

BEST PRACTICES FROM THE ENHANCE PROJECT

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This contribution reports one of the lines of research undertaken by the Erasmus+ project, called “ENHANCE – Enhancing Career and Service Learning in Higher Education”¹, which involved 6 universities, a research center for career guidance, an IT company specialized in career guidance platforms. Among the various project initiatives, the project investigated the learning impact of Service Learning experiences through a collection of testimonies from university students who had experienced it. In particular, an attempt was made to map some significant SL best practices.

Service Learning; Career Management skills; Third Mission; Student Centered; Didactics.

CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGES

The 2024 Report on the Status of Implementations of the Bologna Process identifies dropout rates as an unresolved challenge to achieving a fully inclusive and accessible European Higher Education Area. Addressing this problem implies the need to find solutions that ensure the promotion of equity, particularly for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. This challenge opens a deep reflection on the need to increase the flexibility of learning pathways and improve student support services and recognition of learning pathways aiming at the development of recognition and validation systems through micro-credentials. Tirana Communication also stresses the importance of flexible learning pathways and student-centered approaches as key strategies to combat academic disengagement. The Communique pushes

¹ Erasmus+ project – ENHANCE – Enhancing Career and Service Learning in Higher Education 2021-1-ES01 KA220-HED-000031128

the education system toward innovative teaching methods introduced with digital transformation to address, both structural and individual barriers that contribute to dropout rates. The Bologna Process and the Tirana Communiqué recognize the importance of innovative teaching methodologies and the need for higher education institutions to adapt to the changing demands of the global landscape (Blandford et al., 2015). Both documents reveal a clear direction toward learning frameworks in which academic engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration become essential components in modern curricula. The expected impact of this push in universities points not only to innovation in educational offerings but also to gathering and transferring societal needs into learning processes (Wray-Lake et al., 2017). This alignment aims to prepare students for successful career paths and also promotes a renewed lifelong civic engagement (Zaff et al., 2011). By fostering a sense of belonging and community through service-learning, educational institutions can help mitigate these challenges and promote higher retention rates among students (Hawke et al., 2018). In this context, numerous studies show that students who participate in SL programs are more likely to complete their academic journey (Hope & Jagers, 2014), particularly underrepresented and marginalized groups, who often face additional barriers to academic success (Metzger et al., 2016).

THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING IN HE

Service Learning (SL) is an innovative pedagogical paradigm that synergistically integrates academic learning with community service, promoting holistic development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills in university students (Bringle et al., 2016). This methodology is based on the principle of reciprocity, generating a virtuous cycle of learning and social impact that benefits both students and the community. SL transcends traditional dichotomies in educational contexts, overcoming the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and between curricular and life skills (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Its distinctive features include organic integration with the academic curriculum, structured reflection, systematic collaboration with community partners, significant project duration, and reciprocity between students and community. Effective implementation of SL in the university context requires strategic planning and systematic institutionalization (Jacoby, 2015). SL is situated within the conceptual framework of lifelong learning and lifelong guidance (Barnett, 2018), it contributes to lifelong learning by promoting active and self-directed learning, developing transferable skills, critical reflection on

experiences, and cognitive adaptability. This integration creates a dynamic educational ecosystem that prepares students to face the challenges of an evolving world (Hora et al., 2020). SL offers multiple benefits that extend beyond the academic sphere, positively influencing the personal, professional, and civic development of university students, as well as higher education institutions and the community at large (Holsapple & Brush, 2019). SL plays a crucial role in promoting civic engagement, contributing to the formation of aware and responsible citizens. Benefits include increased social and political awareness, development of a sense of civic responsibility, greater participation in community activities, in-depth understanding of social issues, and advanced ability to critically analyze complex problems (Whitley & Walsh, 2014). SL fosters the development of essential transversal skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving, effective communication, teamwork, leadership, empathy, and adaptability. These skills enrich students' professional profiles and contribute to their personal development (Celio et al., 2011). The adoption of SL in universities catalyzes the creation of innovative relationships with the local community, transforming academic institutions into "Profigurative Centers for Intergenerational Training" (Tapia et al., 2016). This approach generates multiple benefits: more relevant research oriented to community needs, greater visibility and social impact of universities, creation of lasting collaboration networks with local organizations, opportunities for social innovation and entrepreneurship, and improved public perception of higher education (Bringle & Clayton, 2020).

