

Executive Summary

Institutionalisation of service-learning is a multifaceted process that transforms higher education values related to civic engagement into action. It implies the inclusion of SL in the strategic plans of the institution, to develop administrative processes and provide resources needed to support the use of this methodology, including a SL office, staff, funding and space, training, faculty rewards, credit recognition for student participation, and a program evaluation.

This policy brief reviews the current level of the institutionalization of SL in Europe and presents policy recommendations for the European Commission, international stakeholders, member states, and Higher Education Institutions, with a focus on the need to draw responses for SL institutionalization.

Service-Learning Definition

Service-learning in higher education is an experiential educational method in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically. The activities address human, social and environmental needs from the perspective of social justice and sustainable development, and aim at enriching learning in higher education, fostering civic responsibility and strengthening communities. Service-learning is always recognized with ECTS credits.

A European Framework for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education

Introduction

The European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE) [1] believes that Higher Education (HE) is a key tool to promote sustainable human development. In accordance with its commitment to sustainability in the search for environmental quality, social justice and a viable and equitable economy, EASLHE academic members consider that the generation of a culture that contributes to a comprehensive and environmentally sustainable development is an ethical imperative. For this, it is necessary to establish channels that facilitate the involvement of the entire academic community in the construction of a model of HE institutions that promote sustainability and social responsibility.

The inclusion of civic engagement in the teaching-learning processes must be done through methodologies consistent with the following principles: ethical, holistic, complex, global, transversal, and socially responsible.

Service-Learning (SL) is a powerful pedagogical tool that will contribute to putting this mission into practice by improving learning, developing social responsibility, and strengthening the communities.

SL as an ideal teaching methodology for the development of civic engagement

From this perspective, SL is a valuable strategy for the inclusion of civic engagement in the curricula. Likewise, it responds to current HE regulations, which demand that HE favours practices of social and civic responsibility that combine academic learning in the different degrees with the provision of services to the community, aimed at improving the quality of life and social inclusion.

The SL methodology is consolidated in university education in other regions of the world, where not only projects are developed, but there are structures within and outside the institutions that support and promote these actions.

EASLHE proposes the institutionalization of SL in European HE to promote civic engagement, contributes to the development of a fairer society and improves academic and social learning that favours the development of the students' competences.

This methodology can be used in all Undergraduate and Postgraduate degrees, integrated into the teaching programs applied by the teaching staff in their classes, within the framework of students' external internships, and incorporated into the thematic offers addressed in final bachelor and master thesis. All teachers previously trained in SL can supervise these projects, which must be related to the content of the subjects they teach and applied in social organizations and educational institutions (associations, NGOs, foundations, public institutions, etc.).

The institutionalization of SL in European universities and colleges requires customized Institutional Declarations, approved by Governing Councils of universities or colleges, or by Boards of University Networks, to support the implementation of SL Projects within the framework of the teaching programs developed by the teaching staff with their students, in the external internships and in the development of End-of-Degree and End-of-Master Projects.

Background

The European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education, EOSLHE, that was founded in January 2019, gives us an idea of the use of SL in Europe. So far it has gathered 102 service-learning experiences in 19 European countries: Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Portugal, Romania, United Kingdom and Ukraine.

To this data must be added the existence of three national associations (Germany-Austria, Spain, and Ireland) and five informal networks (Finland, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and Flanders).

The situation is very diverse, although the use and research of this methodology is growing in all the countries mentioned.

While in Ireland the 22 rectors signed a declaration of their commitment to the community and in support of the SL methodology, in other countries, such as France, Denmark or Russia, there is no evidence that this methodology is being used.

A description of the situation of SL in ten European countries can be seen in the first bulletin of the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education [3]. According to the self-evaluation rubric [3], some countries are at the Critical Mass Construction phase while others have already passed it and are making progress in the institutionalization process.

Institutionalizing SL implies:

- a) Recognition of the teachers who promote, tutor, coordinate and evaluate the SL projects carried out by their students in the context of their subjects or in SL courses.
- b) Commitment to the development of teaching training programs focussed on the SL methodology.
- c) Visibility of the SL projects carried out and positively evaluated through institutional websites.
- d) Support to carry out SL projects within the framework of teaching innovation.
- e) The necessary health and legal coverage of civil liability that may be specified in the application of SL projects in the community, outside the university campus, which guarantees at all times the rights to health and safety of all the relevant people involved.
- f) Creation of stable governance structures that support the planning, execution, and monitoring of SL projects.

