



University, community and culture: service-learning in the face of refuge and immigration

Universidad, comunidad y cultura: el aprendizaje-servicio ante el refugio y la inmigración

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe and evaluate the service-learning experiences undertaken by university students and implemented in secondary schools, designed to address a specific educational need: to identify and reduce prejudices and distorted representations of refugees and immigrants. Through the mediation of the Spanish Committee for UNHCR, university students design and deliver an educational service intended to foster a more accurate and well-grounded understanding of the phenomenon of refuge and migration. A mixed-methods research methodology was used (both qualitative and quantitative), focusing particularly on the community receiving the service, but also collecting the evaluation completed by the university students who performed the service. The results of the interviews and questionnaires show the effectiveness of this approach, which embraces a comprehensive view of education and of the individual as an active participant in the educational process, while also promoting a sense of citizenship, the creation of an open community and social cohesion in a diverse context. Considering the results of the research and theoretical reflection on service-learning, it is concluded that this approach to educational innovation meets the essential requirements of a university model that transfers knowledge to society and draws on this transfer as a driving force for teaching and learning processes in higher education.

Keywords: higher education; educational innovation; social cohesion; service-learning; civic education; knowledge transfer.

Resumen

El objetivo del presente artículo es describir y evaluar las experiencias de aprendizaje-servicio desarrolladas por estudiantes universitarios y aplicadas en centros de educación

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secundaria, orientadas a atender una necesidad educativa específica: identificar y reducir los prejuicios y las representaciones distorsionadas hacia las personas refugiadas e inmigrantes. A través de la mediación del Comité Español de ACNUR, los estudiantes universitarios diseñan y llevan a cabo un servicio educativo destinado a promover una comprensión más ajustada y fundamentada del fenómeno del refugio y la migración. Se ha utilizado una metodología de investigación mixta, cualitativa y cuantitativa, centrada especialmente en la comunidad receptora del servicio, pero recogiendo también la evaluación llevada a cabo por parte del alumnado universitario que lo realizó. Los resultados de las entrevistas y los cuestionarios muestran la eficacia de este enfoque atendiendo a una visión integral de la educación y de la persona como sujeto de la educación, favoreciendo igualmente el sentido de ciudadanía, la creación de una comunidad abierta y la cohesión social en un contexto diverso. Teniendo en cuenta los resultados de la investigación y la reflexión teórica acerca del aprendizaje-servicio, se concluye que este enfoque de innovación educativa reúne los requisitos fundamentales de un modelo de universidad que transfiere el conocimiento a la sociedad y que se nutre de esta transferencia como motor para los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje en Educación Superior.

Palabras clave: educación superior; innovación educativa; cohesión social; aprendizaje-servicio; educación cívica; transferencia del conocimiento.

1. The university as a space for social and cultural cohesion: service-learning in the Spanish Committee for UNHCR

In this article we describe and evaluate the service-learning projects (hereinafter SL) that the University of Valencia has carried out in the surrounding community, specifically in schools in the city of Valencia itself, with the aim of promoting the value of diversity in education by welcoming people from other cultural contexts. This is precisely the fundamental objective of such projects, which have been carried out within the framework of the “UNESCO-UV Chair in Global Education in the Mediterranean. Studies for Peace, Interculturality, and Sustainability”, and in collaboration with the Spanish Committee for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The regional office of the Spanish Committee for UNHCR in the Valencian Community (hereinafter, Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC) has been working with this Chair since it was founded in 2022, and is one of its preferred partners along with Save The Children-VC. Indeed, since the Chair was approved by UNESCO (Paris), one of its main objectives has been the implementation of SL projects in partnership with different civil associations. In this framework, SL projects have been designed and carried out in collaboration with the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, on the basis that it is an approach or methodology that combines meaningful and practical learning in higher education with (based on) the performance of a service for the community, especially in the areas of civic education and education in values such as solidarity, social justice, equality, and dignity—values which, when applied to people from different cultural contexts, help expand the concept of community and foster intercultural or global citizenship.

