4. Seniors-volunteers organise a variety of activities

Partners of volunteer groups



5. More and more partners collaborate with UTA volunteer groups