



The educational impact of partnerships in university service-learning experiences: Education for critical citizenship and social responsibility

El impacto educativo del partenariado en experiencias de aprendizaje-servicio universitario: formación para la ciudadanía crítica y la responsabilidad social

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Abstract:

The transformation of university learning environments demands pedagogical models that connect academic knowledge with social engagement. In this context, service-learning is established as an educational approach that integrates disciplinary learning with community action. The aim of this study is to analyse, from the students' perspective, the educational impact of partnership relations established with social organisations within the framework of university service-learning projects. A quantitative, descriptive, ex post facto study was conducted based on the analysis of evaluation questionnaires completed by 212 students from the Faculty of Education at the Universitat de Barcelona, who participated in service-learning projects between 2016 and 2024. The instrument used evaluates the factors influencing student participation, their perceived usefulness of the service, and their satisfaction. Based on a correlation analysis, the results show that the active involvement of community organisations has an impact on student satisfaction, their personal engagement, and perceived learning. A high value is attributed to the development of ethical and social competencies, alongside a positive assessment of work on values, responsibility, and social engagement. The study concludes that partnerships play a key educational role in service-learning projects, broadening university learning environments and contributing to the development of critical, reflective, and socially engaged citizenry. It also identifies certain challenges related to the curricular integration of service-learning and the need to strengthen coordination mechanisms between universities and communities.

Keywords: service-learning; university; partnerships; community; learning environments; engagement.

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Resumen:

La transformación de los entornos de aprendizaje universitario exige modelos pedagógicos que conecten el saber académico y el compromiso social. En este contexto, el aprendizaje-servicio se consolida como una propuesta educativa que articula la formación disciplinar con la acción comunitaria. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar, desde la perspectiva del estudiantado, el impacto educativo de las relaciones de partenariado establecidas con entidades sociales en el marco de proyectos de aprendizaje-servicio universitario. Se ha desarrollado una investigación de enfoque cuantitativo, *ex post facto* de carácter descriptivo, basada en el análisis de cuestionarios de evaluación respondidos por 212 estudiantes de la Facultad de Educación de la Universitat de Barcelona, participantes en proyectos de ApS entre 2016 y 2024. El instrumento utilizado evalúa los condicionantes de participación, la valoración de la utilidad atribuida al servicio y la satisfacción del estudiantado. A partir de un análisis de correlaciones, los resultados muestran que la implicación activa de las entidades incide en la satisfacción del estudiantado, su implicación personal y la percepción de aprendizajes alcanzados. Se constata un alto valor atribuido al desarrollo de competencias éticas y sociales, y una valoración positiva del trabajo sobre valores, la responsabilidad y el compromiso social. Se concluye que el partenariado desempeña un papel clave como agente educativo en los proyectos de aprendizaje-servicio, ampliando los entornos de aprendizaje universitarios y contribuyendo a la formación de una ciudadanía crítica, reflexiva y socialmente comprometida. Se identifican también algunos retos relacionados con la integración curricular del aprendizaje-servicio y la necesidad de fortalecer los mecanismos de coordinación entre universidad y comunidad.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje-servicio; universidad; partenariado; comunidad; entornos de aprendizaje; compromiso.

1. Introduction

1.1. Learning environments at university: from the classroom to the educational ecosystem

The concept of learning environments in the university context has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, moving from a perspective confined to the physical classroom towards a holistic view that acknowledges the university as an integral part of the educational ecosystem. This transformation has been driven by the emergence of student-centred pedagogical approaches, the accelerated development of digital technologies applied to education, and a more nuanced understanding of the processes of knowledge construction, competence development, and the shaping of students' academic and professional identities (Doğan and Arslan, 2025; Hotar *et al.*, 2024; Lu *et al.*, 2014; Valtonen *et al.*, 2021).

From this perspective, learning environments are no longer understood exclusively as physical spaces—classroom, laboratory, library—or virtual spaces—digital campus, cloud-based collaborative tools—but rather as interconnected, dynamic educational ecosystems. They integrate multiple interrelated elements: people (faculty, students, support staff, external agents), institutional and socio-cultural contexts, material and digital resources, pedagogical practices, curricular frameworks and shared values that shape and give meaning to learning experiences (Nguyen, 2022; Shah *et al.*, 2024).

