

THE ROLE OF STUDENT VOLUNTEERING IN DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL AND ETIQUETTE: THE CASE OF THE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY FOR THE HUMANITIES AND DEVELOPMENT

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Статья **поступила** 05.06.2025, **принята** к публикации 30.12.2025. Опубликовано онлайн.

Abstract. This article examines the contribution of student volunteering to the development of competencies in diplomatic protocol and etiquette. The study focuses on the case of the International University for the Humanities and Development (IUHD), where volunteering has become an integral part of the educational process and practical training for future diplomats. Through qualitative analysis, document review, and participant observation, the paper identifies the key soft skills and protocol knowledge that student

volunteers acquire during their participation in diplomatic events. The article demonstrates that student volunteering not only enhances academic learning but also serves as a mechanism for instilling values of international communication, cultural awareness, and respect for protocol norms.

Keywords: student volunteering, diplomatic protocol, etiquette, higher education, IUHD, soft skills, international communication

РОЛЬ СТУДЕНЧЕСКОГО ВОЛОНТЁРСТВА В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ ПОНИМАНИЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЧЕСКОГО ПРОТОКОЛА И ЭТИКЕТА: ОПЫТ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА ГУМАНИТАРНЫХ И РАЗВИТИЯ

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу вклада студенческого волонтерства в развитие у студентов понимания норм дипломатического протокола и этикета на примере Международного университета гуманитарных и развития (МУГНР, Туркменистан). В условиях глобализации и возрастающей роли публичной дипломатии участие студентов в международных мероприятиях способствует приобретению практических навыков в сфере межкультурной коммуникации и дипломатического взаимодействия. Используя кейс-стади Волонтерского центра МУГНР,

автор исследует, как систематическое обучение, совмещённое с реальной практикой, формирует у будущих специалистов способности к профессиональному поведению в международной среде. Теоретическая база исследования включает теорию опытного обучения Д. Колба и социологическую теорию ролей Дж. Мида. Результаты демонстрируют, что волонтерская деятельность студентов – это эффективный инструмент неформального обучения, способствующий формированию дипломатической компетентности.

Ключевые слова: студенческое волонтерство, дипломатический протокол, этикет, межкультурная коммуникация, МУГНР, опытное обучение, дипломатическая подготовка, мягкие навыки, неформальное образование, Туркменистан

Introduction

In the modern globalized world, the ability to effectively communicate across cultures and adhere to the rules of diplomatic protocol and etiquette has become a core competence for international relations specialists. Alongside formal education, student volunteering provides an experiential learning platform for developing these skills. Volunteering offers students unique opportunities to participate in international forums, assist in organizing diplomatic events, and engage with representatives of foreign missions and international organizations.

This article explores the experience of the International University for the Humanities and Development (IUHD) in Turkmenistan, where volunteering plays a critical role in fostering students' understanding of diplomatic culture. It is based on a case study of volunteering activities conducted from 2022 to 2024 and includes participant reflections, institutional reports, and observations.

Theoretical Framework

Experiential learning theories, particularly Kolb's model, suggest that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 2014) [1]. Student volunteering falls within the experiential learning paradigm by engaging learners in real-world tasks that develop their interpersonal and intercultural skills. Moreover, Mead's symbolic interactionism underlines the socialization process through which students learn cultural codes and behavioral norms by interacting with diplomats and officials (Mead, 2009) [2].

In the context of diplomacy, etiquette and protocol are structured systems of behavior

that govern official communication and conduct between states (Dyakova, 2015) [3]. By involving students in events where such norms are practiced, volunteering becomes an effective tool for internalizing these standards.

Methodology

The article employs a qualitative case study method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with student volunteers, document analysis (reports of IUHD Protocol Department), and direct observation of several international events hosted by IUHD, including the 3rd International Model UNESCO, diplomatic briefings, and conferences.

Student Volunteering at IUHD: Structure and Activities

At IUHD, student volunteering is organized through the university's Protocol Department, in collaboration with the Department of International Relations and relevant student clubs. Students are selected based on motivation, language skills, and academic performance. Volunteers undergo training in diplomatic protocol, public speaking, and cultural etiquette before participating in events.

Students at IUHD have participated as volunteers in various major international events held in Turkmenistan, including:

- 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games.
- 2018 IWF World Weightlifting Championship.
- 2018 Silk Road Rally.
- 2019 First Caspian Economic Forum.
- 2023 Kurash World Championship.
- Multiple international exhibitions, Olympiads, and summits.

The volunteer training program at IUHD includes:

- Weekly sessions (3 times per week).
- Simulation of protocol scenarios.

- Briefings on Turkmen culture and history.
- Cross-cultural communication exercises.
- Emergency behavior protocols.

Students interact with diplomatic delegations and high-level guests, enhancing their emotional intelligence, adaptability, and global outlook.

Key volunteering activities include:

- Welcoming delegations and high-level guests.
- Assisting in the setup of protocol zones (flags, seating arrangements, gift exchange, etc.).
- Interpreting for foreign guests.
- Managing guest registration and logistical coordination.
- Supporting cultural and educational programs.

These tasks place students in direct contact with high-level officials and expose them to real-life diplomatic settings.

Impact on Protocol and Etiquette Competencies

Interviews with 20 active volunteers indicated a significant improvement in their confidence, communication style, and understanding of formal procedures. Many reported better knowledge of precedence, ceremonial conduct, and national symbols. As Chizhova notes, such practices build the foundation for successful diplomatic careers (Chizhova, 2016) [4].

