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### Short bio:

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### Paper

**Title:** More than Words: An Integrative Approach to Cooperation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education through Service-Learning.

### Abstract

Cooperation and quality assurance are connected across service-learning. There is no service-learning without them. This experiential and critical pedagogy allows the development of transversal skills such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity, and civic engagement. Those are key for the next generations of students, researchers, and innovators to build a resilient society.

Today, we know the steps and requirements to implement service-learning in higher education. We also know the criteria to define high-quality service-learning, derived from the ability to develop co-participatory projects, empower students, or provoke high impacts on students' learning & reflection, the community needs, and the university, among others. However, much of this research has been developed outside the European context. So, to what extent can the results of those studies be transferred to a different context with diverse considerations of quality, management, and institutional accreditation? We also have data from projects and guidelines regarding the institutionalization of service-learning at the European level. How can this knowledge inspire us about the challenges that pose for quality assurance? Quality assurance redefines problems such as overburdened stakeholders, the lack of institutional support, and the necessity to further engage students and faculty members in this kind of community-engaged projects. It requires a framework for quality assurance that supports mutual trust and facilitates recognition and mobility within and across national borders. Including service-learning in the accreditation processes of academic staff and higher education institutions has been seen as an impetus for its development.

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to address the issue of quality assurance and cooperation through service-learning as an innovative pedagogical initiative and academic strategy in European higher education. Some elements are briefly introduced to understand the scope of service-learning and its potential for the construction of fairer societies through cooperation, but above all, it raises questions to continue the discussion on the quality assurance framework in Europe.

Service-learning fosters well-rounded and impactful communitarian learning experiences for students while advancing teaching, research, and knowledge transfer embedded with civic values. In its dimensions of experiential learning, service-learning initiatives encourage students to increase their awareness about societal and environmental challenges, including their responsibility towards society. Service-Learning develops the capacity to understand complex problems, cultivate students' values, act, and bring democratic change for themselves and others. That means that promoting service-learning is a way to strengthen the social dimension of the universities, creating interactive relationships with community partners based on reciprocity and mutual trust. Through cooperation, collaboration, and partnerships, service-learning penetrates the life and culture of the university community. Cooperation in the context of service-learning supports knowledge production and dissemination, as well as enhances students' civic engagement, bringing them closer to different social realities while allowing them to work in a real environment. The current enforcement of quality assurance frameworks demonstrates increasing attention to the public purposes of higher education. The quality components of service-learning are sustained both in research and practice so quality assurance processes can be implemented, carefully monitored, and improved.

Although service-learning is becoming very popular in Europe and is increasingly glossed over in the literature, the same does not happen in the context of exploring its connections with cooperation and quality assurance. In many cases, service-learning projects remain as individual – and very often hidden – didactic initiatives developed by academics. The lack of visibility and transparency of universities regarding their contribution to service-learning development makes it difficult to map and analyze the particularities of European service-learning. That is why cooperation and quality are two dimensions that can be incorporated into service-learning because they are inherent elements for optimal development. As explained later, the desire to cooperate through service-learning is not only instrumental, as can occur in many partnership relationships with companies, but derives from a social motivation. This is also an important consideration for the interpretation of quality and quality management in service-learning.

Quality assurance might be considered as an institutional strategy to encourage universities to institutionalize service-learning to facilitate the mapping of experiences, research the impacts, and transfer to society, integrating the three missions of the universities. At the same time, the institutionalisation of service-learning in the faculties can be seen as an academic strategy to foster quality in education through cooperation and exchange with the community. It is crucial to consider that critical reflection is the component of service-learning that generates, deepens, and documents learning and improves the quality of practice, partnerships, and inquiry. This implies that qualitative and intersubjective procedures are important to unveil the true scope of service-learning, including the voices of all actors in the process.

## 2. Cooperation and social motivations

As said before, cooperation between higher education institutions and the broader community is a prerequisite for success in any knowledge-based society. The main effect seems to be related to the contribution to economic growth and competitiveness through the transfer of knowledge corresponding to the requirements of the labour market. The potential benefits arising primarily from higher education cooperation with enterprises include the possibility of obtaining additional funds, as well as materials

and technical equipment. It also includes the opportunity to use the partner's technical facilities. All this might be considered as an instrumental motivation to cooperate.

But there are also social motivations to cooperate. In service-learning, there is an instrumental gain because students receive ECTS credits for their participation in the co-designed projects, but the motivation is essentially social. It has to do with attitudes, values, and identity, for example, linked to social inclusion, sustainability development, or the common good. This type of cooperation determines the decision-making procedures, shared governance, and interpersonal trust. The values that underline people's actions are then the beacon of cooperation.

Universities should define cooperation as a social motivation. Put in practice, cooperation requires a detailed study of the project cost evaluation, feasibility, manpower, budgeting, finance, and planning to complete the work promptly. In the case of service-learning, cooperation is different. It is based on student empowerment, is flexible, and is strengthened while working with community partners.