The university educational process is no longer understood as a mere transmission of knowledge from the teaching staff to the students, but as a collective and situated construction. Learning emerges from dialogue, interaction, reflective practice and connection

to real problems, transcending the traditional instructional paradigm centred on expository teaching and standardised assessment, and promoting educational models that are more dialogical, experiential, and engaged with the social and cultural context (O'Brien *et al.*, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Consequently, the contemporary university must be thought of as a strategic node in a network of knowledge, practices and institutions committed to social justice, equity and sustainability. Its role as a generator and disseminator of knowledge has expanded to include the formation of critical, creative, and socially engaged citizens. Thus, learning environments should be intentionally designed to foster student agency, critical reflection on their role in the world, and transformative action in collaboration with other social actors (Elkington and Dickinson, 2025; Rodríguez-Zurita *et al.*, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2024).

1.2. Service-learning and partnership: a pedagogy of reciprocity

In this context of university openness and transformation, service-learning is established as a particularly relevant pedagogical strategy, since it integrates academic learning with socially responsible action in community contexts. It is not a complementary methodological resource, but a proposal that redefines the meaning and social function of higher education, based on an ethical, political and epistemological understanding of knowledge as a situated, relational and transformative practice (Hamilton, 2024; Lang, 2024; Puig *et al.*, 2006).

Service-learning assumes that knowledge is not an accumulation of decontextualised content, but the result of dialogue between the university and the community. Through this interaction, students acquire academic, professional and personal competencies, while developing a critical understanding of their role as active citizens, capable of identifying social problems, working collaboratively to address them, and reflecting on the learning resulting from the experience. Thus, service-learning is consolidated as a formative tool with high potential for holistic student development and for the construction of a more permeable, engaged and socially responsible university (Esparza *et al.*, 2018; Herrera, 2020; Luna *et al.*, 2024).

One of the pillars of service-learning is partnership, understood as the sustained, horizontal collaboration between the university and local social actors. Partnerships break with the traditional asymmetry between the academic institution and the community, recognising the legitimacy of community knowledge and integrating their perspectives throughout all stages of the educational process, from needs assessment to outcome evaluation. Collaboration is based on co-responsibility, transparency and mutual trust (Benneworth *et al.*, 2022; Capece *et al.*, 2023; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Hart and Northmore, 2023; Robinson and Hudson, 2024).

These relationships of reciprocity not only sustain the practice of service-learning, but also reshape the forms of interaction between university and society. They foster institutional openness to the diversity of social contexts, encourage the decentralisation of knowledge, and strengthen enduring alliances oriented towards the common good. The university ceases to occupy a hegemonic position in the production of knowledge and becomes an organisation that learns with others, undergoes transformation through its engagement with the community, and actively contributes to community development and social justice (Bringle and Clayton, 2022; Mitchell and Latta, 2020).

1.3. Service-learning as a strategy for building educational community within universities

Beyond its methodological value, service-learning constitutes a comprehensive strategy for fostering a more cohesive and participatory university community oriented towards the common good (Valenzuela and Fernández, 2023). Its implementation reconfigures the relationships between the different university bodies and reasserts the collective purpose underlying academic practice (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Mitchell, 2015).

Service-learning facilitates coordination and engagement among the different groups—students, teaching staff, technical staff, partner organisations—by creating spaces for engagement, dialogue and co-responsibility. Projects require joint planning, shared decision-making and participatory evaluation, which fosters horizontal dynamics within the institution, strengthens university identity and consolidates mutual recognition. Furthermore, critical reflection on experiences promotes a deeper understanding of each member's role in the community and strengthens commitment to shared goals (Luna et al., 2024, Mitchell, 2015).

The participation of external actors expands the boundaries of the university and turns it into an extended learning community, connected with the local context and with social organisations, local administrations and citizen movements. This openness, beyond its instrumental value, has a strong political and ethical significance: it recognises the university as part of a wider social ecosystem, with shared responsibilities for sustainability, equity and quality of life (Furco, 2010; GUNI, 2019).

Partnerships help to establish lasting links with the local context, based on respect, ethics and the will to transform. These partnerships feed back into education, enrich the curriculum and strengthen the university's social mission (Bringle and Clayton, 2022; Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011).

Service-learning also fosters a profound cultural transformation. Values such as solidarity, empathy and social justice are integrated transversally into educational practice, reshaping institutional roles: students become agents of change; the teaching staff, facilitators of learning; and the university, an institution committed to generating useful and socially relevant knowledge (Butin, 2010; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025; Tapia, 2012).