The SL projects in collaboration with the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC have been designed and implemented at the Universitat de València since 2022 in the subjects Intercultural Pedagogy and Philosophy of Education, forming part of the Bachelor's Degrees in Pedagogy and Social Education, both worth 6 ECTS credits. Such projects are structured into the following phases: (1) Contact the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC to establish which university students can participate in the projects, given the availability of the schools where the service will be performed. (2) Invite university students, in the aforementioned

subject areas, to voluntarily participate in the service activities managed by the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC and carried out in schools in the city of Valencia as part of a SL project. (3) Establish communication between the volunteer students and the coordinators of the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, especially to initiate the process and to schedule training sessions prior to performing the service. (4) Training delivered by the NGDO in different sessions, aimed at informing, reflecting on, and raising awareness about the reality of refuge, asylum, immigration and its causes, its national and international regulation, in addition to the serious difficulties faced by refugees and migrants to achieve a life without persecution, without insecurity due to armed conflicts, and without danger to life due to extreme poverty. In the training phase, educational actions are learnt and also designed for primary or secondary school students, actions that will be the core of the service within the SL project. (5) Perform the service in different schools accompanied and guided by the technical staff of the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC. (6) Evaluation of the service by specialised staff from the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, taking into account the evaluation or assessment completed by students at the schools (recipients of the service or community receiving the service) following the actions or activities carried out. (7) Construction of the learning acquired by university students from the service experience, always in relation to the contents and competencies of the subjects of Philosophy of Education or Intercultural Pedagogy, ensuring that university learning contains a hands-on, practical and experiential component from which to build the knowledge and values specific to educational professions such as Pedagogy and Social Education.

The service-learning experiences carried out include a series of pedagogical objectives aimed at strengthening both the academic training and the civic-social competence of university students. Specifically, the aim is to: (1) apply the knowledge acquired in the subjects of Intercultural Pedagogy and Philosophy of Education to a real context; (2) develop professional competencies related to the design, implementation and evaluation of educational interventions; (3) promote critical reflection on the phenomenon of refuge and migration based on service experience; and (4) promote attitudes of social responsibility, civic engagement and sensitivity towards the inequalities and prejudices present in the school context.

In addition to the learning in relation to the aforementioned subjects, the SL experience has promoted the development of civic-social competencies that go beyond theoretical content. Students developed specific skills according to their degree programme. More specifically, students on the Bachelor's Degree in Pedagogy applied competencies related to the design and implementation of educational programmes, the evaluation of schools, the design of educational resources and institutions, the planning of study techniques, and the development of didactic and methodological strategies adapted to different educational contexts. At the same time, students on the Bachelor's Degree in Social Education developed skills related to facilitating group dynamics and the promotion of social inclusion and participation—skills that urgently need to be promoted if we observe the growing trend in the mobility and temporary movement of people forcibly displaced from their country of origin (Estrada and Palma-García, 2020).

According to Sotelino *et al.* (2019), these practices create a significant impact on the student's personal development, fostering deeper and more authentic learning, in which theoretical content is consolidated thanks to its application in real contexts. These experiences also foster values, and lead to increased motivation, self-esteem and personal expectations, as they see that their contribution has a direct effect on a specific environment.

1.1. Service in the area of refuge and migration as an axiological component in Higher Education

Higher Education has undergone a redefinition in Spain following the approval and publication of Organic Law 2/2023 on the reform of the University System (LOSU).

In particular, Title IV states, referring to research and the transfer and exchange of knowledge and innovation, that universities shall promote research, innovation and knowledge transfer structures that may be carried out, fostering multidisciplinary, in other bodies, and other public or private organisations and companies, and similarly in the field of the social economy (article 11, paragraph 4). SL projects address this aim in that they foster innovative learning based on the transfer of knowledge to society, which is applied to organisations and bodies with social aims such as the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC.

Similarly, the LOSU specifies in Title V the need for Spanish universities to cooperate with other civil society organisations and bodies in order to create strategic partnerships and collaboration networks (article 14), networks which, as we understand, we are strengthening by means of SL projects. Continuing with Title VI, perhaps the one that concerns us most, the current university law refers precisely to the relationship between the university, society and culture, a relationship established as one of the major objectives of Higher Education and which, ultimately, aims to develop the axiological side of scientific, technical, humanistic and artistic knowledge inherent to universities. Indeed, article 18 (paragraph 1) states that universities shall foster social cohesion by encouraging the participation of the university community in projects related to the promotion of democracy, equality, social justice, peace, and inclusion. In paragraph 4, explicit reference is made to SL projects as projects that fit in with these aims, promoting the participation of the university community with a view to equitable, inclusive and sustainable economic and social development—development that can promote the creation of quality employment and improve the well-being standards of the local community. There is no better way to express the purpose of SL projects in partnership with the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC and within the framework of the “UNESCO-UV Chair in Global Education in the Mediterranean”, always guided by a model of social cohesion that is inclusive, radically supportive and in line with the ethical principles of our democratic Constitution, the Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and the 2030 Agenda for the Promotion of Sustainable Development Goals. To this we must add what is laid down in paragraph 5 of the aforementioned article, which states that universities shall promote university volunteering in accordance with Law 45/2015, of 14 October, on Volunteering.