### **3. Quality assurance and cooperation in higher education**

The literature reveals perspectives of quality as purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable and a set of quality indicators used to assess each of the broad conceptualizations. Being purposeful, quality is about institutional products and services like a stated mission/vision or a set of specifications, requirements, or standards, including those defined by accrediting and/or regulatory bodies. Regarding being exceptional, quality is about achieving distinction and exclusivity through the fulfilment of high standards. Being transformative, quality is about effecting positive change in student learning (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains) and personal and professional potential. Regarding accountability, quality is about institutions being accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and delivering accurate educational products and services.

Defining quality is an important prerequisite for quality assurance considerations in service-learning. Multidimensional definitions of quality assurance are beneficial for achieving greater transparency and alignment with forms of cooperation with stakeholders. Quality assurance can be seen as an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system. In service-learning, quality assurance means a shared and horizontal process with the community located in a geographical context and a specific time frame. In addition, students are placed in ecological, family, socioeconomic, cultural, and political frameworks of great importance to transfer the benefits of service-learning.

More research is needed to determine the feasibility of writing a universal definition of quality that would apply to different types of institutions in diverse geographic locations, given the potential reliance on broad language that may be too vague to convey any significant meaning. More studies are required to better understand the influence of culture on the use and meaning of quality terminology, specifically whether the terms quality and quality assurance are applicable across cultures and, if so, whether there are distinct regional and national meanings. Also favouring the need for research is the fact that the concept of quality in higher education is seen differently by families, students, faculty members, and other beneficiaries. Previous works state that parents view quality as relating to input (e.g., ranking of the institutions, reputations) and output (e.g., employability, academic placement). Students see quality as relating to the educational process (e.g., courses and teaching) and outputs. Faculty members perceive quality as relating to the whole education system (i.e., input, process, and output). Stakeholders see quality as primarily related to the output (e.g., the skill set that the student brings to the workplace). The distributions of the quality attributes in terms of input, process, and output differ among the recipients of the service provided. To meet the needs of each group, the university has to focus on all aspects of the education system. Further investigation into this topic will provide a basis for policy and quality improvement plans undertaken by education institutions. It would also be interesting to look at students', families', faculty members', and others' perceptions of education quality attributes and how these differences affect the types of policy and planning choices selected.

In the context of the third mission of universities (i.e., fostering the civic development and social engagement of students), along with communication and collaboration, cooperation is the third C that can enhance processes and bring successful implementation. That includes the production of public goods of a social, educational, and cultural nature. Alongside partnerships, cooperation has gained increasing relevance in fostering student public engagement, civic and social responsibility, prosocial education, and citizenry training. As the third mission of higher education has significant connections to social-ecological systems enhancement, it is as strongly related to social innovation. Service-learning is a didactic for merging community needs and academic goals. Service-learning interventions enable universities to enact the third mission by structuring existing curricular training experiences, promoting and attaining the acquisition of transversal competencies, and formalizing civic engagement as an integral part of a university curriculum. It facilitates the co-construction and sharing of knowledge and contributes to developing a 'civic university' based on social responsibility.

Service-learning improves communication and academic cooperation among professors, higher education institutions, and civil society organisations in the education of socially responsible and active citizens, aiming to contribute to the overall development and improvement of the community. Thus, service-learning is recognized as an effective way of connecting students and academics with civil society organisations and the local community. Service-learning benefits communities by establishing cooperation as a value within the local culture. By acting as a predefined form of cooperative work that can bring individuals and institutions together, service-learning creates an opportunity for cooperation and the networking of people and institutions.

#### **4. An approach to cooperation, quality, and service-learning**

It is worth mentioning that for highlighting some of the thesis developed in this paper, data was derived from the *European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education*. Specifically, the contributions from the content analysis of the considerations inductively collected in reported service-learning projects. A total number of 119 service-learning projects were analysed, and diverse findings were obtained. Regarding this paper, issues related to cooperation and quality have been considered to ground further discussion.

Cooperation was seen in the reports as fundamental to curriculum development and the student's civic engagement, allowing the co-creation of projects with the community partners. Those partnerships were established with NGOs, associations, local authorities, and civic organisations. Inter-institutional cooperation initiatives through projects and networks may constitute moments where tacit and implicit personal knowledge of individuals is transformed into explicit and embedded organisational knowledge impacting students' skills development. As described in the reviewed reports, cooperation enhances the development of students' capabilities, academic curricula, and democratic values. Cooperation extends or pervades the entire organic spectrum of partnerships, from their internal university dimension to the surrounding community and its autonomy. It is in this dynamic and interdependence that creative, imaginative, and dialogic thinking and practices materialize at the co-creative level of sustainable local and community solutions. Cooperation is even used or resorted to emancipate socially disadvantaged minority groups.

