

# Service learning in higher education: Evidence from Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism Split

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## SERVICE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM FACULTY OF ECONOMICS, BUSINESS AND TOURISM SPLIT

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### Abstract

*Over time service-learning has been widely recognized as valuable platform for: (i) integrating academic learning with community service, encouraging civic engagement, and supporting students' responsible citizenship, and for (ii) students to develop a wide range of skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, and cultural competence. Although service-learning principles and practices are present at lower level of education, it seems as it becomes more tailored to college and university students. Accordingly, the objective of the study is to analyse the main principles and practices of service learning in higher education environment. In such context it will be carefully considered, various aspects of services learning such as academic integration, experiential learning, community partnerships, reflection and assessment, skill development, personal growth, social impact, global perspective, and finally community service as graduation requirement. In the empirical part, it will be presented and adequately elaborated three (3) case studies initiated at the Faculty of Economic, Business and Tourism (FEBT) in Split, and realized in period from April 2020 to June 2021. Based on the results, the observed case studies are revealed as follows: (i) significant service-learning initiatives designed to align with specific academic courses, (ii) an experiential learning opportunities enabling students the chance to apply classroom knowledge in practical settings; (iii) collaboration with non-profit organizations, (iv) the identified service opportunities which meet community needs (v) the potential for ongoing positive impact on communities, and (vi) the possibility of service-learning as a graduation requirement to encourage the students' participation in community service and civic engagement with respectful social responsibility.*

**Keywords:** service learning, higher education environment, case studies, students' reflections.

**JEL classification:** A29, D60, I31.

### Introduction

Service learning (SL) is perceived as form of teaching that allows students to participate in activities (projects) that are useful for society (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). The environment in which service learning is realized is most often within one of the civil society organizations (CSOs). The three parties (users) in this process are higher education institutions, students and society/CSOs.

The student contributes to the realization of the CSOs mission and vision, and at the same time acquires new special knowledge and skills under dual mentoring (of the professor and a member of an CSO), and achieves the learning outcomes foreseen for individual courses. The main principles of service learning (Felten & Clayton; 2011, Jacoby, 2014; Furco, 2016)

already indicate the complexity of this concept. The first one refers to *a real need*. Namely, student engagement is aligned with the real needs and problems of the partners. In accordance with the teaching objectives, the specific tasks and goals of the service learning projects are used to agree with the non-university partner. The second one refers to *the principle of reciprocity* that enables equal benefit to all service learning stakeholders: students, higher education institution and external partner (CSO). Students gain important practical experiences, acquire social competences and become more sensitized to the problems in their environment. Thanks to social learning, institutions of higher education open up to the outside, get involved in their social environment, and partners in service learning receive scientifically based support (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). The third principle is related to *reflection* (or connection of knowledge and action) which means practical experiences are viewed in the context of academic learning and according to which a bridge between theory and practice may be built. This gives a significant insight into the connection between theoretical contents and their practical importance (Gelmon et al. 2019).

All above enables a more thorough understanding of the professional related content, and in addition, it leads students to reflect on themselves and their own image of the profession. Targeted (reflective) questions (as integrative part of service learning process) encourage students to think again about situations and activities of the service-learning program, reflect on their impressions, and value new experiences and skills. Reflection serves as the bridge between learning and social well-being, acting as the key that enable students to build knowledge from their experiences in service learning initiatives. Therefore, the service learning topic is recognized as a great challenge for research, and thus over time explored in more details (as evident in literature below).

After introduction, it follows part dedicated to theoretical overview of service learning in higher education aspects, and service learning practice in diverse cultural context. The empirical research is qualitative and based on the analyses of three (3) related case studies. At the paper end, are enclosed short discussion based on specific reflections that helped students make meaning out of their service experiences and deepens their learning. The paper finished with conclusion and related implication for future research in terms of university's dedication to community engagement and making a positive impact out of campus borders. Cited literary units are at the paper end.

### **Aspects of service learning in higher education**

From the academic standpoint, service learning (SL) in higher education is thoughtful as educational approach that combines community service with academic instruction and reflection (Salam et al., 2019). It is generally perceived as form of experiential learning that benefits both students and the communities they serve, but it is also discussed from various aspects (Huisman, & Edwards, 2011). One of the basic aspects of SL is aspect of community service (Keith, 2005) which refers of students actively participating in organized service activities that address community needs and accordingly contributing to their local or broader communities as part of their educational experience.