Moreover, the third mission of the university, better known as “university social responsibility”, highlights the need to address social problems by adopting an ethical and active commitment to society (Hernández, 2021). In this sense, the university is conceived as an agent fostering reflective and critical citizens who are engaged, participatory and supportive in the construction of a democratic and just society (Ruiz-Corbella and Bautista, 2016). The university, as a key social institution, has the responsibility to educate future citizens who, guided by ethical and social principles, can assume a transformative role in today’s societies, undertaking actions to promote social justice (García-Aracil *et al.*, 2014). Students need to be prepared not only to carry out their profession well, but also to think and act as just citizens and human beings. Furthermore, students are less likely to act in a way that contributes to social well-being if they do not take on this responsibility with determination during their time at university (Bernal, 2017).

As a result, recent years have seen an increase in the development of SL projects in the university context related to refugees and immigration (Hawkins and Kaplan, 2016; Hooli *et al.*, 2025; Ludwig and Campbell, 2023). The proliferation of these innovative initiatives not only addresses the ethical commitment of academic higher education institutions to contemporary social issues, but also reflects a desire to position the university as an active agent in the formation of critical citizens (Ruiz-Corbella and García-Gutiérrez, 2023). From this perspective, SL responds to the principles established by the LOSU, by promoting a university that participates in society in an engaged manner, and contributes to the development of a more just and, ultimately, more humane community.

1.2. Creating culture, citizenship and an open community through the University

Knowledge is primarily built upon the foundations of experience connected to practical action, particularly when that action occurs collaboratively rather than individually, and is aimed at social transformation (Lorenzo *et al.*, 2020; Santos-Rego *et al.*, 2025). As is well known, the theoretical framework underpinning this theory of learning comes from John Dewey's pragmatism, although we defend pragmatism in its more social and axiological side, insisting on the intimate relationship and continuous interaction between knowledge and values for progress and social transformation (Jover and Gozávez, 2024). Therefore, the SL projects carried out are associated with a pragmatism that goes beyond the axiologically neutral interpretation that is usually given to it, as if the question of the values that drive action and learning disappeared in favour of a constant revision of such values as a result of the changing practical interests of social and educational agents. That is to say, as if there were no axiological foundation prior to action, as one might infer from Dewey's own writings (González-Geraldo, Jover and Martínez, 2017; Dewey, 2010). According to Dewey, what is important from an ethical and moral education point of view is to understand that it is not so much about learning abstract principles, but about learning from human relationships in action. The aim of moral education is not for children and youth to learn rules and precepts, but to acquire the habit of mentally constructing a real human interaction scenario and examining it thoroughly to decide on a course of action (Dewey, 2010) in the most acceptable and consensual way. However, learning from a social and community action project inherently assumes values that must be consolidated, nuanced, materialised and embraced through shared practical action (Jover and Gozávez, 2024). Such values, which function as fundamental premises for action in SL projects, include respect for equal dignity, compassion or empathy for community issues (and thus solidarity), dialogue and active listening to other perspectives, and, of course, freedom understood as participation, autonomy, and human development (García-Gutiérrez y Ruiz-Corbella, 2022; Santamaría-Goicuria y Martínez, 2018; Sotelino *et al.*, 2019). The experience derived from praxis in relation to the community strengthens such values, instilling them in participants' civic mindset and promoting critical reflection as they are confronted with the realities of service practice (Santos-Rego and Lorenzo, 2012; Adarlo *et al.*, 2024).