In conclusion, SL represents a transformative educational approach that bridges the gap between academia and community, fostering holistic student development and contributing to social progress. Its implementation requires careful planning and institutional commitment, but the benefits for students, universities, and communities are substantial and far-reaching.

IDENTIFYING BEST PRACTICES IN THE ENHANCE PROJECT

The project "ENHANCE – Enhancing Career and Service Learning in Higher Education" aims to develop an innovative Community Service Learning (CSL) approach through educational tools and digital resources. This system promotes student's self-awareness, empathy, communication skills, and cultural awareness, enabling them to acquire social skills applicable to everyday life. CSL is also seen as a key element in improving career guidance and academic tutoring, as it helps students master the information they learn,

improve their academic performance, and become more involved in academic life. The project aims to integrate CSL into tutoring and career services of the partner universities, using micro-credentials to certify learning outcomes.

Methodology

The methodology used within the project is based on the participatory action research approach, which allows different theories and perspectives to be brought together with the aim of developing an integrated, practice-oriented learning model. This process actively involved students, universities, and local communities in the planning and implementation of activities. The tools used included moments of reflection based on the storytelling strategy, which enabled the students to develop critical reflection and storytelling skills about their learning experiences. In particular, the project examined the impact of SL on learning through the collection of testimonies of university students from partner universities. The sample analyzed is to be considered a collection of best practices, and was carried out following a snowball approach. The project partners contacted some students who had had SL or similar experiences, and who through peer-to-peer networking contacted other students with similar experiences.

Tab. 1. Interview sample and country of origin. Source: (ENHANCE Project)

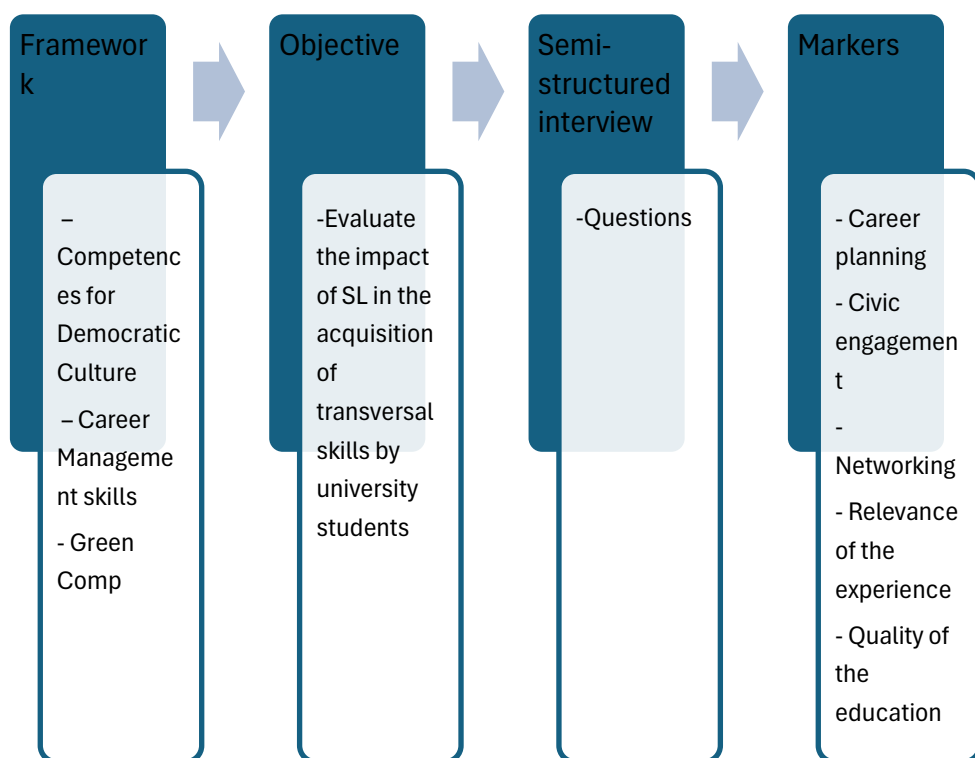
Sample	n. Student	Country
	6	Spain
	6	Italy
	6	Turkey
	6	Greece
	6	Romania
Total	32 ²	

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews administered to the selected students. The main objective of the investigation was to understand the correlation between SL experiences and student learning outcomes. Therefore, the interviews were structured from the theoretical frameworks such as the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFDCD)

² The sample analyzed is not to be considered significant.

(Council of Europe, 2013), Career Management Skills (ELPGN, 2015), and the Green Comp (Bianchi, Pisiotis, & Cabrera Giraldez, 2022), with the aim of detecting the transversal competences acquired by the students after their SL experience.

