

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

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ABSTRACT

Service-Learning (SL) is emerging within Spanish universities as a key methodology for opening the institution to society, responding to social demands, and adopting a policy of social responsibility aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within this framework, the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) is currently undergoing a process 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, a critical evaluation of the current situation was sought, identifying its strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This evaluation facilitated the identification of opportunities and areas for enhancement in the institutional consolidation of SL at the ULPGC.

Keywords: University Service-Learning, institutionalisation, Education for Global Citizenship, ULPGC, educational innovation, university social responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions, such as universities, must address the challenges posed by a constantly evolving society and continuously assess the impact they exert upon it [1]. This perspective highlights the social responsibility of universities, which not only prepare future professionals but also shape and influence the development of society. In this regard, universities must adapt to emerging demands and evolve to offer innovative and pertinent responses to contemporary problems.

In this context, Service-Learning (SL) emerges as a key methodology to achieve this objective [2] and, thus, its institutionalisation enables the consolidation of an educational model that promotes the resolution of real-world problems, creativity, and critical thinking [3], aligning with the mandate of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

SL is a pedagogical strategy that connects academia with society, using a methodology centred on education for global citizenship. As Puig and Palos explain, it is "*una propuesta educativa que combina procesos de aprendizaje y de servicio a la comunidad en un solo proyecto bien articulado, en el que los participantes se forman al trabajar sobre necesidades reales del entorno con el objetivo de mejorarlo* (an educational proposal that combines learning processes and community service in a single well-articulated project, in which participants learn by addressing real needs in their environment with the aim of improving it – own translation)" [4]. Similarly, the Declaration of the Canary Islands on Service-Learning in Higher Education (*Declaración de Canarias sobre Aprendizaje-Servicio en la Educación Superior*) [5] states that this educational strategy integrates teaching, research, and community service, allowing students to learn by solving real-world problems, while enabling teachers to innovate, generate, and transfer knowledge with a responsible and socially impactful approach.

Therefore, SL is governed by principles of social responsibility, aspiring to an "education for the development of sustainable collective social wellbeing" [6], which is oriented towards meeting the needs that society collectively perceives, fostering social wellbeing from a collective, inclusive perspective, rather than individualistic or exclusionary, and maintaining a balanced, respectful relationship with the natural environment. The educational model underpinning SL projects draws upon various pedagogical and learning theories, with the constructivist-rationalist perspective guiding the process, combined with experiential learning, meaningful learning, critical and emancipatory learning, closely linked to popular pedagogy, discovery learning, and emotional learning. The combination of these theories directs the entire process,

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ensuring that all participants (students, teachers, and external agents) engage in an open, participatory, and collective process across all phases of the work plan, assuming an active role in the definition, design, execution, and evaluation of the experience.

The development of SL in Spain began in the 2000s, experiencing rapid growth and reaching a certain degree of maturity. The formal establishment of the Spanish Service-Learning Network (*Red Española de Aprendizaje-Servicio*, REDAPS) occurred in 2014, followed by the Network of Service-Learning Municipalities (*Red de Ayuntamientos Aprendizaje-Servicio*) as a tool for social cohesion, comprising 24 corporations [7], and the University Service-Learning Association (*Asociación de Aprendizaje-Servicio Universitario*, ApS[U]), created in 2017 [8]. By 2018, six national research groups on SL were identified [9], and by 2021, 20 doctoral theses explicitly focused on SL had been developed [10]. Thus, the development of SL in Spanish universities has been swift, driven by the rise of university social responsibility and the alignment of SL with the principles of the Bologna Process [11].

The application of SL in Spanish universities spans a wide range of academic contexts, including courses, curricular internships, final degree projects, doctoral theses, teacher training courses, educational innovation projects, and research groups [10]. In some instances, it is linked to specific course practices, while in others it is voluntary, and it is not always associated with the recognition of academic credits [12]. Regarding SL training, it is important to note the increased frequency of training programmes integrated into centralised plans, programmes, or degrees, with a relatively diversified target audience, including not only teachers and researchers but also, albeit to a lesser extent, external groups [13].

In terms of SL research in Spain, an analysis of scientific output up to 2017 [14] reveals that studies predominantly focus on the tertiary level, especially in the Degrees in Early Childhood and Primary Education, with a tendency to concentrate on qualitative aspects related to learning rather than service. This trend, which focuses more on the impact on students than on teachers or the community, is also predominant globally [15]. Although the majority of internationally impactful scientific production is generated in the United States, Spain ranks as the second European country in terms of indexed publications in Web of Science and Scopus within the European context [9]. The implementation of this methodology in Spanish universities has led to the consolidation of a political-organisational framework responsible for promoting and disseminating SL. By 2018, at least eight Spanish universities had established organisational structures in various Vicerectorates, Institutes, or Offices dedicated to SL [13]. All these aspects indicate that Spanish universities are in a phase of maturity in consolidating SL, legitimised by its formative, teaching, research, and institutional dimensions. However, greater institutional commitment is required to ensure that SL is not only a pedagogical tool but also a hallmark of the institution's culture, fully integrated into its short, medium, and long-term strategy [13] and a daily practice within university life [16]. Within this framework, the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) initiated its SL strategy in 2015, in line with its university mission and with the aim of promoting the implementation of active learning methodologies, applying an approach to education for global citizenship. Therefore, the ULPGC is currently undergoing the process of institutionalising SL. As a relatively young institution, founded in 1989, and of medium size, with 19,876 students, 1,640 teaching and research staff, and 842 technical, administrative, and service staff members in the 2023-24 academic year [17], this process is part of its Fifth Institutional Strategic Plan (*V Plan Estratégico Institucional*), where the ULPGC defines its vision of a university:

