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ONGOING INSTITUTIONALISATION OF SERVICE-LEARNING AT BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY: CLASSROOM PRACTICE, FACULTY INNOVATION, AND INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS IN WARTIME PALESTINE

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Institutionalising service-learning in higher education is widely recognised as a complex, multi-dimensional process that requires alignment across mission, curriculum, and institutional structures (Furco, 2002). Institutionalising service-learning in higher education is demanding even in stable contexts. In settings of prolonged conflict, it requires balancing the building of sustainable structures with the need for flexibility, maintaining mission alignment while responding to immediate social needs, and nurturing community partnerships when communities themselves face severe disruption. This paper explores the ongoing process of embedding service-learning at Bethlehem University in Palestine and reflects on what this experience may offer to other institutions working toward similar goals in crisis and recovery contexts.

As a Catholic Lasallian university committed to quality higher education and service to Palestinian society, Bethlehem University has been actively advancing service-learning through a combination of classroom innovation and institutional support. An internal evaluative process drawing on the Uniservitate framework has indicated Advanced progress overall, with service-learning described as fully aligned with the institutional mission, very developed in regulations, and developed in curricular

integration. Support structures for faculty and students, community partnerships, and processes for reflection and evaluation are either in place or under active development. Full institutionalisation, however, remains an ongoing journey.

This progress builds directly on concrete pedagogical experiences. In English and communication courses, students engage in service-learning cycles that move from social diagnosis to project design, implementation, reflection, and public communication. Topics have included stigma reduction, women's empowerment, identity, and community awareness. Research conducted on these experiences (Awwad & Ayyad) highlighted gains in students' digital competences, critical thinking, leadership, autonomy, spirituality, and sense of agency, alongside contributions to collective resilience and social cohesion during wartime.

The institutionalisation process involves complementary roles and structures. The Academic Innovation Hub (AIH) supports broader curricular innovation, faculty development in andragogy and applied teaching methods, and the integration of service-learning into teaching practices across the university. The Institute for Community Engagement & Partnership provides additional coordination and oversight, while deanships in areas such as Arts, Nursing, and Education support integration into academic programmes. Faculty development activities, university events, and participation in international networks (including Uniservitate and ServU dialogues) further contribute to this work.

As an instructor, Layth R. Awwad implements service-learning directly in his courses, conducts research on its impact in the Palestinian wartime context, and presents this work at international conferences. Paola Handal, as Co-Director of the Academic Innovation Hub, contributes through faculty capacity-building in innovative and applied teaching approaches that help embed service-learning more systematically across programmes.

The paper argues that institutionalising service-learning in crisis contexts demands a dual approach: formal backing, mission coherence, and governance support on one hand, and pedagogical flexibility, ethical responsiveness, and reciprocal community collaboration on the other. Neither alone is sufficient. What makes this case significant is not that Bethlehem University has achieved institutionalisation despite the conflict, but that the conflict has

clarified what institutionalisation must be capable of – and that the resulting model has lessons for higher education institutions elsewhere seeking to make service-learning durable, mission-driven, and genuinely responsive to social need.

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