

# Service Learning

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Service Learning formulates a methodology committed to establishing synergies between the academic content and the students' civic commitment. The difficulty of implementing civic projects in academic programmes has found an answer in the field of innovation, establishing the relevance of the construction of civic and social competencies that structure the skills and attitudes of an ethical, committed academic community with a global citizenship.

Keywords: social responsibility ; sustainable university ; teacher education ; social and emotional learning ; psychosocial development ; volunteering ; teaching self-efficacy ; social justice ; quality education ; education for sustainable development

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## 1. Introduction

A worldwide, complex, and interrelated society, due to the phenomenon of globalisation, manifests new forms of learning to which the traditional instructional culture would appear to have difficulties adapting to. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the serious healthcare, social and human consequences it has caused around the world have impacted the educational field, accentuated by the requirement to transform teaching and learning models in a sudden and extreme manner <sup>[1][2][3]</sup>, generating a high level of uncertainties <sup>[4]</sup>. In the midst of this rapid change, there seems to be a consensus that society can count on is a firm educational response <sup>[5]</sup>, which involves working collaboratively in terms of ecology and sustainability <sup>[6]</sup>.

The importance of the events that we are experiencing has led us towards the adaptation of an educational paradigm that coexists amid constant transformations, where the university, beyond managing the knowledge society, is challenged to face a series of urgent tasks, among which are task crucial to ensure a critical education and to strengthen social commitment <sup>[7]</sup>. This situation has forced us to work on the idea of a new classroom concept, the renewal of which goes beyond the replacement of some teaching methods with others. This model revolves around an essential educational task that is none other than ensuring that students establish real links between the knowledge acquired and the potential situations that they will have to deal with professionally, socially, and personally. Educational institutions face the need to make a proposition that goes beyond the curricular area to become involved in civic and moral objectives across the board, in line with the ability to adapt and to develop skills, making students social agents of change based on an education of solidarity and ethics. This would be a matter of overcoming the individual–society dichotomy and facing global challenges through an active and committed citizenship. This is where the leading role of higher education institutions today acquires a remarkable importance; for the ability to establish relationships between what is proposed in the classroom and what occurs in society <sup>[8]</sup>. This arises from the need to establish a real connection among academic approaches and to promote a social commitment among students <sup>[9]</sup>.

The need for a new figure of the citizen emerging from the universities is defined by a philanthropic profile based on personal responsibilities <sup>[10]</sup>. For this university-based figure to emerge, learning has to balance the academic with the practical. However, if there is one idea that is repeated it is that of social justice, constantly present in the academic literature <sup>[11][12][13][14]</sup>, even more so in times of the COVID-19 pandemic <sup>[15]</sup>.

In this context, the socio-educational commitment construct acquires prominence by locating in university centres the need to develop spaces for reflection and social action <sup>[16]</sup> and to specify the evidence that speaks to a conversation between theory and practice in real contexts <sup>[17]</sup>, giving rise to a teacher competencies profile characterised by promotion and socio-educational actions. This construct acquires its relevance in the research that we are presenting because the aim of the study is to analyse the acquisition and development of the socio-educational commitment of student teachers. The commitment in which the social and educational aspects are combined with the motivational aspects, is defined in our study in terms of *Awareness of social justice*, for the range of attitudes, and as a *Socio-educational action* for the field of performance. These two dimensions are deeply intertwined.

The university is one of the institutional referents that society has, both from the perspective of educating and training qualified professionals and because it represents the vanguard in the promotion of knowledge. Teachers, in turn, have acquired a new position added to their role. In conjunction with teaching, research, and management, they perceive that society demands a teaching profile that leads and promotes pro-social attitudes.

There are various methodologies that are compatible with the purpose of merging the academic and the social. Service Learning is one of them <sup>[18]</sup>, as is the inclusion in undergraduate degrees of the subject, Education for Peace and Equality <sup>[19]</sup>, Education for Peace and Good Relations <sup>[20]</sup>, education centred in Human Development <sup>[21]</sup>, or acknowledging the role of the university tutor as an agent of change <sup>[22]</sup>. Even so, Service Learning enjoys a prominent position on campus as it has become part of the field of educational innovation <sup>[23]</sup>, possessing a structure that is included in universities' new management policies, in the strategy known as University Social Responsibility, currently referred to as the concept, "sustainable university".