“preocupada por la cultura, la calidad ambiental y el desarrollo sostenible; que potencie la solidaridad entre los pueblos y la cooperación, en especial con el continente africano y Latinoamérica; que contribuye a la solución de los problemas sociales e impulsa las relaciones internacionales como palanca de generación de valor (concerned with culture, environmental quality, and sustainable development; that promotes solidarity among peoples and cooperation, especially with Africa and Latin America; that contributes to the resolution of social problems and fosters international relations as a lever for generating value – own translation) [18].”

The main objective of this study is to conduct an exploratory qualitative research with a deductive analysis of the SL initiatives developed at the ULPGC which contribute to its institutionalisation. Through this analysis, a critical evaluation of the current situation was carried out, identifying both strengths and areas for improvement. This evaluation enabled the identification of opportunities that favour the advancement and consolidation of SL within the institutional structure of the ULPGC, thus contributing to its full and sustainable integration into the educational offerings and university culture.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main research method employed in this work is the case study. This methodology is frequently used in the social sciences and the educational field [19], [20]. This approach involves the systematic description of the key elements of a given object of study, offering a comprehensive view of its complexity, and thus enabling its holistic understanding [20]. The general objective of this case study is to gain insight into the initiatives that influence the institutionalisation of SL at the ULPGC. To this end, the following methodological phases have been undertaken:

1. Establishment of the theoretical framework, state of the art and research questions, formulated as follows: 1) What actions are being promoted at the ULPGC in relation to the institutionalisation of SL?; 2) What are the strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for advancing the institutionalisation of SL at the ULPGC?

The theoretical approach of this study also includes Programme Theory, carried out through the proposed model of variables to explore the SL initiatives implemented at the ULPGC, through a hypothetical-deductive analysis. This model is based on the proposals of Seibold [21], Zabalza [22], and Boni, López and Barahona [23], with the necessary and sufficient adaptations made to apply it to the university context. The model is presented here as a framework that facilitates the understanding of the reality being studied. In this regard, the variables adopted are, on one hand, the commitments outlined in the institutional declaration entitled Strategy for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning at the ULPGC (*Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio-ULPGC*) [24], and on the other hand, the proposal by Furco [25] regarding the institutionalisation of SL at the ULPGC, which will be further detailed below.

In addition, this study also adopts Grounded Theory, an inductive approach, as a counterbalance to Programme Theory. This approach invokes the principle of flexibility and the absence of rigid patterns in qualitative research, where researchers are responsible for selecting the appropriate theories and methods. Grounded Theory is a method that does not adhere to pre-existing theories but instead aims to discover theories, concepts, hypotheses, and propositions directly from the data collected in the research [26].

2. Search and compilation of data on all actions and initiatives related to SL at the ULPGC, using the official ULPGC website and information provided by members of the Innovation Group *Educa Multidisciplinar* (GIE-09), the Cooperation Group Education for Global Citizenship (*Educación para el Desarrollo de la Ciudadanía Global*, GEDE-ULPGC), as well as participants in SL-related training courses and events. A sample of these experiences is briefly presented in this work, in order to showcase the diversity of SL initiatives being promoted at the ULPGC.

3. Analysis of the data related to SL at the ULPGC based on four key areas for institutionalisation as described by Furco [25] in the context of SL at the ULPGC: 1) The relationship between the institutional mission and SL objectives; 2) Community engagement and the formation of partnerships; 3) The academic aspects concerning teachers, departments and students; and 4) The structural and programmatic aspects necessary for the advancement and sustainability of SL. These key aspects are included in the ULPGC's Institutional Declaration (*Declaración Institucional*) titled Strategy for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning at the ULPGC (*Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio-ULPGC*), which was also used as a reference for analysing the institutional development of SL at this university.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Mission, vision, and values of the ULPGC and objectives of SL

The analysis of the ULPGC's mission reveals a clear alignment with the fundamental principles of SL as it focuses on public service, the training of competent, responsible, and compassionate individuals, and the dissemination of knowledge for the social welfare of the autonomous community of the Canary Islands [27]. These pillars are reflected in the objectives of SL, as it combines the acquisition of academic knowledge with service to the community, creating a space for experiential learning that addresses both educational and social needs.

The ULPGC's vision includes several key elements that closely align with the implementation of SL: autonomy, innovation, social impact, and sustainability. The university aspires to be recognised for its social impact, and the SL pedagogy not only innovates in teaching but also establishes a direct link between the university and the community, contributing to the resolution of social problems. Additionally, the vision of fostering cooperation and solidarity among peoples, together with an emphasis on sustainability, clearly resonates with the principles of SL which seek to generate positive impacts both in the immediate environment and in a broader context. The "third space" referred to by Zeichner [28], where educational and community actors collaborate, also reflects this purpose, as it creates a domain where the interests of the university and the community converge to achieve shared goals.

