

Exploring the institutionalisation of Service-Learning at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

A. Cano Ramírez^{a[0000-0003-3550-5845]}, B. M. Sandu^{*b[0000-0003-3961-3130]}, A. R. Vidal-Luengo^{*c[0000-0001-8556-1883]} and P. L. Castro Alonso^{d[0000-0002-0395-899X]}, ^aDepartamento de Psicología, Sociología y Trabajo Social, ULPGC, Las Palmas, Spain, ^bDepartamento de Filología Moderna, Traducción e Interpretación, ULPGC, Las Palmas, Spain, ^cDepartamento de Filología Española, Clásica y Árabe, ULPGC, Las Palmas, Spain, ^dDepartamento de Morfología, ULPGC, Las Palmas, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are currently undergoing a process of adaptation to societal demands, which entail adopting greater social responsibility. In this context, Service-Learning (SL) emerges as a key methodology focused on Global Citizenship Education, integrating learning, research, and community service, with the aim of addressing collective social needs in a sustainable manner [1]. In Spanish universities, SL has experienced rapid development since the 2000s, leading to the establishment of a political and organisational framework responsible for its promotion and dissemination. Although it can be argued that the consolidation of SL within universities is in a mature phase, it is generally considered that its institutionalisation still presents certain shortcomings [2].

Within this framework, the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) is currently in the midst of institutionalising SL. The primary objective of this study was to conduct an exploratory qualitative investigation using deductive analysis of the SL initiatives developed at the ULPGC that contribute to its institutionalisation. Through this analysis, the aim was to provide a critical evaluation of the current situation, identifying its strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This evaluation helped to pinpoint the opportunities and areas for enhancement in the institutional consolidation of SL at the ULPGC.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research method employed in this study is the case study approach, applying Programme Theory, which is operationalised through a proposed model of variables designed to explore the SL initiatives that have been implemented at the ULPGC. This is achieved through a hypothetical-deductive analysis. The variables adopted include the commitments outlined in the institutional declaration Strategy for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning at the ULPGC (*Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio-ULPGC*) [3] and Furco's [4] model for the institutionalisation of SL in universities.

The research process involved three methodological phases: 1) The preactive phase, which established the theoretical framework and the following two research questions: a) What actions are being promoted at the ULPGC in relation to the institutionalisation of SL?; and b) What are the strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for advancing the institutionalisation of SL at the ULPGC?; 2) The phase of data collection on SL initiatives at the ULPGC, drawing on various sources (official ULPGC website, members of the Educational Innovation Groups GIE-09 and Cooperation Group GEDE-ULPGC, participants in SL courses and projects); 3) The analysis phase, focusing on four key areas for the institutionalisation of university SL as outlined by Furco [4], alongside the commitments set out in the Strategy for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning at the ULPGC (*Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio-ULPGC*) [3].

* bianca.sandu@ulpgc.es; anaruth.vidal@ulpgc.es

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the institutionalisation of SL at the ULPGC has been based on these two diagnostic tools, namely the Strategy for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning at the ULPGC and Furco [4], aligning this author's key aspects [4] with the ULPGC's six commitments, leading to the identification of the following strengths and weaknesses:

- 1) Alignment between the institutional mission and SL objectives: the mission, vision, and values of the ULPGC are congruent with the principles of SL, and the institutional, regional, and national regulatory frameworks support its implementation; however, this methodology is not explicitly included in the ULPGC's Strategic Plan.
- 2) Community engagement and partnership building: this corresponds with the commitment which emphasises the visibility of successfully evaluated SL projects; the key SL actors are primarily local, receiving recent support from the Spanish University Network for Service-Learning (*Red Universitaria ApS[U]*); five regional seminars and one national and international conference have been organised; however, the initiatives are still predominantly led by teaching members in an unsystematic manner, without institutional certification or validation.
- 3) Academic aspects, which cover four institutional commitments related to SL: a) recognition of SL in the DOCENTIA-ULPGC programme: SL is recognised as an innovative teaching activity, though there is no explicit formal recognition for it; b) development of training programmes for teaching staff in SL methodology: seven specific training courses on SL have been conducted between 2012 and 2023, although this development has been intermittent, reliant on the initiative of the Cooperation and Educational Innovation Groups (GEDE-ULPGC and GIE-09), and contingent upon the institutional prioritisation of SL in policy cycles; d) support for SL projects within the framework of teaching innovation: the first call for inter-university educational innovation projects between the ULPGC and the University of La Laguna (ULL) is very recent (2024) and is not exclusively focused on SL; ULPGC's adherence to the Research European Reform University Alliance (RE: ERUA) presents an opportunity for promoting SL, as it recognises SL as a strategic methodology; e) healthcare and civil liability coverage in SL projects: coverage is only guaranteed for projects embedded within curricular internships, and no specific framework exists for SL activities involving external entities.
- 4) Structural and programmatic aspects for advancing and sustaining SL: this aligns with the commitment f), which concerns the creation of stable structures to support the planning, execution, and monitoring of SL projects. However, no institutional structure currently exists to promote SL actively.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of this study regarding the four key aspects of the institutionalization [4] of SL lead to a series of recommendations: 1) strategic integration of SL: the ULPGC has shown an increasing commitment to SL, incorporating it into its institutional declarations; however, as it is not embedded in the university's strategic plan, it is necessary to develop an action strategy that allocates the resources required to address the institutional challenge of promoting SL in a sustainable manner; 2) building synergies and partnerships: there is a significant need to foster synergies and partnerships between the university and external organisations, such as public administrations and civil society entities; 3) academic recommendations: it is recommended that a specific section for SL projects be integrated into the DOCENTIA-ULPGC programme; additionally, the establishment of a stable structure to ensure the continuity and systematic delivery of training, proper evaluation, and certification of SL projects by a qualified technical team is essential; specific calls for SL projects should be launched, alongside efforts to identify funding sources and partnerships beyond competitive educational innovation project grants; moreover, a mechanism must be established to guarantee health and legal liability coverage for all participants in SL projects; 4) creation of stable support structures: the effective management of the aforementioned commitments requires the establishment of a stable organisational structure, in the form of a committee, unit, directorate, or office dedicated to SL, as is already present in other Spanish universities.

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