One thing that is certain is that, as the SL projects were scheduled and carried out in collaboration with the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, these values not only served as a basic premise for action, but also gave rise to axiological learning for active, democratic and intercultural citizens. The notion of "community" that has been fostered points to an openness beyond borders, insofar as it fosters cohesion with asylum seekers and, on that basis, advances an understanding of community as open and welcoming to refugees fleeing war contexts, violence against women, political or religious persecution, etc., as established in Article 14 of the Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. The training and pedagogical intervention actions of university students, and the educational actions received by primary and secondary school students as recipients of the service, are oriented towards, as we will show later, reinforcing cosmopolitan citizens in a global context, capable of broadening the meaning of the common to the whole human community; a meaning, as Huerta and Martínez-Virto (2023) point out, capable of questioning the limitations of a conventional and nationalistic view of societies, and undoubtedly capable of growing in awareness and sensitivity towards problems, perhaps tragedies, suffered by people whose only 'crime' is having been born in a political and cultural context of intolerance and violence.

Thus, the SL projects we describe aim to introduce innovative educational approaches in Higher Education based on a broad idea of community, valid for multicultural societies. In current educational innovation, the concept of community is understood as a collaborative ecosystem where teachers, students and social agents co-create improvement processes. Recent research highlights that sustainable innovations depend less on incorporating technology or methodologies in isolation and more on strengthening collaborative networks for joint learning (Fullan and Quinn, 2016).

2. Training held by the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC and service actions in the field of education

2.1. Training context in the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC

There are currently over 123 million people who have been forced to flee their homes because of war, persecution and violence. Each year, UNHCR reports show an increasing trend in this figure as new emergencies are added to the multiple protracted crises.

The reality of forced displacement impacts people differently depending on their gender, age and other diversity issues. It is further exacerbated by climate change and environmental degradation, which can lead to conflict and scarcity of resources, increase the frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events, and increase the vulnerability of communities.

Moreover, mass forced displacement takes place in a context marked by misinformation and fake news, which promotes prejudices, negative stereotypes and attitudes of fear and rejection towards people who arrive in our communities or who are perceived as foreigners.

These xenophobic attitudes, which can occur during all stages of displacement, are particularly critical when they occur in host societies, since they jeopardise the entire international protection system.

It is thus essential to promote critical thinking and foster co-responsibility that leads to reflection and action both in higher education and in secondary schools, where processes are articulated that enable an understanding of the interconnections between forced displacement on a global scale and the attitudes affecting displaced persons locally.

2.2. Training agents of social transformation

The self-perception of people as agents of change in this globalised context is essential to strengthen international solidarity and social cohesion. This perception as agents of change is especially important among educators and future educators due to the multiplier potential of their actions.

The Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC includes, in its strategy from 2021, work through SL processes aimed at educators, placing at their disposal the educational resources and lessons learned throughout the history of the organisation, which began implementing projects regarding Global Citizenship Education in 2007. The aim is to provide teachers and future educators with tools and resources that facilitate the development of civic competence through content related to forced displacement.

The Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC identifies in its assessments (based on regular surveys) that secondary and higher education students show a low level of knowledge regarding refugee and migration issues. It is also identified that their primary source of information is social media, where fake news and hate narratives towards migrants and refugees proliferate. The lack of reliable and contrasted information is at the root of the construction of prejudices that damage intercultural coexistence. Based on this observation, the SL projects implemented attempt to meet the need for citizen and ethical education in relation to the phenomenon of racism, xenophobia and hate crimes in our society. These considerations, together with the requests received from the schools with which the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC collaborates in the field of Global Citizenship Education (GCED), lead us to identify secondary school students as the target group for SL actions.

2.3. Training pathway

The training pathway for these SL processes seeks to strengthen the relationship between “knowing” and “doing”, fostering the capacity to integrate knowledge and attitudes so as to convey, from a critical perspective, the realities of forced displacement. The stages of the pathway are:

1. Empathy: connect with university students' prior knowledge and with the emotions evoked by this reality.
2. Understanding: foster knowledge and critical thinking through guided reflections on the causes and consequences of forced displacement, with particular emphasis on the importance of having strong sources of truthful information.
3. Creation: prepare a service project, linked to what has been learnt, which helps improve the reality of refugees, migrants or people perceived as foreigners. It is articulated through the design of an awareness-raising workshop. Each group chooses a topic to focus on.
4. Action: implement the designed project. Students carry out an awareness-raising workshop on inclusion, justice and sustainability approaches in schools, especially at secondary school level.
5. Evaluation: the impact of the actions implemented in secondary schools is analysed, as is the knowledge acquired and the skills applied during the process.