Knowledge is no longer conceived as a commodity or individual capital, but as a “common good”, collectively constructed and oriented towards social well-being. This reconceptualisation challenges neoliberal models based on competitiveness and individual excellence, and proposes a relational, democratic and critical university, where learning is at the service of community transformation and the common good (Locatelli, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). In this framework, partnerships are consolidated as the structuring core of this new participatory and dialogic university governance (O'Brien et al., 2022).

Thus, the research presented below set out to explore, from university students' perspective, the educational role of partnerships in service-learning projects, and to analyse how this relationship contributes to strengthening the connection between students and their environment.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach and design

Based on the general objective of the study—to analyse the relationship between the quality of partnerships and the satisfaction of students participating in service-learning projects—a non-experimental, ex post facto, descriptive-correlational design is proposed. This approach allows for a rigorous examination of reality without intervening in it, observing the relationships between variables as they occur in their natural context.

The study combines a quantitative analysis of the closed responses to the questionnaire and a qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses in order to identify the mechanisms through which partnerships operate as educational agents and the conditions that facilitate or hinder their educational impact.

2.2. Research hypothesis

The central hypothesis guiding this study is as follows:

The higher the quality of the partnership between the university and social organisations, the greater the students' satisfaction, both academically and personally.

2.3. Conceptualisation of variables

- Independent variable: Partnership quality.

This is defined as the degree of effective and sustained collaboration between the university and the participating organisations considering three dimensions: involvement of the organisations, sustained coordination, and continuity of the relationship.

- Dependent variable: Student satisfaction.

Understood as the extent to which the service-learning experience is positively valued, both academically and personally.

- Control variables: degree studied and academic year.

These variables are included to detect any potential structural differences influencing student perceptions.

2.4. Population and sample

The reference population is comprised of all students participating in the projects coordinated by the Office of Service-Learning in the Faculty of Education at the Universitat de Barcelona, between the academic years 2016-2017 and 2023-2024.

The sample consists of 212 valid questionnaires, representing approximately 75% of the total number of participants. Table 1 shows the distribution according to degree and academic year. Note the absence of data in academic year 2019-2020, which was due to the interruption of projects as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 1. Number of students who responded to the questionnaire according to academic year and degree.

Degree	Year						
	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Pedagogy	15	4	19	3	10	6	2
Early Childhood Education	2	2	1	0	0	0	2
Primary Education	7	6	4	8	3	3	5
Early Childhood and Primary Education	0	0	7	2	1	0	1
Social Education	13	1	6	4	6	2	0
Social Work	12	3	17	12	12	9	2
TOTAL	49	16	54	29	32	20	12

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Furthermore, about 70 % of students are in their first year, 16 % in their second year and 13 % in their third year. Students in their fourth year and those on international mobility programmes account for the remaining 1%. The sample is predominantly female (95 %).

2.5. Context and description of the programme

Service-learning projects grant students between three and six credits and are carried out in collaboration with social and educational organisations linked to the fields of Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, Social Education, Pedagogy and Social Work.

Each academic year begins in October with a fair of partner organisations, where they present their proposals and needs to students. Subsequently, a project catalogue is compiled and disseminated via the heads of studies. Projects may take place over the whole academic year or one semester.

The process includes:

- Initial training session at the university.
- Welcome session at the partner organisation.
- Personal reflective diary, with regular educational feedback from the Office of Service-Learning.
- Final evaluation questionnaire, along with submission of the diary upon completion of the project.

The participating organisations include both formal education institutions (schools, educational reinforcement and reading associations) and non-formal education institutions (socio-educational organisations, projects involving children, adolescents, the elderly, and adults with disabilities).

2.6. Instrument

The instrument used for data collection is a validated questionnaire (Escofet *et al.* 2016), designed to assess the levels of and factors influencing participation, the competencies developed, the educational relationship established with the organisations, and student satisfaction with the experience.

It consists of 16 items, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” - 5= “strongly agree”). This article analyses the items related to the factors influencing participation, perceived usefulness of the service, and student satisfaction (see items in table 2).