The values of the ULPGC provide an ethical and practical framework that facilitates the institutionalisation of SL. Among the most relevant values are commitment to the community and society, excellence in teaching and research, transparency and accountability, sustainable development, and equity and social justice.

The regulatory framework of the ULPGC reinforces the alignment between the institutional mission and the incorporation of SL. According to Article 173.-1 of the ULPGC Statutes, "*cada estudiante tiene el derecho a su incorporación a las actividades de voluntariado y participación social, cooperación al desarrollo, y otras de responsabilidad social que organice la ULPGC* (each student has the right to participate in voluntary and social engagement activities, development cooperation, and other social responsibility initiatives organised by ULPGC – own translation)" [29]. Not only does this article legitimise the active participation of students in activities that have a social impact, but also creates a favourable

legal context for the institutionalisation of SL, enabling students to combine their academic education with providing services to the community.

From an educational mission perspective, the ULPGC has defined the following core competencies that demonstrate these aspirations: N4: To actively commit to developing professional practices that respect human rights and the ethical norms of one's professional field, fostering trust among the beneficiaries of one's profession and achieving the legitimacy and authority society recognises, and N5: To actively participate in multicultural integration, promoting full human development, social coexistence, and social justice [30]. These core competencies emphasise the importance of training professionals with a strong ethical and social commitment, values that are intrinsically linked to the philosophy of SL. This pedagogical approach, by intertwining academic teaching with social responsibility, not only reinforces these competencies but also provides a space for students to apply these ethical principles and social justice in real-world contexts, thereby contributing to their holistic development.

3.2 National and international regulatory framework

The implementation of SL in universities requires the institution's active participation in society, establishing partnerships with entities that can offer students the opportunity to apply their knowledge to address societal needs and demands that benefit their social environment. Both national and international regulatory frameworks endorse this societal projection of the university.

At the national level, the Statute of the University Student (*Estatuto del Estudiante Universitario*) specifies in the chapter titled '*De las actividades de participación social y cooperación al desarrollo de los estudiantes*' (On student participation in social and development cooperation activities – own translation) that "*las universidades (...) deberán favorecer prácticas de responsabilidad social y ciudadana que combinen aprendizajes académicos en las diferentes titulaciones con la prestación de servicios a la comunidad, orientados a la mejora de la calidad de vida y la inclusión social* (universities must promote practices of social and civic responsibility that combine academic learning in various degrees with the provision of services to the community, aimed at improving quality of life and social inclusion – own translation)" [31].

More recently, the Organic Law 2/2023, of March 22, on the University System (*Ley Orgánica 2/2023, de 22 de marzo, del Sistema Universitario*), in its Title VI, University, Society, and Culture (*Universidad, sociedad y cultura*), reinforces this commitment by stipulating that "*[l]as universidades fomentarán la participación de la comunidad universitaria en actividades y proyectos relacionados con la promoción de la democracia, la igualdad, la justicia social, la paz y la inclusión, así como con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible* (universities will promote the participation of the university community in activities and projects related to the promotion of democracy, equality, social justice, peace, and inclusion, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – own translation)" [32]. Moreover, section 4 of the same article highlights that universities "*reforzarán la colaboración con las Administraciones Locales y con los actores sociales de su entorno mediante los proyectos de Ciencia Ciudadana y de ApS, entre otros mecanismos* (will strengthen collaboration with Local Administrations and social actors in their environment through mechanisms such as citizen science projects and SL)" [32].

At the international level, within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015, the ULPGC is called upon to contribute to achieving the SDGs, with particular emphasis on SDG 17, which promotes the establishment of strategic partnerships, an essential principle in SL methodology. By fostering collaboration between the university and external actors, this pedagogy contributes to fulfilling the SDGs through the implementation of projects that address social and environmental needs.

The prominence of SL at the ULPGC is further enhanced by its alignment with the Dublin Declaration on Global Education, which defines global education as:

“education that enables people to reflect critically on the world and their place in it; to open their eyes, hearts and minds to the reality of the world at local and global level. It empowers people to understand, imagine, hope and act to bring about a world of social and climate justice, peace, solidarity, equity and equality, planetary sustainability, and international understanding. It involves respect for human rights and diversity, inclusion, and a decent life for all, now and into the future [33]”.

This framework brings to light the global relevance of SL by embedding its practices within both national legislation and international commitments to sustainable development, social justice, and global citizenship.

3.3 Service-Learning at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

The promotion of SL at the ULPGC began in 2015 with the launch of the University Programme for Development Education and Social Awareness (*Programa Universitario de Educación para el Desarrollo y Sensibilidad Social, PUEDySS*), an initiative driven by the Directorate of Cooperation and Social Commitment (*Dirección de Cooperación y Compromiso Social*) under the Office of the Vice-Rector for Internationalization and Cooperation. This marked a more

robust institutional commitment to SL. Through this programme, training courses on SL were organized for university teaching staff, solidifying the university's interest in this pedagogical approach.