A sustainable university is committed to its current actions as an institution, but also to the training of professionals who in turn are committed to contributing to a more sustainable and socially just world at the institutions with which they are professionally associated. This is a change that Sirignano <sup>[24]</sup> synthesises in the transition from two dimensions: research and education, to three dimensions, in which direct participation in the progress of society is present. A way in which the university can respond to the questions posed by the environment <sup>[25]</sup> and meet the requirements set out in the European Higher Education Area, in which the promotion of social responsibility aligns with the aim of contributing to the development of qualified and supportive citizens, is in the civic learnings that are translated into community attitudes <sup>[26]</sup>. That is, to explore in greater depth the discourse of co-responsibility between the university environment and social structures to build a civic culture, promote an awareness of the most vulnerable realities that become visible in an interconnected society, and build links with the needs of disadvantaged environments.

One of the challenges present at the outset of Service Learning has been to present a project different from the volunteering actions that, intermittently and occasionally, have accompanied academic routines. From an approach inspired by mainstreaming and curricular requirements, it has sought its space by integrating itself into the management policies of the ethical quality entailed within the field of University Social Responsibility. Within the framework of this renewed civic commitment of university centres, Service Learning acquires a differentiated profile with respect to volunteering by adding different methodological and evidentiary characteristics <sup>[18][27]</sup>; stressing the evaluation of learning processes <sup>[28]</sup>; facilitating, together with experience, theorising and research <sup>[29]</sup>; connecting with mobility and digital technologies <sup>[30]</sup>; developing emotional competencies <sup>[31]</sup>; and promoting civic literacy <sup>[32]</sup> that imbues students and graduates with the necessary attitudes of responsibility and solidarity towards a society that is certainly in need of them.

## **2. The Impact of Service Learning in the Development of Student Teachers' Socio-Educational Commitment**

It is necessary for the university to contribute to the training of professionals, specifically teachers, who in turn are committed to contributing to a more sustainable and socially just world at the institutions they are professionally associated with.

Participation in teacher education Service-Learning programmes is shown to be more relevant than participation in volunteering projects in the development of the global socio-educational commitment, as well as in the strengthening of teaching self-efficacy and self-efficacy in the selection and design of instructional materials.

With regard to the difference between Service Learning and the Volunteering variable, it is found that what is truly effective is to participate and perform Service Learning; participating in a Service Learning programme is the best way to develop the socio-educational commitment of teachers, and demonstrates that the effect of Service Learning activities is not the same as that of volunteering.

Service Learning has generated extensive educational research with a growing scientific production <sup>[33]</sup>, in which international organisations have carried out parallel assessments of civic participation and Service Learning activities <sup>[34]</sup>. Service Learning represents the opportunity to validate learning, to establish the relationship between experiential activities and learning outcomes <sup>[35]</sup>, the latter being one of the main reasons for its growth.

It underlines the importance and value of Service Learning in many different aspects already acknowledged by numerous researchers. According to which the pedagogical practices of Service Learning correlate with a change or the promotion of pro-social attitudes both among teachers <sup>[36]</sup> and students <sup>[37]</sup>. Those students who participate in Service Learning projects develop a commitment to their environment from a transformative perspective in a special way <sup>[11]</sup>, encouraging students to develop critical thinking skills and multicultural awareness <sup>[38]</sup>, acquire intercultural skills, learn to recognise and mediate in their community <sup>[39]</sup>, and prepare future teachers to face injustice and work toward socially supportive actions <sup>[42]</sup>.

The link between self-efficacy and civic participation is shown to be important <sup>[40][41]</sup>, as well as the skills-based training provided by Service Learning programmes <sup>[42]</sup>; but studies are significant as they correlate the improvement of the self-efficacy of students with the training and development of Service Learning programmes <sup>[43]</sup> or with the development and perception of an effective teaching personality <sup>[44]</sup>.

Moreover, the teaching self-efficacy variable and its correlation with Service Learning presents higher levels of correlation than in the case of volunteering. In addition, this shows that the students who display a greater socio-educational

commitment (both in general and in its two dimensions) are also those who have a greater general teaching self-efficacy and self-efficacy with the use of materials.

The popular image of the university in society is that of a centre of knowledge and research, as well as a professional space. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced an adaptation in which digital technologies have been reorientated towards hitherto unaddressed teaching and learning models <sup>[45]</sup>. However, the real crossroads is in structuring the right interrelationship between society and the university.

In any case, it can be concluded that at the time of assessing Service Learning in student teachers, higher education institutions will have to face the challenge of incorporating it into their curricular programmes <sup>[32]</sup>. They would also have to develop curricular structures that promote civic and social competency. The university of the 21st century deals with the responsibility of assuming a social and educational role that fosters civic attitudes related to social justice and performance, in line with socio-educational, solidarity and ethical actions.

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