2.7. Analysis procedure

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed quantitatively using the software Jamovi 2.6.26. On the one hand, a descriptive analysis of the variables was carried out, obtaining the mean, median and standard deviation of the variables analysed. Some of the questions posed in relation to participation have a lower number of responses due to the fact they were omitted in some of the questionnaires for the 2016-17 academic year. On the other hand, the correlation between students’ assessment of the level of involvement of the organisation in the project and their perception of the impact of the project on different aspects of their personal development was analysed. To this end, the correlation between the independent variable “involvement of the organisation” and various dependent variables related to relevant aspects of student involvement and education (student involvement, learning achieved, service performed, being more responsible for one’s own actions, understanding social needs, helping to improve society, knowledge of the professional field, relating theory and practice, reflecting on the content worked on at university, being more motivated to study, participating in the faculty, neighbourhood, population) was calculated using Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient, after verifying that the variables were not normally distributed (in all cases Shapiro-Wilk $W > 0.538$; $p < 0.001$).

Finally, a qualitative analysis was carried out as a preliminary exploration of the short-written responses provided by the students in response to the questions “indicate what you liked most about the experience” and “indicate what you liked least about the experience”. The term “organisation” was sought in the responses to check the role of the organisation in each participating student’s satisfaction with the development of the project. This analysis was carried out using the software ATLAS.ti 25.0.1. The gender of students was not considered in the analysis of the responses due to the low participation of male students.

2.8. Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of educational research and the policies of the Universitat de Barcelona, in accordance with the Code of Good Practice in Research (University of Barcelona, 2023) and the guidelines of the Ethics Committee for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (CEI-CSH).

No authorisation was sought from the ethics committee, as this was not a mandatory requirement at the time the study was initiated (2016–2017 academic year). Even so, all phases of the process were carried out in accordance with established institutional and international ethical standards.

Informed consent was obtained from the participating students and from those who provided unpublished data or testimonies, thus guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality, and secure storage of the data in institutional repositories of the Universitat de Barcelona, in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR) and Organic Law 3/2018.

The research team declares that it does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, religion, social status or functional diversity, nor does it have any conflicts of interest. The research adheres to the principles of integrity, transparency and respect for diversity, in accordance with the guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, 2023) and the journal's own ethical policies.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the medians, means and standard deviations of the variables analysed, classified according to the different items assessed: factors influencing participation, perceived usefulness of the service, and student satisfaction.

TABLE 2. Descriptive data for the variables obtained via the questionnaire and related to the items analysed. *N* = number of responses to each item.

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Factors influencing participation				
I like the type of project	172	4.59	5	0.65
Being able to participate in an organisation/association	172	4.09	4	1.07
Putting the content of the degree programme into practice	172	4.04	4	1.16
Helping/collaborating	172	4.61	5	0.633
Being part of an organisation/association	172	3.82	4	1.1
Helping to improve society	172	4.46	5	0.866
Perceived usefulness of the service				
Understanding social needs	212	4.4	5	0.726
Collaboration with an organisation/association	212	4.34	5	0.813
Interest in social problems	212	4.48	5	0.733
Participation in the faculty/neighbourhood/population	172	3.7	4	1.08
Motivation to study	212	4.03	4	0.981
Responsibility for one's own actions	212	4.54	5	0.74
Putting professional competencies into practice	172	4.36	5	0.877

Helping to improve society	211	4.35	5	0.8
Ability to relate theory and practice	212	3.93	4	0.982
Reflecting on the content worked on in the degree programme	212	3.85	4	1.02
Work on values	212	4.69	5	0.635
Student satisfaction				
Involvement of the organisation	212	4.24	4.5	0.931
Involvement of the student him/herself	212	4.57	5	0.609
Learning achieved	211	4.29	4	0.81
Relationship between theory and practice	212	3.77	4	0.992
Service performed	212	4.44	5	0,755

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The results show that the main motivations of students when deciding to carry out a service-learning project are related to the possibility of helping and contributing to the improvement of society, and that the type of project is a determining factor in their choice.

These motivations are also reflected in the students' most frequently mentioned opinions regarding the perceived usefulness of the service: the possibility to work on values, the acquisition of responsibility for one's own actions, and the development of an interest in social problems and an understanding of these problems. Thus, alongside the possibility of putting into practice the professional competencies they are acquiring in the degree programme, students value the opportunity to develop aspects of their education related to social responsibility, an aspect clearly enhanced by interaction with the organisations, thereby emphasising their role as educational agents.

Finally, with regard to the elements with which students feel most satisfied, all analysed variables are generally rated highly, with somewhat lower values for the relationship between theory and practice, thus indicating an area for improvement in the projects.

