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SERVICE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Background

Research shows that young Europeans feel that they do not have much say over important decisions, laws and policies affecting their lives. At the same time young people express that they would like to be more actively engaged in political decisions on various levels.

This strikes particularly hard among young Europeans with migrant background, since they, according to research, run a higher risk of lacking a sense of belonging in their local society. This affects all parts of life that ensures social cohesion and functioning as autonomous, productive, self-realised citizens.

Methods

One way to facilitate opportunities to increase civic engagement, is through the HE pedagogical method, Service Learning. This form of higher education community engagement can help increase the level of civic participation of the student population through their placements in organisations that deal with issues relevant to the community. An increased focus on implementing Service Learning as a pedagogical method in HEIs would especially benefit migrant students' possibilities to engage in their local society.

Recommendations

To facilitate the implementation of Service Learning as a pedagogical method in higher education, this Policy paper gives recommendations on three levels: system level (national authorities in charge of higher education), organisation level (higher education institution level) and implementation level (teaching staff).

Promoting the nexus of migrants through active citizenship

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Content

Acronyms

HEI - Higher Education Institution

Introduction

"Service Learning fits well into the third mission of higher education institutions, which can be described as the development of activities that will link a higher education institution to its surrounding environment" (Skledar Matijević et al., 2021). According to Farnell (2020), there is a long tradition of universities' interaction with their communities, and "the benefits of higher education are not limited to students and graduates but extend across society" (Farnell, 2020). By becoming increasingly involved and connecting their activities to both the problems and needs of their communities, higher education institutions can become significant stakeholders in contributing to economic, cultural and societal growth. While the umbrella term 'community engagement' is used to "refer to engagement with a broad range of external stakeholders on a broad range of issues" (Farnell, 2020), 'civic engagement' implies "a focus on promoting active citizenship and democratic values" (Farnell, 2020), and this is the aspect that the NEXUS [1] project is focused on. More specifically, it is focused on empowering students (especially migrants) to exercise their rights, uphold human values, and contribute constructively to the society around them and the global community in general.

NEXUS aims at innovating the civic educational process resulting in increased participation of students in their communities since in representative and participatory democracies, it is crucial that citizens are engaged in order to be an active part of society (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2018). However, the Eurobarometer statistics show that young people in the EU are feeling that their votes will make no difference and that they are unaware of the democratic processes within the EU (European Commission, 2021). According to other studies, young people are somewhat more engaged in non-governmental organisations than in traditional political parties and that they are using more digital tools, such as social media, when they interact and engage (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2018). Although there might be differences among countries, the trend is clear that young people are becoming increasingly detached from political participation in the traditional format and do not participate in civic engagement activities. Newly arrived migrants are especially vulnerable to feeling detachment since they generally risk lacking social identity, sense of belonging and social engagement (Mansouri et al., 2016).

One way to address the issue of the detachment of young people is implementing the Service Learning method in higher education because it can help with enhancing the civic engagement of students. NEXUS has prepared recommendations for higher education institutions that wish to implement Service Learning as a teaching method because it involves planned and structured student placements in partner organisations as a mutually beneficial response of higher education institutions to the challenges faced by their community.

The Challenge: The Detachment of Young People from Civic Participation

The findings of the 2021 Eurobarometer Youth Survey indicate that "a majority of respondents feel they do not have much, or any, say over important decisions, laws and policies affecting them". As many as 53% feel they do not have much, or any say over decisions, laws and policies affecting their local area, and when it comes to matters affecting the EU the percentage is higher (almost 70%) (EACEA, 2021).

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[1] The NEXUS project (https://nexus4civics.eu/) is an ERASMUS+ project, running from 2019 to 2022, is implemented by a consortium composed by: UNED – Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Spain (coordinator); ECAS - European Citizen Action Service, Belgium, Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia; Knowledge Innovation Centre, Malta; Malmo University, Sweden; UNIMED - Mediterranean University Union, Italy; Zavod APIS APIS Institute, Slovenia

However, according to the same source, young people perceive poverty and social inequality, climate change and environment protection and unemployment as priority issues which need to be dealt with, which proves that they have an interest in social issues.

This is in line with the findings of the survey conducted by the NEXUS team and targeting students in higher education. Although 97% of the answering students believe their opinion (public opinion) is worthy to be listened to and taken into consideration, 59% of students think they do not have or know the means to make his/her voice be heard in the relevant institutions (NEXUS, 2020).

At the same time, 60% of the responding students would like to improve their participation and be more actively engaged, while 74% think that they would like to have a more active part in the resolution of problems and decision making in university life (NEXUS, 2020).