Looking behind, community service within service learning process has always been beyond traditional volunteerism (Mohan, 1994). On the one side, students were encouraged to engage in activities that have a meaningful impact on the community and address real-world issues.



Simultaneously, on the other side institutions collaborate with local organizations, non-profits, or government agencies to identify and implement service opportunities and to ensure the alignments of service with community needs (Kahne, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000).

Another aspect for consideration is *academic integration* aspect. The named integrates academic coursework with real-world experiences. Students apply what they learn in the classroom to address community issues and challenges of real word problems (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Duffy, Barrington, West, Heredia, & Barry, 2011; Jia, Jung, & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2018). It seem that over time, service learning projects become more and more designed to align with specific learning objectives, academic goals, even course content. Since a long ago, an idea is to complement and enhance the material covered in the classroom (Howard, 2001). The academic credit (ETCS) for service learning experiences may also be part of the course's overall grading structure, encouraging students to take their service seriously (Preradović & Stark, 2019). Service learning goes cross-disciplinary boundaries, allowing students to apply knowledge from multiple academic fields to address complex societal issues (Green & Johnson, 2023).

Furthermore, *reflection* within service learning in higher education plays a significant role in helping students extract the most educational value from their service experiences (Hatcher, 2004). Reflection is linked to specific learning objectives and academic goals. Consequently, it enables students to connect their service experiences with course content and desired educational outcomes. Moreover, reflective activities encourage students to think critically about their experiences and analyze what they have learned, question assumptions, and consider the broader social and ethical implications of their service (Dubinsky, 2006).

*Reciprocal benefit* aspect of service learning in higher education emphasizes that both students and the community should receive tangible and meaningful benefits from the service learning experience (Gregory, Schroeder, & Wood, 2021). Community engagement is built on the principle of reciprocity, where both the community and the university mutually benefit from the collaboration (Cooper & Orrell, 2016). Thus, the community receives valuable support, while students gain practical experience and knowledge.

Service learning require and active involvement and collaboration between students, faculty, and the university with the local or broader community (Soska, Sullivan-Cosetti, & Pasupuleti, 2010) and accordingly indicate the relevance of *community engagement* aspect.

Furthermore, perceiving the service learning from the *aspect of assessment* refers on ensuring the quality and effectiveness of these programs (Steinke & Fitch, 2007). It provides evidence of the impact of service learning on student learning and community development and informs continuous improvement efforts (Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2011). Additionally, assessment helps universities and educators refine their service learning initiatives to maximize the benefits for all involved. In general, the impact of service learning on the community is assessed by evaluating whether the service activities have met community needs, contributed to positive change, or addressed specific issues (Simons & Cleary, 2006).

Service learning provides students with opportunities to explore different community contexts, address a wide range of issues, and develop a broad set of skills and experiences (Waterman, 2014). These *varieties of settings* allow students to apply their academic knowledge and

contribute to various aspects of society while fostering a sense of civic responsibility and social engagement.

Onward, service learning promote respectful and effective community engagement and contribute to the development of responsible and culturally aware citizens (Goldberg & Coufal, 2009; Amerson, 2010). It seems as cultural competencies developed through service learning are not only valuable for students but also for the communities they serve.

Finally, *ethical considerations*, as integral to responsible and sustainable service learning in higher education, ensure that service experiences are conducted with integrity, respect, and a commitment to the well-being of both students and the communities they serve (Saltmarsh, 1997; Opazo, Aramburuzabala, & García-Peinado, 2014).

### **The service-learning practice in diverse cultural context**

The service-learning area has attracted significant attention in academic research implemented in different institutions and cultural contexts. For instance, Preradović and Stark (2019) reach inside this area, analyzing 49 service-learning experiences identified as relevant out of 199 collected from universities across 11 European countries. The research highlighted the intrinsic value of service learning, emphasizing its diversity and potential for fostering creative development. It also elaborates how service learning has the capacity to inspire innovative formats for experiential learning. The authors also proposed that optimal standards for service learning practices emerge from a synthesis of research findings and the shared requirements observed across various service learning programs in higher education all over the world.

In a separate study, Mejis et al. (2019) explored the institutionalization of service learning in 12 European universities and countries. The research revealed that, while the concept of service learning appears to be accepted in Europe, many higher education institutions do not actively implement it. The authors observed a gap between promising ideas and intentions and the limited actual implementation of service learning.