Volunteering also enhances soft skills such as time management, stress tolerance, and adaptability – essential qualities in international diplomacy (Kostina, 2020) [5].

Volunteer activities at IUHD reflect all four stages of Kolb's learning cycle:

- Concrete experience: assisting in real diplomatic settings.
- Reflective observation: analyzing their performance.
- Abstract conceptualization: integrating feedback and theory.

- Active experimentation: applying new approaches in future events.

Using Mead's framework, student volunteers learn to perform institutional roles by internalizing professional behaviors they observe during international events. These experiences contribute to:

- Improved professional communication.
- Development of intercultural sensitivity.
- Real-time decision-making and etiquette awareness.

The IUHD model demonstrates how volunteering serves not merely as a service but as a parallel educational structure.

Reflection and Personal Growth

Students describe volunteering as transformative. One student shared: "Before volunteering, I didn't realize how much thought goes into seating arrangements. Now I understand the symbolism and political weight of such decisions."

Another emphasized the intercultural learning aspect: "Welcoming guests from India or Uzbekistan taught me how to navigate cultural differences with respect." These testimonials align with research by Grushevitskaya and Popkov, who argue that intercultural competence is best developed through real interaction (Grushevitskaya & Popkov, 2017) [6].

Institutional Support and Policy Framework

The university's emphasis on volunteerism reflects national policies promoting youth engagement and civil society. Turkmenistan's Law on Volunteering recognizes volunteerism as a tool for youth empowerment and nation-building (Law of Turkmenistan, 2016) [7].

IUHD's Protocol Department also collaborates with government agencies, allowing students to volunteer at international exhibitions and forums outside the university, broadening their diplomatic exposure.

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite its benefits, student volunteering at IUHD faces challenges:

- Limited number of large-scale events.
- High demands on student time.
- Need for standardized volunteer training.

To enhance the system, the article recommends:

- Creating a formal curriculum on diplomatic protocol integrated with volunteering.
- Institutionalizing volunteer recognition through certificates and academic credit.
- Increasing partnerships with youth organizations.

Conclusion

An essential dimension of student volunteering in the context of diplomatic protocol and etiquette training is its capacity to foster institutional transformation and long-term strategic value for higher educational establishments. At the International University for the Humanities and Development (IUHD), student involvement in volunteer-driven diplomatic activities has evolved beyond auxiliary assistance and become a structured pedagogical and leadership development tool.

These activities include hosting high-level diplomatic events, organizing international forums and cultural exhibitions, and assisting in visits by foreign delegations. Through their structured participation, students not only learn the procedural and behavioral nuances of diplomacy but also actively contribute to the university's international image and operational capacity. This aligns with the concept of "learning by doing," emphasizing experiential learning models advocated by educational theorists such as David Kolb [1]. Importantly, student volunteers internalize the codes of formal diplomatic behavior and cultivate a mindset that values intercultural sensitivity, discretion, and institutional loyalty – attributes

that are essential for future careers in diplomacy and international relations.

From an administrative perspective, the university's leadership increasingly integrates volunteering into its academic strategy. Student volunteers serve as bridges between academic theory and professional application, making them critical assets in events that showcase Turkmenistan's model of neutrality and hospitality.

Their visibility during protocol events – often held in the presence of state officials and foreign ambassadors – demonstrates the country's investment in youth leadership and capacity-building. Moreover, such involvement helps solidify the institutional cooperation between IUHD and national entities like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan and international organizations such as UNESCO.

This institutionalization of volunteering programs also responds to contemporary global trends in higher education, which call for a blending of civic engagement, professional training, and academic performance [7].

Another vital element is the role of mentorship and peer learning within student volunteer structures. Senior students often take on leadership roles, mentoring junior peers in protocol practices, event planning, and real-time decision-making under pressure.

This practice echoes the principles of transformative learning, where learners undergo a shift in worldview through guided critical reflection and collaborative engagement. At IUHD, these mentorship systems foster a collaborative, hierarchical learning culture aligned with diplomatic environments, where seniority, experience, and protocol are paramount. Students also report increased confidence, improved time management skills, and a heightened sense of responsibility, which contribute not only to their academic outcomes but also to the broader development of soft skills [10].

Furthermore, institutionalizing student volunteering also creates avenues for formal recognition. IUHD has introduced certificates, awards, and internships for volunteers, creating an incentive structure that values service, excellence, and commitment.

These recognitions play a dual role – enhancing student portfolios while reinforcing the university's commitment to producing diplomatically literate, ethically grounded, and socially responsible graduates. Given the growing emphasis on soft diplomacy, student volunteers emerge not only as learners but also as youth ambassadors who reflect the values and priorities of Turkmenistan's foreign policy.

Thus, the role of volunteering transcends training; it becomes a cornerstone of diplomatic culture-building within academic institutions and an exemplar for youth engagement across Central Asia.

Student volunteering at IUHD has proven to be a powerful method for building understanding of diplomatic protocol and etiquette. It complements theoretical learning and helps students internalize norms essential for diplomatic practice. Through structured engagement, volunteers become better prepared for careers in international relations and public diplomacy.

The model can serve as a benchmark for other universities in Turkmenistan and beyond. Further research may explore long-term career outcomes of volunteer alumni or comparative studies between different universities.

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