Also, 86% of the surveyed students think that some of the problems of their communities could be (partially) solved with a higher level of public participation and 75% are ready to invest time and effort to receive training in active citizenship (NEXUS, 2020). There is a clear indication that young people are interested in their communities and would like to be included in tackling the challenges and issues their communities are facing; they want their voices heard but do not feel that they have a say or know how to make themselves heard.

Research, therefore, shows that there are two trends in parallel. Although young Europeans are losing faith in EU-institutions and bureaucracy, they are at the same time expressing increased concern and interest in important problems facing the society.

Diversity is another dimension that needs to be considered in the context of higher education, since the student population is increasingly culturally and migration-based diverse. Newly arrived migrants are especially vulnerable to feeling detachment since they generally run a higher risk of lacking social identity, sense of belonging and social engagement (Mansouri et al., 2016). According to the OECD, active participation of migrants in education, the labour market, and in public life is vital for ensuring social cohesion and enabling migrants to function as autonomous, productive, self-realised citizens (OECD/EU 2015). Therefore, the issue of young Europeans' community engagement needs to be addressed with particular interest when it comes to the subgroup of young migrants.

Service Learning as a Tool for Increasing Students' Civic Participation

According to Morgan and White (2015), "… higher and further education should play a role in addressing gaps in achieving educational qualification, job training, access to the labour market, and in other aspects of integration."

Service Learning, as a form of higher education community engagement, can help increase the level of civic participation of the student population in the community-related decision-making processes through their placements in organisations which deal with issues relevant to the community. According to the Council of Europe 2008 White Paper, active participation by all residents in the life of the local community contributes to its prosperity, and enhances integration (Council of Europe, 2008). If Service Learning is adopted by higher education institutions, they become more involved in the community and provide support to their students who seek a way to make their voices heard by the decision makers.

In terms of newly arrived migrant students, Service Learning can provide additional integration opportunities by including them in the community service activities which address the issues of the local community. According to the Council of Europe, "the genuine integration of migrants into their new society also involves efforts to accommodate them that go beyond the specific steps taken to welcome them. The acceptance of new forms of social behaviour, provided that

they do not infringe the fundamental values of democracy, presupposes that the society in question is open to otherness and tolerant of change" (Council of Europe, 2017).

The Civic Aspect of Service Learning

According to Skledar Matijević et al (2021), there are many definitions of Service Learning since the concept has evolved over time and since there are numerous ways in which it can be implemented in different contexts. A contemporary concept of Service Learning is reflected by the European Association for Service Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE), which defines Service Learning as "an educational approach that enhances students' civic engagement, brings them closer to different social realities while allowing them to work in a real environment. It involves structured and graded student placements in organisations in response to the needs of the community and is different from volunteering because it is part of mandatory coursework" (EASLHE, 2021).

The civic aspect of Service Learning has been explored from the 2000s on. According to Saltmarsh (2005), higher education should include "civic learning" and students should be equipped with "the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate as engaged, democratic citizens" (Saltmarsh, 2005) in order to successfully participate in the democratic processes.

Service Learning Diagram

The Fresno State University provided a Service Learning diagram, which positions it at the overlap of academic learning, practical experience and civic engagement, student practice, student volunteering and civic education.
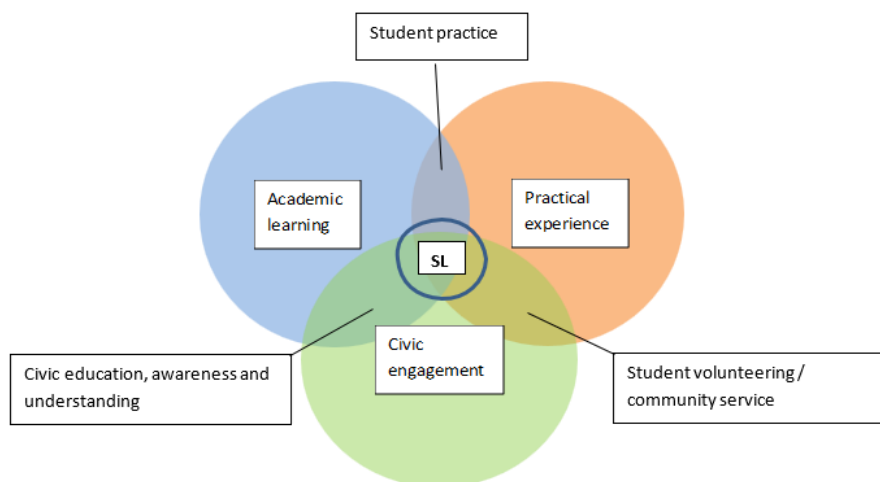

Illustration 1: Service Learning Diagram, source: http://www.fresnostate.edu/csm/arc/service-learning.html

Implementing Service Learning for Enhancing Students' Civic Engagement

According to Skledar Matijević et al. (2021), students require study programmes which are in line with both the labour market trends and current social trends. The teaching process on the other hand needs new, innovative and inclusive methods of working, teaching and learning, and the curriculum needs to include the integration of local, regional and global problems. In a broader perspective, it is necessary to ensure a strong connection, i.e. cooperation, collaboration and knowledge exchange between higher education institutions and local communities, as well as a joint response to challenges (Skledar Matijević et al. 2021).