Furthermore, insights from students across 11 European countries, as present by Harte et al. (2019), emphasized the positive impact of service learning on fostering a deeper sense of community, an aspect often lacking in their respective curricula. Additionally, they noted that engagement in service learning contributed to their development as critical thinkers challenging social injustices regardless of the cultural context.

In light of these experiences, it seems though that the future of service learning should not be a subject of doubt, especially considering the associated long-term impacts (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Taylor & Raykov, 2014) on different stakeholders. Namely, for students, long-term impacts of service learning are noticed in enhancing the employability, fostering lifelong civic engagement, and fortifying alumni networks. Community partners perceive long term impacts through sustainable solutions and capacity building. Higher institution contributes to community-engaged research in long term, gaining more recognition in time. Community institutions benefit from enduring partnerships, ongoing alumni contributions, and broader societal impact through socially responsible graduates.

Finally, European Observatory of Service Learning in Higher Education (2023) has also been indicated a positive shift and trends towards recognizing the value of service learning in higher education by different geographical area, for both students and the communities they serve.

### **The Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism at Split: The Center for Service Learning**

The Center for Service Learning<sup>1</sup> has a respectful position within the Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism (FEBT) at Split. In essence, the Center starts in 2018 onward is actively shaping a generation of students who are not only well-equipped with knowledge and skills but are also motivated and dedicated to making a positive difference in society. This commitment to bridging the gap between education and social impact not only enriches the academic experience but also empowers students to become catalysts for change, fostering a culture of active citizenship and social responsibility that extends far beyond the walls of the institution. As part of the Center's broader mission, is dedicated to establishing and strengthening partnerships between civil, civic, and non-profit organizations (CSOs) on one side, and higher education institutions on the other. This strategic objective aims to harness the collective knowledge, skills, and resources of both these sectors to effectively address and resolve pressing social issues within the community.

The Center core mission revolves around the development and implementation of a service-learning program, primarily provided through the Professional Practice course (*in Croatian: SP-DKU course*) in the framework of which the students gain hands-on experience and apply their academic knowledge to address local and regional social challenges. This program represents a dynamic and innovative initiative that not only improves the academic experience of FEBT students but also build vital connections between the institution and the local community.

Methodologically, the SP-DKU program is realized as follows: the SP-DKU leader forms student teams (four members by each) and randomly assigns them, the FEBT mentor and the CSO for the DKU practice realization. After that, the student teams with the assigned, CSO and FEBT, mentors discuss and specify the activities in favor of CSO i.e. for its benefit and well-being. At the end of the SP-DKU course, all teams that participated in this program publicly present/share with others the contribution of their service learning engagement for the CSO. By participating in this program, students are encouraged to explore the various dimensions of civic engagement and social responsibility. This encompasses the development of a strong sense of community awareness and empathy, as well as the acquisition of skills that enable them to address critical issues affecting society. Evidently, through this initiative, the Center enriches the educational experience of students by providing them with practical, contextually relevant learning opportunities. This not only equips them with valuable skills but also instills a deep sense of social responsibility and awareness. Up to 2023 there are currently 28 active CSO's in above mentioned SP-DKU program.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dku.efst.hr/>

## Empirical research/Case studies

In continuation with the above, in the empirical part is applied qualitative research that involves in-depth exploration of three (3) case studies provided under *this paper author* mentorship in academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 (March 2020 - June 2021). The participants consisted of three distinct groups, each comprising four FEBT students. In addition to the student groups, three CSOs located in the Split-Dalmatian area were also participated. These CSOs were actively engaged with the students, providing them with a unique opportunity to apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings. Furthermore, mentors, including one FEBT mentor and three mentors associated with CSOs guided the collaborative efforts of these students. The case studies explored the diverse interactions and learning experiences that transpired during these partnerships. The mentioned are presented, briefly in Table 1 and, more detailed, in text below:

*Table 1: The selected case study objectives/activities at FEBT service learning program*