From 2017 onward, the promotion of SL at the ULPGC was led by the Cooperation Group for Education for Global Citizenship Development (*Grupo de Cooperación 'Educación para el Desarrollo de la Ciudadanía Global'*, GEDE-ULPGC), which has as one of its key objectives the aim to "*impulsar el Aprendizaje-Servicio como herramienta pedagógica para la transformación social y la sostenibilidad*" (promote Service-Learning as a pedagogical tool for social transformation and sustainability)" [34]. Two primary dimensions of the group's objectives support the advancement of SL: first, connecting the university with the actions it organises and promotes; and second, motivating teachers from various disciplines to implement teaching experiences based on this methodology. From 2018, the Educational Innovation Group *Educa Multidisciplinar* (GIE-09) joined these efforts, reinforcing the initiatives already driven by GEDE-ULPGC. One of the most significant actions taken to promote SL has been the approval by the ULPGC's Governing Council of two institutional declarations, through which the university formally recognises the importance of SL and commits to fostering its implementation. The Institutional Declaration titled *Strategy for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning at the ULPGC (Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio ULPGC)*, approved by the Governing Council on May 31, 2021 [35], declares its adherence to the Technical Document Institutionalization of Service-Learning as a Teaching Strategy within the Framework of University Social Responsibility for the Promotion of Sustainability (*Institucionalización del aprendizaje-servicio como estrategia docente dentro del marco de la responsabilidad social universitaria para la promoción de la sostenibilidad en la universidad*), approved in 2015 by the Executive Committee and the Plenary Session of the Sustainability Commission, CADEP Group, of the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (*Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades de España, CRUE*). This document outlines the basic requirements for the institutionalization of SL, as follows, which serve as a guide for advancing the promotion of SL:

a) Reconocimiento en el Docencia del profesorado que promueve, tutoriza, coordina y evalúa los proyectos de aprendizaje aplicados en la comunidad que realiza su alumnado en el contexto de su asignatura. b) Compromiso para el desarrollo de programas de formación del PDI en la metodología de Aprendizaje-Servicio. c) Visibilidad de los proyectos de ApS realizados y evaluados positivamente, a través de las webs institucionales. d) Ayudas a la realización de proyectos de ApS en el marco de la innovación docente. e) La necesaria cobertura sanitaria y jurídica de responsabilidad civil que se pueda precisar en la aplicación de proyectos de ApS en la comunidad, fuera de los recintos universitarios, que garantice en todo momento los derechos a la seguridad y salud de todas las personas implicadas (estudiantes y profesorado). f) Creación de estructuras estables que den soporte a la planificación, ejecución y seguimiento de los proyectos de ApS. ((a) Recognition within Docencia of teaching members who promote, mentor, coordinate, and evaluate community-based learning projects undertaken by their students in the context of their courses. b) Commitment to developing training programs for academic staff (PDI) in Service-Learning methodology. c) Visibility of SL projects that have been positively evaluated, via institutional websites. d) Support for SL projects within the framework of teaching innovation. e) Provision of necessary health and civil liability insurance to cover SL projects carried out within the community, outside university premises, ensuring the safety and health of all involved parties (students and teachers) at all times. f) Creation of stable structures to support the planning, execution, and monitoring of SL projects – own translation) [36].

On July 9, 2021, the Canary Islands Declaration (*Declaración de Canarias*) on Service-Learning in Higher Education [6] was drafted during the 10th National and 4th International University Service-Learning Conference, organized by the ULPGC, the University of La Laguna (ULL), and the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), with significant representation from the teaching staff and SL coordinators from their respective universities. The ULPGC signed and adhered to this institutional declaration on October 26, 2021, following its approval by the Governing Council [35].

The following sections will analyse the basic requirements for the institutionalisation of SL, as detailed in the institutional declaration. These requirements not only serve as an essential guide for advancing the promotion of SL at the ULPGC but also establish a framework aimed at strengthening the institution's commitment to this pedagogical methodology and ensuring its effective implementation within the educational context.

3.3.1 Recognition within the *Docencia* Programme

The current context of teaching evaluation at the ULPGC presents a significant opportunity concerning the SL methodology. Although the Strategy for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning at the ULPGC (*Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio ULPGC*) emphasizes SL as a pedagogical strategy aligned with university social responsibility and sustainability, its recognition within the framework of the DOCENTIA-ULPGC programme is not distinct from other pedagogical innovations.

In the current system, SL activities are considered alongside other teaching innovations, without a specific category that distinguishes them. This approach may lead some teaching staff to opt for alternative teaching innovations that may be

perceived as more accessible, as they, while equally valid, require a different level of involvement in terms of effort and resources.

With the recent initiative to modify the DOCENTIA-ULPGC programme, promoted by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación*, ANECA), there is the possibility of incorporating a new qualitative evaluation module. This development holds the potential to provide a space for more prominently valuing SL experiences, thereby enriching the current evaluation framework.