However, even though community engagement is becoming more visible in various forms of strategic documents in European higher education institutions, it is still at an early stage. The central challenge is creating the framework for successfully implementing Service Learning.

According to Skledar Matijević et al. (2021), it is essentially community-based learning, and it represents a possible way for higher education institutions to meet the needs of their communities, which can in turn benefit from higher education institutions' diverse knowledge bases. Such an approach can lead to a sustainable and inclusive higher education. "Higher education institutions' capacity for community engagement can be reinforced by embedding Service Learning into the curriculum and syllabus design so it can be assessed within the course structure. In doing so, students will both gain awareness of different types of societal needs and get first-hand experience of engaging in the community and addressing these needs. This will also help higher education institutions to reach their full potential as valuable actors in their local communities […]" (Skledar Matijević et al, 2021)

Policy Recommendations

Although Service Learning is being adopted by many higher education institutions in Europe, there are hardly any system-level policies which refer to implementing Service Learning as a teaching method in higher education. There are some policies which refer to community engagement, such as the European Commission's Renewed Agenda for Higher Education (EC, 2017) but Service Learning as such has not been emphasised.

For this reason, the NEXUS team has prepared recommendations at three levels: system level (national authorities in charge of higher education), organisation level (higher education institution level) and implementation level (teaching staff).

Recommendations for Higher Education Systems (System Level)

To support the implementation of Service Learning as a teaching method which increases the levels of community engagement of higher education, it would be beneficial that the education system recognises and encourages Service Learning as a teaching method by:

- **Recognising Service Learning as a teaching method which supports community engagement of higher education institutions and as a valid point in quality assurance and external evaluation procedures**
- **Standardising the procedure of introducing Service Learning as a teaching method**

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (Organisation Level)

To successfully introduce and implement Service Learning is recommended that higher education institutions take the following steps:

- **Providing support in terms of guidelines and training for the teaching staff**
  The staff should understand the concept and the principles of Service Learning, as well as the models of implementation, the requirements and the desired outcomes of a Service Learning programme.
- **Defining the stakeholders**
  There are three key stakeholders in a Service Learning programme: the students, the higher education institution and the external partner. The higher education institution should scan their community for suitable partners (e. g. NGOs, citizens' initiatives, charities…), contact them and sign agreements.
- **Providing support for teachers who want to implement Service Learning in their courses**
  - *Providing administrative support*
    The teaching staff need institution-level administrative support for contacting external partners, informing students, reaching the target groups, organising off-campus activities etc. It is recommended that such support is provided

through establishing a Service Learning office, or to provide support through existing organisational units (such as Career Centres or Student Services).

- *Allocating time*
  The teaching staff need extra time to plan and organise a Service Learning course, so they need support in allocating enough time within their working hours.
- *Simplifying the procedure for syllabus modification*
  The teaching staff who wish to implement Service Learning will need to modify their syllabi in terms of mode of delivery and assessment. If the internal procedure for making changes to existing syllabi is lengthy or complicated, it would be beneficial if higher education institutions take steps to simplify the procedure or make it more flexible.
- *Offering recognition, reward and incentives* (e. g. via promotion, awards, reassigned time) to the teaching staff who have implemented Service Learning into their teaching, to ensure the sustainability of the initiatives.

- **Including Service Learning in internal quality assessment procedures**
  Developing criteria for regular internal quality assurance of Service Learning will ensure that teaching quality standards are being observed.
- **Allocating funding**
  It is to be expected that creating the framework and supporting the implementation of a new pedagogical method will require additional funding so higher education institutions should plan accordingly.

Recommendations for the Teaching Staff (Implementation Level)

To successfully introduce and implement it is recommended that the teaching staff take the following steps:

- **Learning about the Service Learning method**
  The Service Learning Guidelines by the NEXUS project cover all the steps necessary for implementing the Service Learning method and offer valuable examples.
- **Actively communicating with the external partners**
  Involving external partners in the planning process and the implementation will ensure the success of the Service Learning programme.
- **Providing support for students**
  Students may find some situations within their Service Learning projects challenging and will need mentor support. Planning enough time for providing feedback and encouragement is recommended.

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