Regarding the correlations analysis (table 3), a positive relationship between moderate and high can be observed between student satisfaction with the involvement of the organisation and their own involvement, in addition to with satisfaction regarding the learning achieved throughout the project, satisfaction with the service performed, and improvement of responsibility taken for their own actions. A positive, albeit somewhat weaker, relationship is also observed between this perception of the organisation's involvement and aspects such as the students' improved understanding of social needs, their feeling of contributing to the improvement of society or their knowledge of the professional field covered by their studies. Therefore, the involvement of the organisation in the project is crucial for it to make a significant contribution to the acquisition of learning, competencies and attitudes that foster social responsibility. Their role goes beyond that of mere collaborators in service-learning projects, since they act as an additional educational agent in student development, thus broadening the learning environment and strengthening essential elements of their education.

TABLE 3. Correlations between students' perception of the organisation's involvement and their perception of other relevant aspects.

	Involvement of the organisation		
	Spearman's Rho	df	p
Student involvement	0.546	160	< 0.001
Learning achieved	0.475	159	< 0.001

Service performed	0.467	160	< 0.001
Being more responsible for one's own actions	0.425	160	< 0.001
Understanding social needs	0.358	160	< 0.001
Helping to improve society	0.337	159	< 0.001
Knowledge of the professional field	0.285	160	< 0.001
Relating theory and practice	0.270	160	< 0.001
Reflecting on the content worked on at university	0.238	160	0.002
Being more motivated to study	0.266	160	< 0.001
Participating in the faculty, neighbourhood or population	0.157	111	0.098

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Finally, a qualitative analysis was carried out on the short-written responses provided by the students in response to the questions “indicate what you liked most about the experience” and “indicate what you liked least about the experience”. The term “organisation” appears 13 times in the answers, six in the first question and seven in the second. Among the positive aspects related to the organisation that students value regarding the experience, they highlight the relationship with the people and professionals who form part of it: “I would highlight the cohesion and the group that we volunteers have formed with the organisation’s staff and the children who give it meaning” (student 7, Pedagogy 2022), “I would highlight the organisation’s professionals and the fact that I felt total freedom to carry out the activities in the classroom” (student 55, Primary Education, 2024), and the opportunity to work with them as a team and to learn about their daily activities and how the social fabric to which they belong is structured: “What I enjoyed the most was being part of an organisation that sparked a lot of curiosity in me. I have been able to learn and discover more about this world” (student 46, Primary Education, 2022). They highlight the fact that feeling part of this team serves as recognition of their work in the project: “The warm welcome from the team, both the educators and the people they work with. From the first day, I felt part of the group” (student 31, Social Education, 2021).

Regarding negative aspects, students express the need for improved communication and follow-up from the organisation: “What I liked least about the experience was that the organisation forgot quite a few times that I was going to take the class” (student 52, Social Work, 2017), “the scarce communication with the organisation, I had no assigned point of contact and sometimes felt lost” (student 71, Primary Education, 2024). And greater support from some of the organisations: “Sometimes I didn’t receive enough support from the organisation” (student 75, Social Education, 2022), in addition to prior and more comprehensive knowledge of their activities: “I wasn’t able to participate on some occasions in which the figure of a pedagogue was required, and therefore I didn’t have the opportunity to fully understand certain functions of the organisation” (student 60, Pedagogy, 2021).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The evolution of university learning environments reflects a significant shift from closed institutional models focused on the transmission of knowledge to more open, collaborative and socially engaged conceptions. For decades, universities have been considered ivory towers, far removed from the real problems of their environment and with dynamics that prioritised academic excellence measured in terms of scientific productivity or international competitiveness. However, the growing emphasis on social responsibility, civic engagement and the need for active citizenship has led to a paradigm shift that redefines the role of the university in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2021; O’Brien *et al.*, 2022).

In this new scenario, the university is no longer understood as an exclusively academic space, but as a key actor in the construction of fairer, more sustainable and cohesive societies. This transformation entails a comprehensive reassessment of learning environments, from being conceived as closed physical spaces to being understood as broad educational ecosystems, interconnected with the community and underpinned by relationships of reciprocity. In this context, university–community partnerships take on a central role not only as a methodological resource, but also as the ethical and political foundation for higher education committed to the common good (Loh, 2016; Tshishonga, 2022).