3.3.2 Training offered in the training plans for academic staff

Since 2012, SL training courses for academic staff have been held in specific years (see Table 1), covering topics related not only to SL but also to social responsibility and sustainable development, in accordance with the university's objectives of linking its pedagogical actions to the SDGs. Notable trainers and experts include, among others, Ana Cano, Roser Batlle, Pilar Aramburuzabala, and Silvana Longueira, who have promoted SL knowledge and methodologies at various times.

Table 1. Courses for teaching and research staff at the ULPGC

| Year | Course | Trainer |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017 | Education for Development (<i>Educación para el desarrollo</i>) | Ana Cano, Coordinator of GEDE-ULPGC |
| 2015 | Service-Learning: Academic Excellence and Social Change (<i>Aprendizaje-Servicio. Excelencia académica y cambio social</i>) | Roser Batlle, President of the Spanish Service-Learning Network (<i>Red Española de ApS, REDAPS</i>) |
| 2019 | University Service-Learning: Learning, Participation, and Social Transformation (<i>Aprendizaje-Servicio Universitario. Aprendizaje, Participación y Transformación Social</i>) | Pilar Aramburuzabala, President of the University Service-Learning Association |
| 2019 | Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development (<i>Responsabilidad Social y Desarrollo Sostenible, GEDE-ULPGC</i>) | Ana Cano, Inmaculada Galván, Heather Adams, Vicente Díaz, ULPGC |
| 2022 | Curriculum Sustainability and SDGs in University Training: Service-Learning as an Effective Tool (<i>Sostenibilización curricular y ODS en la formación universitaria. El Aprendizaje-Servicio como herramienta eficaz</i>) | Silvana Longueira from the University of Santiago de Compostela and Rafael Miñano from the Polytechnic University of Valencia |
| 2022 | A Pedagogical Tool for Social Transformation and Sustainability (<i>Herramienta pedagógica para la transformación social y la sostenibilidad</i>) | Pilar Aramburuzabala, President of the University Service-Learning Association |
| 2023 | Service-Learning: Creation and Reformulation of University Projects (<i>Aprendizaje servicio: creación y reformulación de proyectos universitarios</i>) | Mariona Masgrau Juanola, Pilar Albertín Carbó, and Eulàlia Guiu Puget, University of Girona |
| 2024 (October) | Action Learning (AL) for Research and Training (<i>Aprendizaje en Acción (AA) para la investigación y la formación</i>) | Monique Leivas Vargas, University of Valencia, and Álvaro Fernández-Baldor Martínez, Polytechnic University of Valencia |
| 2024 (November) | Reflection as an Evaluation Tool in Teaching: The Case of Service-Learning Projects (<i>La reflexión como instrumento de evaluación en la docencia. El caso de los proyectos de Aprendizaje-Servicio</i>) | María Antonia Buenaventura Rubio, University of Barcelona |

At the ULPGC, the training courses have been initiated and organised by GEDE-ULPGC and GIE-09, with institutional financial support from the vice-rectorates responsible for the training plan for teaching and research staff. This SL training has been carried out intermittently, as evidenced by the course offerings (see Table 1) for the academic staff. Despite occasional experiences over the years, the training offering has not been continuous, reflecting periods of promotion and others of lesser visibility, with some stability evident in recent years. As mentioned in the 2021 *Declaración Institucional* [24], one of the fundamental aspects for the institutionalisation of SL is the commitment to offering continuous training to the teaching staff. However, the failure to provide training in a continuous and systematic manner contradicts one of the recommendations made by Furco [25], relating to the academic and structural aspects necessary for advancing the institutionalization of SL, as led and embraced by the institution itself, highlighting the fragility with which this action line has been pursued.

From 2015 onward, with the creation of the University Programme for Development Education and Social Awareness (*Programa Universitario de Educación para el Desarrollo y Sensibilidad Social*, PUEDySS), the institutional commitment to SL was strengthened. However, despite the initial momentum, the periods when specific training was not offered indicate that challenges remain in ensuring the sustainability of these actions. These gaps in training offerings highlight the importance of securing a stable structure that does not rely solely on the initiative of certain groups, political moments, national impulses or new legislative requirements, but becomes an integral part of the institutional training strategy.

3.3.3 Organisation of Service-Learning events at the ULPGC: Promoting and raising awareness of Service-Learning in the Canary Islands

GEDE-ULPGC and GIE-09 have played a key role in organising events to disseminate and promote SL within the Canary Islands. Through collaborations with organisations such as the Canary Islands Association for SL (*Asociación Canaria de ApS*) and the Coordinator of Development NGOs in the Canary Islands (*Coordinadora de ONGD de Canarias*, CONGDCA), these groups have actively contributed to raising awareness of this pedagogical methodology by co-organising three out of the five Canary Islands Service-Learning Conferences held in the last decade.