This makes it clear that service-learning advocates and leaders stand for cooperation between higher education institutions and external entities as a prerequisite for success. Cooperation is a source of many positive outcomes for all involved parties and society. Cooperation in service-learning contributes to economic growth and competitiveness through the transfer of knowledge and the creation of high-quality professionals with knowledge, skills, research abilities, and democratic citizenship. That not only tends to correspond to the labour market requirements but seems to be also associated with attitudes, values, and identities of trust and sincerity that they create through their actions. The emphasis on the importance of cooperation between higher education institutions and civil society organisations in the education of socially responsible and active citizens contributes not only to the overall development and improvement of the students and community but also to the adaptive capacity of the service-learning

concept. The cooperative nature of service-learning highlights the cultural interpretation and modification nature of this pedagogy.

Regarding quality, by encouraging the participation of students in democratic life, it supports the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union's* competence towards quality education (art. 165). That is in line with the *Council Recommendation on key competencies for lifelong learning* that strengthen citizenship competence, that is, the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life.

Quality in service-learning focuses on the development of transversal skills such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and civic engagement. They are key for the next generations of students, researchers and innovators to build a resilient society. The concept and practices of inclusion in higher education institutions turn central the “knowledge square” of education, research, innovation and service to society. Service-learning stands for personal fulfilment, employability, and active and responsible citizenship. Seeks to ensure the fullest contribution to and participation in society. By building inclusive and cohesive societies, while promoting sustainability and EU values for a Union of equality and a new push for European democracy, strengthens a social market economy and democracy with freedom, diversity, human rights and social justice. For that to happen, as stated in the *European Service-Learning Public Declaration on civic responsibility of Higher Education* (Art.9), “Institutionalisation of service-learning should be considered in the strategic plans of Higher Education institutions to promote the needed structural changes with the allocation of adequate resources for its full inclusion in the academic programmes, as well its recognition in wholistic quality assurance and accreditation systems”. Then, based on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, it could be relevant to find substantive answers to the following questions:

1. Policy for quality assurance
  - a. Do higher education institutions have a policy for quality assurance and service-learning that is made public and forms part of their strategic management?
  - b. Are internal stakeholders developing and implementing this policy through appropriate structures and processes while involving external service-learning stakeholders?
2. Design and approval of programs
  - a. Do higher education institutions have processes for the design and approval of their service-learning programs?
  - b. Are service-learning programs designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes?
  - c. Is the qualification resulting from a service-learning program specified and communicated, and refers to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area?
3. Student-centered learning, teaching, and assessment
  - a. Are institutions ensuring that service-learning programs are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in recreating the learning process and that the assessment of students reflects this approach?
4. Teaching staff
  - a. Are institutions assuring themselves of the service-learning competencies of their teachers?
  - b. Are they applying service-learning fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff?
5. Learning resources and student support

- a. Do institutions have appropriate funding for service-learning activities?
  - b. Are institutions ensuring that adequate and readily accessible service-learning resources and student support are provided?
- 6. Information management
  - a. Are institutions ensuring that they collect, analyze, and use relevant service-learning information for the effective management of their programs and other activities?
- 7. Public information
  - a. Are institutions publishing information about their service-learning activities, including programs that are clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date, and readily accessible?
- 8. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programs
  - a. Are institutions monitoring and periodically reviewing their service-learning programs to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society?
  - b. Are these reviews leading to continuous improvement of the service-learning program?
- 9. Cyclical external quality assurance
  - a. Are institutions undergoing external service-learning quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis?
- 10. Designing methodologies fit for purpose.
  - a. Are institutions designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the service-learning aims and objectives set for them while considering relevant regulations?
  - b. Are stakeholders involved in its design and continuous improvement?

## 5. Conclusions

This paper emphasizes that higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their service-learning provision and its assurance. Quality assurance should (a) respond to the service-learning diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programs, and students; (b) support the development of a service-learning quality culture in higher education; (c) take into account the service-learning needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders, and society.

This paper intends to mean that quality assurance is not only a question of standards, documentation, and measurement. It is far more than that. It is a question of applying tacit and experiential knowledge via service-learning inherent diversity, creativity, imagination, and communication. The aim should be to develop new and innovative examples for experiential learning, whether in the humanist, progressive, or radical sense. The chosen way quality assurance might achieve these concerns is through the participation and transfer of human and technical resources. That should be done in a way that increases the potential of stakeholders concerning the identification, analysis, and utilization of endogenous resources for the local development of those areas and the training of students.

Quality assurance should take service-learning in a way that mentoring supports students' empowerment with a clear sense of their growing social responsibility. Quality assurance should consider transfer knowledge through students' active enrolment in their microsphere with fellow friends and family members, for example, awakening a strong sense of breaking prejudices among them.

Quality assurance should deal with service-learning problems such as overburdened stakeholders, the lack of institutional support, and the necessity to further engage students and develop methods for applying academic knowledge in community-engaged projects. It should enable the development of occupationally specific performance and organisational competencies.

To contribute to these aims, the methodological process of quality assurance and service-learning should be based on critical reflections describing courses, and specific recommendations for the

institutionalisation of service-learning. Should favour in-depth qualitative approaches, narrative products, interviews, discussion groups, and stories of academics, students, and community partners. Genuine community engagement and student learning experiences should be at the centre of the analysis.