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 that are consistent with the ethical, holistic, complex, global, transversal, and socially responsible principles.

Service-Learning (SL) is a powerful pedagogical tool that contributes 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, Service-Learning 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 that are aimed at improving the quality of life and social inclusion.

Service-Learning can be used in all Undergraduate and Postgraduate degrees. Its integration in the curriculum can take different formats: integrated in the teaching syllabus, external internships, and final bachelor and master thesis. All teachers previously trained in this methodology can supervise a Service-Learning project, which must be linked to the content of the subjects they teach and to social organizations (associations, NGOs, foundations, public institutions, etc.).

Service-Learning 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 Service-Learning in European Higher Education to promote civic engagement, contribute to the development of a fairer society and improve academic and social learning that favours the development of the students´ competences.*

The institutionalization of Service-Learning in European Higher Education requires customized **Institutional Declarations**, approved by the Governing Councils, or by Boards of University Networks, to support the implementation of Service-Learning projects.

Executive Summary

Institutionalization of Service-Learning is a multifaceted process that integrates civic engagement values into higher education curriculum of an institution so that SL becomes part of the culture of the institution. It implies the inclusion of SL in the strategic plans of the institution, to 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 sets the concept of institutionalization of Service-Learning in European higher education and presents policy recommendations for the European Commission, European States, international stakeholders, and Higher Education Institutions.

EASLHE Definition of Service-Learning

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.

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 138 Service-Learning experiences in 20 European countries: Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and Ukraine.

To this data must be added the existence of national networks in Austria, Finland, Flanders, Germany- Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

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

Some countries are at the critical mass construction phase while others have already passed it and are making progress in the institutionalization process [2].

While in Ireland the all rectors signed a declaration of their commitment to the community and in support of the Service-Learning methodology, in other countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, Greece or Russia, there is no evidence that this methodology is being used.

Institutionalizing Service-Learning implies:

a) Recognition of the teachers who promote, tutor, coordinate and evaluate the Service-Learning projects carried out by their students in the context of their subjects or in specific Service-Learning courses.

b) Commitment to the development of teaching training programs focussed on the Service-Learning methodology.

c) Visibility of the Service-Learning projects carried out and positively evaluated through institutional websites.

d) Support to carry out Service-Learning projects within the framework of teaching innovation.

e) The necessary health and legal coverage of civil liability that may be specified in the description of the Service-Learning projects, that are carried out 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 Service-Learning projects.

Challenges

Service-Learning in Europe faces challenges related to socio-political approaches to the mission of HE institutions, institutional models to support Service-Learning practice and research, the creation and maintenance of national and international networks, and the linguistic and cultural translation of the term "service-learning". The following challenges have been identified [3]:

1. Accommodating the model of Service-Learning with the various European socio-political models. The practice of Service-Learning, which originally comes from the United States must be adjusted to the diverse cultural contexts in which it occurs.

2. Translation of the "Service-Learning" term, and cultural adaptation of the methodology.

3. Infrastructures for project coordination at the level of each Higher Education 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 Service-Learning projects requires extra effort and time.

7. Knowledge of the methodology, for which courses, seminars and other training actions are valuable.

8. Research that allows obtaining evidence of the impact of Service-Learning on students, teachers, the university, the community, 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 Service-Learning projects, but also of the institutional programs that support this methodology.

11. Quality standards that improve the use and research of Service-Learning.

12. Involvement of 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 Service-Learning a mandatory or voluntary course for students.

Policy recommendations for the European Commission

1. Pursue an agenda to make Service-Learning a reality in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in all Member States.

2. Promote Service-Learning as an integral part of the Erasmus+ Programme, especially within the mobility and training programs.

3. Fund teacher training, professional development, technical assistance, research and mobility programs on Service-Learning.

4. Promote and offer educational digital and curriculum resources for Service-Learning in higher education.

5. Support the development of national centres for Service-Learning for promoting the development, implementation, and sustainability of Service-Learning within all HEIs.

6. Work with the Departments of Higher Education of Member States on Service-Learning matters for developing common quality standards, scholarships, mobility programmes, etc.

7. Work with the Quality Accreditation Agencies of the Members States on recognition of Service-Learning.

8. Promote the development of HEIs rankings that integrate civic engagement.

9. Create a common database of Service-Learning stakeholders in the Member States.

Policy recommendations for European States

1. Advocate Service-Learning at the national level to build private-public partnerships in support of Service-Learning as a tool for building common bonds.

2. Call on relevant professional organizations, private foundations, community organizations, educational centres to include Service-Learning in their agenda.

3. Advocate Service-Learning as an integrative strategy for grounding civic education, civic engagement, and a sense of social connection with others.

4. Undertake a national Service-Learning strategy to promote and distribute the most up-to-date guidelines and best practices about Service-Learning to every HEI.

5. Improve the existing infrastructure for providing technical assistance and professional development of teachers, staff, and administrators.

6. Appoint a specialist in Service-Learning and pursue Service-Learning initiatives.

7. Appoint a national Service-Learning Committee in order to formulate, review, and recommend general HE curriculum and operational guidelines as they relate to internships, scholarships, mobility, and Service-Learning experiences.

8. Integrate Service-Learning and civic engagement in the accreditation processes of academic staff and HEIs.

Policy recommendations for International Organisations

1. Advocate Service-Learning as a tool for integrating civic engagement in the higher education curricula.

2. Facilitate international Service-Learning projects.

3. Work in collaboration with HEIs to assess community and environmental needs.

4. Disseminate Service-Learning.

5. United Nations declares an international Service-Learning Day.

6. Identify the Service-Learning Research Agenda taking into account the European cultural context.

Policy recommendations for the Higher Education Institutions

1. Include Service-Learning the HEI strategy plan.

2. Create a Service-Learning program and structure to coordinate all activities, ensuring the necessary human and material resources.

3. Incorporate Service-Learning into existing academic programmes and promote it in collaboration with students, teachers and staff, assessing the needs of the local community and its existing capacities.

4. Provide high quality Service-Learning training to teachers.

5. Allocate time in the teachers' schedules to prepare, plan, guide and evaluate Service-Learning.

6. Internal and external recognition, both for teachers through promotion mechanisms and accreditation systems, and for students, who must obtain recognition of their participation in Service-Learning experiences in terms of ECTS.

7. Guarantee sustainability of the Service-Learning projects.

8. Promote both basic and applied research needed to examine how Service-Learning influences civic education and academic learning, and to provide evidence of the impact of Service-Learning on students, community, teachers, and participating entities.

9. Appoint a national Service-Learning 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.

References

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

[2] 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/

[3] 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.