Challenges

SL in Europe faces challenges related to socio-political approaches to the mission of HE institutions, the linguistic and cultural translation of the term “service-learning”, institutional models to support SL practice and research and the creation and maintenance of national and international networks. The following challenges have been identified [2]:

1. Accommodating the model of SL with the various European socio-political models. The practice of SL, which originally comes from the United States and Latin America, must be adjusted to the diverse cultural contexts in which it occurs.
2. Translation, and linguistic and cultural adaptation.
3. Infrastructures for project coordination at the level of each HE institution.
4. Financing that facilitates the use and impact of this methodology.
5. Internal and external recognition, both for teachers through promotion mechanisms and accreditation systems, and for students, who must obtain recognition of their participation in these experiences in terms of ECTS credits.
6. Curricular time for teachers since designing, implementing, and evaluating SL projects requires extra effort and time. For this purpose, it is helpful to have the support of institutional SL units and programs.
7. Knowledge of the methodology, for which courses, seminars and other training actions are valuable.
8. Quality? research that allows obtaining evidence of the impact of SL on students, the community, teachers, the university and participating social entities.
9. Tools for evaluating Service-Learning experiences that include indicators and allow assessing their effects on the environment and on the various actors.
10. Sustainability of the SL projects themselves, but also of the institutional programs that support this methodology.
11. Quality standards that improve the use and research of SL.
12. Involve students, academic staff, and community partners. For this purpose, issues such as motivation to participate, reciprocity and collaboration are of great importance.
13. Analysis of the benefits or possible disadvantages of making SL a mandatory or voluntary course for students. The analysis of the possible consequences of this decision will facilitate the acceptance or rejection of this methodology by students and teachers.

Policy recommendations for the European Commission

1. Fund, at the Member States level, teacher training, professional development, technical assistance, research and mobility programs on SL.
2. Promote SL as an integral part in Erasmus+ – especially within the mobility and training programs
3. Pursue an agenda to make SL a reality in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) Member States wide. A commitment to provide seed funding for private-public partnerships is needed with careful outreach to communities, schools, foundations, and the private sector.
4. Promote and offer, within HEI, Educational Digital and Curriculum Resources for S-L.
5. Create budget for all Member States to support the development of a National Centre for Service-Learning for promoting the development, implementation, and sustainability of SL based teaching within all HEI.
6. Work with the Commission on Higher Education of each Member State on SL matters, such as, common evaluation criteria, common quality standards, scholarships, and mobility.
7. Create a common database with the stakeholders of all Member States.
8. Promote the development of HEI rankings that integrate civic engagement.

Policy recommendations for European States

1. SL needs to be advocated at the national level to build private-public partnerships in support of SL as a tool for building common bonds.
2. Relevant professional organizations, private foundations, community organizations, educational centres should be called on to include SL in their agenda.
3. SL can be advocated as an integrative strategy for grounding civic education, civic engagement, and a sense of social connection with others.
4. A national SL strategy should be undertaken to promote and distribute the most up-to-date guidelines and best practices about SL to every HEI.
5. Improvements should be made in the existing infrastructure for providing technical assistance and professional development of teachers, staff, and administrators.
6. Member States should appoint a specialist in SL and pursue SL initiatives.
7. Members States should appoint a national SL Committee in order to formulate, review, and recommend general HEI curriculum and operational guidelines as they relate to internships, scholarships, mobility, and SL experiences.
8. Members States should integrate SL and civic engagement in the accreditation processes of academic staff and HEIs.

Policy recommendations for International Stakeholders

1. SL needs to be advocated by the stakeholders as a tool for building common bonds.
2. Work in collaboration with HEI and its students, teachers, and staff to assess the needs of the local community.
3. Implement programs to ensure that funds offered address genuine community needs.
4. Create opportunities for SL, including training in SL within their HEI.
5. Promote partnerships to ensure effective SL projects.
6. Participate in improving civic education, promoting meetings and networks with the communities and the HEIs where SL projects are being developed.
7. Promote the engagement of youth in SL.

Policy recommendations for the Higher Education Institutions

1. Allocate time in the teachers' schedules to prepare, plan, guide and evaluate SL activities.
2. Incorporate SL into existing programmes and promote SL in collaboration with its students, teachers and staff assessing the needs of the local community and its existing capacities.
3. Identify a SL coordinator to organize all SL activities on an annual basis, and, guide, help and advice, both students and teachers.
4. Appoint a national SL Committee to formulate, review, and recommend general HEI curriculum, operational guidelines, policies, and tools and criteria for the evaluation of SL experiences that include indicators for assessing effects on the environment and on the various actors.
5. Provide high quality SL training to teachers.
6. Promote both basic and applied research needed to examine how SL influences youth development, character and civic education, and skill and academic learning, as well as evidence of the impact of SL on students, community, teachers, and participating entities.
7. Guarantee sustainability of the SL projects themselves, either ongoing and/or after ending.
8. Internal and external recognition, both for teachers through promotion mechanisms and accreditation systems, and for students, who must obtain recognition of their participation in SL experiences in terms of ECTS.

References

[1] European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education. <https://www.eoslhe.eu/easlhe/>

[2] Aramburuzabala, P., Vargas- Moniz, M. J., Opazo, H., McIlrath, L. y Stark, W. (2019). Considerations for service learning in European higher education. In P. Aramburuzabala, L. MacIlrath & H. Opazo. In Embedding Service-Learning in Higher Education. Developing a Culture of Civic Engagement in Europe. Oxon: Routledge; 230-243.

[3] European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (September 2019). Newsletter 1. Historical Memory of Service-Learning in European Higher Education. Retrieved from <https://www.eoslhe.eu/newsletter/>