

INSTITUTIONALISING SERVICE-LEARNING FOR SDG-ORIENTED RECOVERY: A SCALABLE MODEL OF UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FROM THE SERVU PROJECT

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The war in Ukraine has exposed the limitations of traditional higher education models and accelerated the need for universities to act as active contributors to societal recovery. In this context, the institutionalisation of service-learning represents a strategic pathway for aligning higher education with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and strengthening the societal impact of universities.

This paper presents a scalable model of university-community engagement based on the ServU (Erasmus+ EDU-2023) project.

The study is grounded in the concept of the university's third mission, reframed through an SDG-oriented lens [1]. Universities are not only knowledge providers but also facilitators of inclusive development (SDG 10), quality education (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8) and resilient communities (SDG 11). However, in many cases, service-learning remains fragmented and project-based, limiting its contribution to systemic transformation. Institutionalisation is therefore critical for ensuring continuity, scalability and measurable impact.

Empirical evidence from focus group interviews in three communities of the Dnipropetrovsk region highlights a strong demand for structured, long-term cooperation with universities [2]. Communities expect practical, skills-oriented programs and co-created solutions addressing employment, infrastructure recovery, digitalisation and social inclusion. These needs directly correspond to key SDG priorities and underline the potential of universities to act as local drivers of sustainable development.

At the same time, the study identifies systemic barriers that hinder impact. Service-learning is rarely embedded into formal curricula and is often treated as an add-on activity. Institutional partnerships remain insufficiently formalised, and resource constraints limit the scaling of effective practices. As a result, existing initiatives demonstrate high local relevance but low structural sustainability.

Recent studies highlight the increasing role of universities in advancing SDG-oriented development through institutional transformation [3]. To address these gaps, the paper proposes a multi-level institutionalisation model. At the educational level, service-learning should be integrated into curricula with defined learning outcomes, credit allocation and assessment mechanisms. At the institutional level, universities need dedicated coordination structures, staff capacity building and strategic alignment with regional development agendas. At the ecosystem level, stable partnerships with local authorities, businesses and civil society organisations should be formalised through co-governance and co-creation mechanisms.

A key dimension of the proposed model is inclusiveness. Service-learning provides structured pathways for engaging vulnerable groups, including youth, internally displaced persons and women, thereby contributing to social cohesion and equitable recovery (SDG 10). By linking education with real-life challenges, it enhances employability and supports local economic revitalisation (SDG 8).

From an impact perspective, institutionalised service-learning enables the transition from short-term interventions to long-term systemic change. It strengthens social capital, improves trust between stakeholders and creates feedback loops between education, research and community needs. Importantly, it also enhances the accountability of universities by linking their activities to measurable societal outcomes.

Policy support is essential for scaling this model. National and European frameworks should recognise the third mission as a core function of higher education and provide incentives for SDG-oriented engagement. Instruments such as Erasmus+ demonstrate the value of transnational cooperation in developing methodologies, sharing best practices and ensuring transferability across contexts.

The ServU project illustrates how service-learning can be transformed into a scalable and transferable model of impact-driven education in crisis conditions. Its experience shows that aligning university activities with SDGs, embedding them institutionally and supporting them through policy frameworks can significantly enhance the contribution of higher education to recovery and sustainable development.

In conclusion, institutionalising service-learning is not only an educational innovation but a strategic lever for achieving SDG-oriented recovery. Universities that adopt this approach can move from reactive engagement to proactive leadership in rebuilding resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities.

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