Tab. 2. Process of constructing and analyzing interviews. Source: ENHANCE Project.



The qualitative analysis of the interviews content was carried out with Atlas.ti software through document coding, which allows for a set of procedures based on textual data. The indicators that led the analysis process were deduced from the areas investigated and concerned the skills acquired, the value attributed to the experience in terms of career planning, the development of civic engagement and a sustainable mindset, networking opportunities, the significance of the experience in relation to the course of study and the quality of the training offered.

SURVEY RESULTS

The findings indicate that structured SL programs within universities are virtually non-existent. Students reported practices that could potentially be recognised as SL, but these lack a formal framework. The most common activities within the university involve student associations, event committees or similar initiatives. It should be noted that professors themselves often promote these experiences to their students, during classroom lectures, but there is no more structured organisational support for the dissemination and recognition of these experiences. While, as far as experiences outside the university context are concerned, these mainly involve voluntary associations. It is important to note that these activities are not always formally recognised.

Regarding the skills acquired during these experiences, Table 3 presents some testimonies from the interviews. Students reported using these experiences as opportunities to reflect on their professional paths. In some cases, they gained insight into potential workplaces where they could apply their knowledge, while in others, they re-evaluated their academic journey, discovering new interests and professions they had not previously considered. For example, the experience led students to consider the possibility of continuing their studies, to confirm their choice of academic course or to decide further training steps. With regard to the transversal skills acquired, the results mainly highlight interpersonal skills. SL experiences allowed students to challenge themselves in different situations from those they are used to, promoting adaptability and problem-solving skills. Development of these skills is valuable in dealing with the dynamic and ever-changing demands of personal and professional contexts. In addition, results indicate that some students from science and technical fields (STEAM) emphasized how the SL experience enabled them to develop civic commitment skills that they would not otherwise have encountered. In addition, emotional intelligence skills were frequently mentioned, highlighting their pervasive presence in the various SL situations the students encountered. emotional intelligence skills were always at the core, despite different contexts, roles, functions or academic backgrounds. The experiences reported by the students took place in challenging contexts that pushed them into situations of personal and professional challenge. However, these experiences allowed them to experiment, develop new skills and deal with failure in a protected and accessible environment where they could reflect on the experience as a formative moment. In addition, these experiences allowed students to engage with different professionals and working environments. These opportunities facilitated networking, both with peers and with

organizations operating in the local area, even when not directly related to the university context or their specific field of study.

Tab. 3. Main results from the students' interviews. Source: (ENHANCE Project)

Main results	Quotes
Reflection on their professional paths	<p>"I think that if I had not had this experience, I would not have decided to study for a doctorate or to continue with higher studies" (M.M.).</p> <p>"It gave me a lot of strength to continue with special education" (E.A.).</p> <p>"It helped me to choose my master's program" (V.M).</p>
Interpersonal skills	<p>"I improved my ability to communicate effectively with people with autism" (E.).</p> <p>"I improved my organizational and teamwork skills, which are essential for navigating complex and collaborative environments" (M.K.).</p>
Adaptability and problem solving skills	<p>"I initially experienced difficulties in coordinating students", but that this allowed her to "become more adaptable and adept at coming up with creative solutions" (A.N.).</p>
Civic commitment	<p>"It gave me the opportunity to be more social" (D.K.).</p>
Emotional intelligence skills	<p>"The experience of providing psychological support to fire victims helped me to develop self-control and a deeper understanding of others" (D.K.).</p> <p>"This experience influenced my decision to pursue a teaching career, emphasising the transformative impact of cultivating empathy and emotional intelligence" (V.M.S.).</p>

There are two key aspects on which all interviewees agree: i) The community experience prompted them to reflect on their future, their course of study, and their social role; ii) all respondents confirmed they would recommend the experience to their peers as an enriching addition to their educational journey.

The project presented made it possible to integrate theory and practice into an innovative learning model, centered on the development of student's professional in close connection with the local context.

CONCLUSION

The topics discussed and the results drawn from the interviews, highlight a significant correlation between SL experiences and the acquisition of transversal skills, as well as the effectiveness of this experience as a career guidance tool for university students. Creating structured and formally recognized SL experiences increasingly necessary for universities to build a space in which the university, territory, community continuum is made explicit. By integrating SL into academic programs, universities can offer richer and more holistic learning experiences that better prepare students for the complexities of professional world.

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