Since the first conference in 2014, these events have become a reference point for reflection, the exchange of experiences, and the promotion of SL as a transformative educational tool. The following are the most notable events:

1. 2015: The second Canary Islands Service-Learning Conference. Education and Civic (Engagement *II Jornada Canaria Aprendizaje-Servicio. Educación y Compromiso Cívico*). This conference, organised by the Spanish Network for Service-Learning (*Red Española de Aprendizaje-Servicio*) in collaboration with the Teacher Training Centre of Telde, the Ideo Foundation, and the Vice-rectorate for Internationalisation and Cooperation of the ULPGC, marked a significant milestone in the promotion of SL in the Canary Islands. The event highlighted the connection between education and civic engagement, emphasising SL's potential to foster values of social responsibility and community participation.
2. 2022: The fourth Canary Islands Service-Learning Conference (*IV Jornada Canaria de Aprendizaje-Servicio*). After a prolonged absence of conferences, this event was co-organised by GEDE-ULPGC, the Canary Islands Association for SL, and the CONGDCA. It showcased the renewed institutional commitment to SL, addressing its relevance for the development of global citizenship and sustainability. The transformative role of SL in university education and its contribution to the SDGs was prominently featured.
3. 2023: The fifth Canary Islands Service-Learning Conference 'SL and Global Citizenship' (*V Jornada Canaria de Aprendizaje-Servicio 'ApS y Ciudadanía Global'*), co-organised again by the ULPGC along with the Canary Islands Association for SL, the CONGDCA, and the *Fundación Universitaria de Las Palmas*. This edition involved the collaboration with the Island Council (*Cabildo*) of Gran Canaria and was funded by the Government of the Canary Islands. The conference focused on SL as a key tool for building global citizenship committed to addressing contemporary challenges, promoting strategic alliances between the university and the community.

In addition to these conferences, the ULPGC also spearheaded the organisation of larger-scale events, such as the tenth national and fourth international University Service-Learning Conference (*X Congreso Nacional y IV Internacional de Aprendizaje-Servicio Universitario*), held in 2021. This conference, organised in collaboration with the ULL and the UNED, was titled *Service-Learning in Alliance with the SDGs*. It focused on research and the exchange of experiences related to SL, with a particular emphasis on its role in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The congress, held virtually, was promoted by the University Network for Service-Learning (*Red Universitaria de Aprendizaje-Servicio ApS[U]*), a network that fosters the annual gathering of academic professionals committed to the development of SL in higher education. Under the title 'Service-Learning in Alliance with the SDGs', the conference aimed to promote and disseminate research, experiences, and processes of institutionalising SL within the university context. Additionally, it reflected on the role of university SL in achieving the 2030 Agenda goals, while highlighting and strengthening collaborative partnerships, as well as encouraging active student participation in such projects.

3.3.4 Service-Learning experiences at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

For this research, a selection of eleven SL experiences implemented in various areas of the ULPGC has been made (see Table 2), demonstrating a multidisciplinary approach that has involved more than 730 students over several years. The institutionalisation of these initiatives is presented as essential for consolidating the educational and social impact of the projects undertaken.

Table 2. Selected Service-Learning experiences at the ULPGC

| Project Name | Degree Programme | Number of Students | Years of Implementation |
|--|--|--------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Cooperativas vecinales: Propuesta participativa para el impulso de modelos cooperativos en la isla de Gran Canaria</i> (Neighbourhood Cooperatives: A Participatory Proposal for Promoting Cooperative Models on the Island of Gran Canaria) | Bachelor's Degree in Architecture | 25 | 5 |
| <i>Encuentro de Sensibilización sobre Realidades Sociales</i> (Awareness Workshop on Social Realities) | Bachelor's Degree in Social Work | 500 | 5 |
| <i>ApS aplicado al Estudio del Trabajo</i> (Service-Learning Applied to the Study of Labour) | Bachelor's Degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources | 8 | 2 |
| <i>ApSU en Histología</i> (University Service-Learning in Histology) | Bachelor's Degree in Medicine | 45 | 2 |
| <i>Experiencia Piloto de Aprendizaje Servicio para el Desarrollo del Pensamiento Computacional en un Proyecto de Estímulo del Talento Matemático como parte del proyecto "Metodologías Didácticas Activas para la Integración del Estudiantado para Maestro" (PENSACT)</i> (Pilot Service-Learning Experience for Developing Computational Thinking in a Mathematical Talent Stimulation Project as Part of the "Active Teaching Methodologies for Integrating Computational Thinking into Teacher Education" Project) | Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education / Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education | 46 | 1 |
| <i>EcoAprendemos: Nuevas narrativas para un mundo unido</i> (EcoLearning: New Narratives for a United World) | Creative Writing and Social Action Course offered to ULPGC students of different Bachelor's Degrees | 14 | 5 |
| <i>If you can dream it, you can achieve it!: Cuentos que dan alas</i> (If you can dream it, you can achieve it!: Winged stories) | Bachelor's Degree in Modern Languages | 100 | 2 |
| <i>Enseñanza de Español L2 a migrantes y refugiados</i> (Teaching Spanish as a Second Language to Migrants and Refugees) | Master's Degree in Teaching Spanish and Its Culture | 11 | 4 |
| <i>Alineación estratégica con la Agenda 2030 en una organización sin ánimo de lucro: una experiencia de aprendizaje-servicio con la Fundación Canaria Pequeño Valiente</i> (Strategic Alignment with the 2030 Agenda in a Non-Profit Organisation: A Service-Learning Experience with the Pequeño Valiente Canary Foundation) | Master's Degree in Business Management and Human Resources | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Aprendizaje-Servicio. Diagnóstico sobre las Necesidades y Potencialidades del IES de Tafira Nelson Mandela y su Entorno Sociocomunitario</i> (Service-Learning: Assessment of the Needs and Potential of the IES Tafira Nelson Mandela and Its Socio-Community Environment) | Final Master's Project - Master's Degree in Teacher Training, Specialisation in Educational Guidance | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Strategic Alignment with the 2030 Agenda in a Non-Profit Organization: A Service-Learning Experience with the Pequeño Valiente Canary Foundation</i> | Master's Degree in Business Management and Human Resources | 1 | 1 |