Case study (CS) _ Civil Society Organization(CSO)	Objective	Activities
CS1_SRCE Association of people with cerebral palsy <sup>2</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• innovative approach to promotion</li> <li>• higher visibility in general</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integrating more social media in as-is promotion</li> <li>• designing visual elements</li> <li>• providing stronger support to event management</li> <li>• technical and IT assistance</li> </ul>
CS2_TOMS Associations of people with disabilities <sup>3</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• as-is the tourist offer accessibility assessment</li> <li>• creating “accessible to all” the tourist offer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conducting research about needs of people with disabilities</li> <li>• identifying their needs and requirements</li> <li>• processing research results</li> </ul>
CS3_Beba EVA Club/assistance in pregnancy and postpartum period <sup>4</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conceptual proposal for website updating</li> <li>• web content renewal</li> <li>• visual design upgrade</li> <li>• educational video providing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creating/ publishing renewal web content designing and creating visual materials for various campaigns</li> <li>• creating the educational video material and promoting it to the local community</li> </ul>

*Source: Author research based on active participating as FEBT mentor in service learning program / SP-DKU in academic year 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.*

<sup>2</sup> <https://srce-cp-split.hr/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.toms.hr/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://beba-eva.hr/>

In Case study 1, the students assist the non-profit association whose main goal is to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities and their families. The associated student activities were focused on two primary objectives: (i) enhancing the promotion of the association to a broader local community and (ii) increasing the visibility of its ongoing activities and events. To achieve these goals, the team has implemented a multifaceted approach. First, the students has engaged in effective communication strategies, leveraging both traditional media and social media marketing to disseminate its message as far as possible. Secondly, the students has recognized the importance of visual elements in creating a lasting impact and has thus make efforts in designing compelling visual content to convey its mission. Moreover, students extended their support by actively participating in organizing events and engaging in promotion activities. Finally, recognizing the significance of technology and IT infrastructure, the students has also embraced technical and IT assistance to streamline project documentation management. Through this holistic approach, the students helped and encouraged the Association to bolster its presence in the local community but also to implement advanced IT support in their project management domain.

In Case study 2, the students cooperate with non-profit association that actively contributes to the resolution of issues and problems related to the life and work of persons with disabilities. Thus, the students were mainly engaged on evaluating and enhancing the accessibility of the tourist offerings in the City of Trogir. Case study 2 objective were twofold. Firstly, it involves a comprehensive assessment of the current state of accessibility within the city's tourist attractions and amenities and ascertain the extent to which the City caters to individuals with physical limitations, disabilities, and people of all age groups. The second objective was to stimulate the development of innovative solutions that can benefit Trogir's tourism sector, ensuring it becomes universally accessible and welcoming to everyone, regardless of their physical limitations, disabilities, or age. To achieve these goals, the few activities had been provided. Firstly, student engagement started with by conducting research into the specific needs of people with disabilities. They actively participated in identifying and understanding the unique requirements, preferences, and expectations of disabled tourists during the research process. This inclusive approach allows for the design of tailored solutions that genuinely address the concerns and desires of these end users. Subsequently, students collaborated in the analysis and processing of research findings, aiming to generate actionable insights. Moreover, the students, with exceptional support of CSO mentor, took efforts into a comprehensive exploration of the needs of all end users to ensure that the proposed improvements to Trogir's tourist offerings are not only accessible but also inclusive, creating an inclusive tourism experience for all.

In Case Study 3, the students were involved in the work of association that supports pregnant women, babies and their families. Related student activities were focused on significantly enhancing its services and stronger recognition and interaction with wider auditory. The primary objective was to design a conceptual proposal for updating the association's website. The intention was to provide a more comprehensive and user-friendly platform for expectant mothers and those in the postpartum period to access crucial information and resources. To reach this goal, the student team participated in multifaceted activities like creation and publication of relevant and informative content for the website and the similar ones. The mentioned web content “mission” was to serve as a valuable resource for pregnant women, offering support and guidance as well. Additionally, the team contributed to the re-design of visual materials for campaigns as well as to promotion of educational video content meant for

new mothers. The students also extended their support in communication with the media, partners, and the local community, ensuring that their services and initiatives reach a wider audience. Due to student assistance, “Beba EVA” is facilitated the communication to women during the critical phases of pregnancy and the postpartum period, ensuring they have the information and resources they need for a healthy and fulfilling journey into motherhood.

