

# **Exploring the social aspects of agroecology through a case study of the student volunteer program in the SZIA Agroecological Garden at MATE, Hungary**

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The thesis examines the social dimension of agroecology through an “Experience based volunteer program with an agroecological base” run in the SZIA Agroecological Garden at the Szent István Campus of the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences (MATE) during April-June 2025. Universities are positioned as social actors that can popularize sustainable practices, such as agroecological community gardens, that act as complex systems for practical, social, and scientific matters. The SZIA Garden is an agroecological and organic community garden, with about 300 m<sup>2</sup> of the whole area being primarily managed by volunteer students and a student coordinator. The study researched the characteristics of the applicants’ group: age, nationality, gender, the level and program of study, gardening experience, and weekly availability of students, as well as their inner drives for joining, and their views on how participating in the Volunteer Program can benefit their academic and/or career goals. Furthermore, the feedback of the participants was also analyzed with an emphasis on the strengths and benefits of the program. The research was primarily conducted based on the 49 registration forms received, which were all combined with a questionnaire. Quantitative analysis, in the form of descriptive statistics, was used to study the applicants’ profile, and content analysis, a tool for qualitative analysis, was done for the assessment of students’ interest in agroecology’s three dimensions (science, practice, and social movement), and in the case of processing the 10 post-program feedback messages. Results show there was a great diversity in age, nationality, level and field of studies, and gardening experience, as well as availability of volunteers in hours per week, thus all these factors did not identify a specific target group. Practical, hands-on engagement was at the top priority for students, while community aspects came in second place, and research orientation was the least important, but still quite significant.

The expected career and/or academic benefits mentioned included practicing teamwork, eco-friendly techniques, gaining experience in the field of organic farming, and learning based on experience. Three months after the 10-week program, the written reflections highlighted a collaborative and international team with great cultural exchange, many opportunities for hands-on learning, and the promotion of well-being through outdoor physical activities, while suggested improvements included more theoretical learning and cooking on the weekend for even more cultural exchange. Overall, the program effectively promotes all three dimensions of agroecology within a higher education setting, and popularizes models of community-based, hands-on approach to sustainable food systems education.