A significant example is the *Cooperativas vecinales* project, part of the Bachelor's Degree in Architecture, which has involved 25 students over five years. The project aims to promote local cooperative models with a focus on the social economy and innovation. Similarly, in the Bachelor's Degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources, the project *ApS aplicado al Estudio del Trabajo*, undertaken by eight students over two years, centres on analysing and improving working conditions within the CONGDCA. The *Encuentro de Sensibilización sobre Realidades Sociales* project, driven by the Bachelor's Degree in Social Work, has engaged approximately 500 students over five years. In this project, students investigate social services and organise informational, awareness-raising, and outreach events within the university community, with the aim of increasing knowledge and ensuring access to social services.

In the field of Medicine, *ApSU en Histología* has allowed 45 students, over two years, to teach aspects of histology to patient associations, thus contributing to health education and the development of communication skills in future professionals. Additionally, the *PENSACT* project, developed within the Bachelor's Degrees in Early Childhood and Primary Education, has involved 46 students in promoting computational thinking through active methodologies, in a one-year pilot experience.

The project 'If You Can Dream It, You Can Achieve It: *cuentos que dan alas*', which involves 100 students from the Bachelor's Degree in Modern Languages, focuses on creating motivational stories within the framework of inclusive education and SDG 4 (Quality Education). More recently, a project has been implemented with the aim of generating new narratives to counter hate speech. The project *EcoAprendemos: New Narratives for a United World* enables students to practise narrative techniques, such as point of view, structure, and dialogue writing, while also acquiring skills to relate literary texts to other discourses. The students participate as volunteers in an association working with a particular community, after which they write stories that are disseminated to raise awareness of the reality of that community.

In postgraduate programmes, SL initiatives also cover various areas, offering students the opportunity to apply their knowledge in practical contexts and generate a positive social impact. In the Master's Degree in Teaching Spanish and its Culture, the project *Enseñanza de Español L2 a migrantes y refugiados* responds to the growing need for linguistic support for this group in Gran Canaria. Students develop skills in planning didactic activities and adapting to multicultural environments, fostering inclusion and empathy.

In the project *Alineación estratégica con la Agenda 2030* with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that supports children with cancer, students from the Master's Degree in Business Management and Human Resources apply strategic management tools (PESTEL analysis, SWOT analysis, CANVAS model) to design the NGO's first strategic plan, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This approach strengthens the NGO's ability to adapt to changes and advance its mission. The Final Master's Project *Aprendizaje-Servicio. Diagnóstico sobre las Necesidades y Potencialidades del IES de Tafira Nelson Mandela y su Entorno Sociocomunitario* conducts a diagnostic study of IES Tafira (Gran Canaria) and community entities in the surrounding neighbourhoods to identify factors that may facilitate the future development and implementation of SL in the school, as well as areas of opportunity. The project also aims to contribute to establishing networks between the education sector and the local community.

Finally, the project 'Advising an NGO Dedicated to Supporting Children with Cancer', developed within the context of the Master's Degree in Business Management and Human Resources, focuses on providing strategic advice to the NGO, facilitating decision-making during the pandemic, and contributing to the creation of its first strategic plan, aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

With regard to visibility and evaluation, point (c) of the Institutional Declaration (*Declaración Institucional*), which emphasises the importance of making SL projects visible and positively evaluated through institutional platforms, highlights a crucial aspect for the promotion and recognition of these initiatives at the ULPGC. This gap in formal evaluation presents a significant challenge for the teaching staff, as it is essential to have a mechanism that not only enables the assessment of projects but also provides feedback on possible improvements and adjustments. The ability to receive guidance on the effectiveness of their initiatives is critical for the professional development of educators and the continuous improvement of educational quality. Furthermore, the issuance of certificates accrediting the completion of these projects is a key component for teachers to formally justify their involvement in SL.

3.3.5 Support for Service-Learning project implementation, health and legal coverage, and the establishment of stable support structures

Despite their significance, the institutional declaration's points (d), (e), and (f) concerning SL have not been sufficiently prioritised in practice. Firstly, point (d), which refers to support for the implementation of SL projects within the framework of teaching innovation, has not received adequate attention, hindering the effective execution of these initiatives by academic staff. It was only in 2024 that two actions were identified as potential support mechanisms for SL projects,

provided they fell under competitive calls for educational innovation projects. One such initiative was the first competitive inter-university call for educational innovation projects by the ULPGC and the ULL. However, this call is not specific to SL, and the methodology is merely mentioned as an example of potential projects. Another opportunity arises from ULPGC's membership in the Research European Reform University Alliance (RE: ERUA), where SL has been identified as one of the strategic methodologies that participating universities aim to promote. The ULPGC has selected SL, among other methodologies, to be part of its efforts to promote this approach alongside other universities in the network. RE: ERUA is expected to launch competitive calls for educational innovation projects in the near future [37]. These initiatives, however, do not account for the numerous SL projects already being developed within the framework of courses, which are not necessarily motivated or aligned with competitive calls for innovation projects and currently lack alternative support mechanisms.