### **Results, student feedback and reflections**

After completing the service learning process, the students report the status of all planned / realized activities. Additionally, they also clearly expressed their reflections regarding the main values of the process behind them. Some of their responses to core reflection questions are selected and quoted below:

#### **Reflection question 1:**

*What kind of contribution did you make, through the SP-DKU program, to the host organization and/or to the solution of the specific problem you were working on?*

#### **Quoted student responses:**

- *“By creating a YouTube channel, I enabled the association to publish its educational materials on the Internet because, due to the pandemic, they could not hold courses for pregnant women. Together with my colleagues, I participated in the creation of a guide for tourism for people with disabilities, which expresses the importance of tourism for everyone”.*
- *“The contribution was in writing letters, creating manuals and getting in contact with facilities in Trogir”.*
- *“Launching the possibility of cooperation with individual companies for the club of pregnant women “Beba Eva”, and for the association 'TOMS' we contributed to the creation of an interactive map for people with disabilities, and created a manual that describes, promotes and explains what 'tourism for all' is and what it is its importance”.*
- *“By creating a guide for tourism for people with disabilities together with our colleagues, we presented the importance of tourism for everyone. In addition, along with photos of buildings from the old core of the city of Trogir, I helped the disabled association “TOMS” in the faster implementation of the creation of a digital map of the city of Trogir with disabled people”.*
- *“We created a poster, a project cost control chart, a media collage for the Association's website, and a new brochure design”.*
- *“My contribution is the creation of a new flyer design that will introduce the association to those who want to learn more about the association, and I believe that my task will be successfully fulfilled if someone decides to volunteer after reading the flyer”.*

#### **Reflection question 2:**

*What, for you personally, is the most important lesson learned through the DKU program?*

**Quoted student responses:**

- *“New experience, knowledge and skills that I gained while working in the association, which may be useful to me one day”.*
- *“Personally, the most important thing for me is that I gained a broader picture of how non-profit organizations function, and knowledge about all the obstacles and needs of people with disabilities and how we encounter them during certain life stages”.*
- *“The entire internship provided me with a new experience. I gained new knowledge and skills that will come in handy when I get a job after completing my education”.*
- *“Gratitude for things that I often take for granted”.*
- *“I learned the importance of teamwork and gained a sense of how much we depend on each other”.*
- *“The best part of the program is that with our work we also contribute to a non-profit organization with an important impact on our community”.*
- *“By helping and volunteering in associations, we primarily help people who need help the most, and in this way we also help ourselves, because the good deeds we do fill us up and make us better people”.*
- *“The lesson I learned in this program is the fact that with minimal help and your knowledge you can contribute a lot to the community and also influence others to do good, I will try to apply these qualities in my further studies, future jobs and in general in life”.*
- *“A small thing for me and the whole world for someone else”.*
- *“Our little, someone is everything!”*
- *“When little hands come together, anything is possible!”*

**Reflection question 3:**

*What did you learn about yourself?*

**Quoted student responses:**

- *“I have learned about myself that with a little effort and good will, I can help people who cannot do some basic things like me”.*
- *“I learned that I did not pay enough attention to the needy....and how by helping them we help everyone including ourselves”.*
- *“I learned about myself that despite the obstacles, like the pandemic, I could help others.*
- *“I learned that even though I do not have experience working with associations, I have knowledge that could help associations”.*
- *“I learned that the acquired knowledge from the studies can be applied to practical tasks and that with good communication and friendly people, all tasks can be completed”.*
- *I can help others and myself with two hands. Desire and will are the driving force behind everything”.*
- *“I learned that I could help a lot, that if I try”.*
- *“I need to be more patient and accommodating”.*
- *“I have learned about myself that I am a bit more creative than I give myself credit for”.*





with this research outputs, the students can successfully (i) promote the CSOs to the local community, enhancing visibility through communication strategies, visual content, event organization, and IT support (Case study 1), (ii) enhance the accessibility of tourist offerings to individuals with disabilities and create proposals for inclusive solutions (Case study 2), and (iii) create content, design visual materials, produce educational videos, and facilitate communication to support women during pregnancy and the postpartum period (Case study 3). However, the list of service learning associated activities the students are invited engage and contribute is much longer, and is considered as the subject of another, more extensive, research. Finally, due to the reflection process, each student, regardless of the scope of the engagement, gained new valuable perspectives on himself and the disabled community.

In spite the fact that student reflections offered quite valuable perspectives, the reflections from community partners, and other stakeholders, is missing. Thus, the stated is perceived as limitation of this research. The recommendation for future similar research is to focus and analyze the reflections of all stakeholders with aim to create more effective and sustainable service learning programs. Furthermore, adding a quantitative aspect that would allow for the systematic measurement and comparison of various aspects of service learning within the higher education context are also suggested as valuable extension of this research.

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