The results obtained in this research provide solid empirical evidence of the educational value of service-learning in this new university framework. In particular, the role of the partnership is emphasised as the core element that connects meaningful learning experiences. The analysis of students' perceptions shows that the quality of the link established with the social organisations has a direct impact on their involvement, satisfaction and perception of the learning achieved, especially in the field of social, ethical and professional competencies. This finding coincides with the postulates that understand service-learning as a pedagogy of reciprocity (Tapia, 2012), where knowledge is built based on dialogue between academic and community knowledge, and within the framework of collaborative, horizontal relationships.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings allow us to affirm that partnerships not only provide a logistical framework for the development of projects, but also create a broader educational environment. Here, social organisations act as educational agents that facilitate learning experiences that are experiential, relevant and deeply connected to reality. This educational function is expressed on multiple levels: as transmitters of contextualised and practical knowledge, as generators of social awareness, and as spaces where values such as empathy, solidarity, justice and responsibility are experienced. The fact that students particularly value the possibility of collaborating with these organisations, understanding real social problems and working on fundamental values reinforces the transformative dimension of service-learning and positions the partner organisations as active participants in the educational process.

These results align with theoretical perspectives that propose a reconfiguration of university learning environments through the lens of an educational ecosystem. In this model, the university is not a closed space for knowledge production and transfer, but a node in an interdependent network of actors, knowledge and practices. Service-learning is thus consolidated as a privileged pathway to articulate these connections, bringing together formal and non-formal contexts, connecting theory and practice, and promoting critical, situated, and action-oriented learning (O'Brien *et al.*, 2022).

Nonetheless, the study also identifies areas for improvement. The lower scores in dimensions such as the ability to relate theory and practice, or active participation in the local context, show a certain disconnection between the experiences undertaken and the academic curriculum. This gap can be attributed to multiple factors: partial integration of service-learning into curricula, insufficient coordination between teachers and organisations, or limited preparation of students to reflect critically on their experiences. Furthermore, some open responses point to difficulties in communication or support provided by organisations, which reinforces the need for more stable, transparent and shared frameworks for collaboration (Tijmsma *et al.*, 2023).

From a methodological point of view, the study also has certain limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First, the *ex post facto* correlational design does not allow us to establish causal relationships between the variables analysed, only significant associations. Second, the use of self-assessment questionnaires implies a subjective component that may be influenced by social desirability biases or by the overall positive assessment of the project. Moreover, the sample, although large and representative of various degree programmes, is confined to a single faculty and a

specific institutional context, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other university settings. Finally, the absence of triangulation with data from teachers or partner organisations reduces the possibility of contrasting perceptions and enriching the understanding of the phenomenon from a more holistic perspective. These limitations suggest the need to complement future studies with mixed methodologies, longitudinal analyses and a multi-level approach that includes the voices of all actors involved.

From an institutional point of view, the data collected call for a reconsideration of university policies in relation to community engagement. In order for service-learning to unfold its full potential, it is necessary to establish support structures that guarantee the quality, sustainability and pedagogical coherence of the projects. This involves developing specific technical offices, providing systematic training for teachers and organisations, and ensuring academic recognition of students' social commitment. Furthermore, it requires a deeper cultural change that places the social function of the university at the centre of its mission, moving beyond the logic of knowledge commodification and embracing relational, collaborative models oriented towards social justice (Bringle and Clayton, 2022; Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011).

While community partnerships offer many benefits, they also present significant challenges. Power asymmetries, scarcity of resources or the difficulty of sustaining participation over time can hinder the development of equitable and effective partnerships. However, as Preece and Manicom (2015) point out, when there is careful planning, honest dialogue and an explicit willingness for mutual benefit, these partnerships can become privileged spaces for transformative learning and educational innovation.

In short, service-learning and the partnership relations that underpin it are a strategic way of renewing the university from within, endowing it with ethical meaning, social relevance and transformative capacity. They are experiences that not only have an impact on those involved, but which also contribute to the construction of sustainable and inclusive learning communities oriented towards the common good. Through them, the university opens up to the surrounding community, recognises the plurality of knowledge, and actively engages with collective challenges.

Therefore, it is necessary to continue researching and strengthening this approach, broadening the perspective to include the experiences of other actors involved, such as the social organisations themselves, the teaching staff or the people who receive the service, and exploring how these links can contribute to the structural transformation of the university.

Author contributions

Anna Escofet. Formulated the central idea and research objectives, and defined the theoretical framework and methodological design. Prepared the original draft of the manuscript and supervised the entire writing and editing process.

Mireia Esparza. Coordinated the management of the questionnaires, the data cleaning and organisation, and the creation of tables for correlational analysis. Integrated the results and conducted the final review of the manuscript.

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