Furthermore, point (e) addresses the need for health and civil liability insurance for SL projects conducted outside university premises, except for SL projects embedded within the External Internships (*Prácticas Externas*) course, which are covered by accident and liability insurance for collaborations with external entities. While university centres have offered their support in this regard, without a formal framework that ensures the safety and health of all participants, legitimate concerns arise regarding the rights of both students and staff in these settings.

Lastly, point (f) emphasises the importance of creating stable structures to support the planning, execution, and monitoring of SL projects. However, this need remains unaddressed, potentially impacting the quality and sustainability of these initiatives.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proposed, organised in accordance with the commitments outlined in the *Declaración Institucional Estrategia de institucionalización del Aprendizaje-Servicio-ULPGC* [24], and based on Furco's classification [25], which identifies four key areas for the institutionalisation of SL.

1. The relationship between the institutional mission and SL objectives: the ULPGC has shown an increasing commitment to SL by integrating it into its institutional statements. However, SL is not yet embedded within its strategic plan. It is necessary to define an action strategy that provides the required resources to address the institutional challenge of promoting SL, thereby ensuring its consolidation and sustainability.
2. Community participation and partnership formation: There is a significant need to create synergies and partnerships between the university and external organisations, such as public administrations and civil society entities. Collaboration with these actors is essential for implementing effective and transformative projects that address local social realities.
3. Academic aspects concerning staff, departments, and students and structural and programmatic aspects necessary for the advancement and sustainability of SL:
 - a) With regard to institutional commitment, it is essential that the ULPGC implements a specific section for SL within the DOCENTIA system to recognise and reward the teaching staff who promote, supervise, coordinate, and evaluate community-based learning projects within the context of their courses. This would not only ensure appropriate recognition of SL's value but could also encourage greater teaching staff participation in such projects.
 - b) In line with the commitment to teaching staff development programmes on SL methodology, it is necessary to establish a stable structure that guarantees the continuity and systematicity of training. According to Furco's recommendations [25], both academic and structural aspects are key to advancing SL's institutionalisation.
 - c) Regarding the visibility of completed and positively evaluated SL projects, it is essential that projects be assessed and certified by a qualified technical team. Additionally, a communication strategy must be implemented to ensure their visibility through institutional websites. Specific calls for SL projects would also contribute to raising awareness of these initiatives.
 - d) Concerning the support for SL projects within the framework of teaching innovation, it is necessary to promote strategies for identifying partnerships and funding opportunities that enable the teaching staff to face the challenges of leading SL initiatives without being solely dependent on competitive calls for educational innovation projects. Moreover, it is essential to engage students in awareness-raising efforts to ensure they understand the educational model to which SL responds.
 - e) With regard to the health and legal coverage required for SL projects undertaken in the community, outside of university premises, it is absolutely essential for the ULPGC to establish a mechanism that

guarantees the safety and health of all participants, both students and teaching staff. This mechanism would ensure that all rights related to safety and health are protected for those involved.

4. The need for stable support structures: Finally, managing the commitments outlined above requires the ULPGC to take a decisive step forward, as other Spanish universities have done, by making a strategic institutional commitment to creating stable structures. These would provide support for the planning, execution, and monitoring of SL projects, a commitment currently lacking at the ULPGC.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to analyse SL initiatives at the ULPGC with the aim of addressing two key questions: 1) What actions are being promoted at the ULPGC in relation to the institutionalisation of SL?; and 2) What are the strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for advancing the institutionalisation of SL at the ULPGC?

Through this evaluation, we aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of SL and its integration into the educational offerings of the ULPGC. The analysis of the evolution of SL at the ULPGC has enabled us to highlight both the advances made and the challenges that persist in the process of institutionalisation.

At present, the ULPGC implements a variety of SL projects, reflecting its commitment to social responsibility and its connection to the surrounding cultural and social environment. These projects span multiple disciplines, allowing students to apply their knowledge to real-world situations that respond to community needs. However, the ULPGC faces a critical challenge, namely, ensuring the sustainability of these actions and making progress towards fulfilling the commitments set forth in its institutional declarations. Addressing this challenge is essential for establishing SL as a core pedagogical tool within the university's educational offerings. To achieve this, it would be beneficial to: 1) create institutional recognition through programs such as DOCENTIA; 2) establish a stable administrative and technical support structure that ensures the sustainability of SL at the ULPGC, effectively managing various aspects related to the promotion and implementation of university-based SL, standardising training, and securing healthcare and legal coverage throughout project execution; 3) focus on professionalizing SL or educational innovative project management with qualified assessors and an adequate visibility policy; and 4) seek partnerships and funding opportunities to attract students.

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