Stages 1 and 2 usually include a meeting with a refugee, as these dialogues are a catalyst for empathy and understanding in the group. Stages 3 and 4 are guided and accompanied by the technical staff of the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC.

Therefore, the SL projects carried out in relation to refugees and forced immigration were not improvised, since the different service actions were preceded by a training session given by the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, aimed at service agents. Since the partnership between the "UNESCO-UV Chair in Global Education in the Mediterranean" and the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC began, 12 SL actions have been carried out by different groups of university students and applied to the same number of groups in both primary and secondary education.

3. Results and evaluation of the process: the perspective of the service agents and recipients

The evaluation of any SL project should reflect the complexity of the project as well as the perspectives of the different groups involved. As in any programme evaluation process, depending on the object and purpose of the evaluation, very different processes involving different audiences can be identified (Perales *et al.*, 2022; Ruiz-Corbella and García-Gutiérrez, 2019). In addition to analysing the overall SL project, the evaluation process must address the specificity of its two constituent phases. In the case of the experience with the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, particular care has been taken in this regard.

The overall SL project, focused on university students, should enable the integration of knowledge and attitudes about the situation of forced displacement through a critical lens. It includes training sessions ("empathy and understanding"), but also support in the design and implementation of the service project. Furthermore, in this case the service stage focuses on secondary school students, with whom workshops on reflection and awareness-raising regarding forced displacement were carried out.

Specifically, in this case, the Stufflebeam systematic evaluation model was used, in its adaptation with reference criteria (Perales *et al.*, 2019; Perales *et al.*, 2022). Quantitative and qualitative information was collected, using instruments appropriate both to the type of information to be collected and, above all, to the different groups:

- Evaluation of the university students themselves:
 - The final report of the SL project, presented as a product of learning in the subjects Intercultural Pedagogy and Philosophy of Education, describes the process

undertaken and the learning acquired through a reflective and critical dynamic. Moreover, it allows teachers to make their own assessment of these two elements.

- The evaluation sheet succinctly summarises students' assessments of the learning acquired, along with reflections on the design and implementation of the workshop, and especially on the SL project as a learning experience.
- Evaluation carried out by primary and secondary school students:
 - A colourful sticker dynamic was used to gather secondary school students' perceptions of their level of knowledge, before and after the workshop, regarding the key issues addressed.
 - In addition, a post-it note activity enabled us to discover the impact of the workshop through brief reflections on the changes perceived in their way of seeing foreign people (changes in feelings, reflections, doubts, etc.).
- Evaluation carried out by primary and secondary school teachers: through a questionnaire with open questions and a short satisfaction scale, their perception of the effectiveness of the workshop and its potential impact was gathered, analysing in this case its potential link with the Tutorial Action Plan.
- Evaluation carried out by the technical staff of the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC: based on the presentation of a project report with their assessment of the implementation of the whole SL project, and their view of how successfully the students met the project objectives.

Thus, a fundamental contribution of this study is the inclusion in the evaluation process of the perspective of the community receiving the service (Ruiz Corbella and García Gutiérrez, 2019). The central figures in this SL project are obviously the university students; nevertheless, the project would be meaningless without the equally central inclusion of the community where the service is carried out, in this case secondary schools as educational communities. The SL process is only meaningful if the service is relevant to the community that receives it, and relevant to the education of the university students. And a fundamental way of recognising this key role is by including their voice in the assessment of the SL project, in this case through its two fundamental groups: the school's teaching staff and the secondary school students themselves.

Particularly significant is the evaluation of the workshop carried out by the 225 participating students. In fact, this evaluation is also an educational task in itself, because it allows primary (Colegio Sagrado Corazón Vedruna in Valencia) and secondary (IES Ramon Llull in Valencia) students and teachers to reflect on the learning acquired and, more importantly, on how this learning translates into students' real understanding of the issues discussed, or into teaching practice via the Tutorial Action Plan (for teachers).

Given that this involvement of the community in the evaluation process of SL projects is less common, the presentation of the results of this experience will focus on this point, leaving the presentation of the rest of the results for another time. Their analysis focused on descriptive statistics of the quantitative variables, complemented by qualitative data.

The number of participants whose assessments were collected in the evaluation process is shown in the table below:

TABLE 1. Number of information items collected in the UV [Universitat de València] Refugee Project.

	SL Project (UV students in groups of 4-5 members)	Service stage (secondary school students)	
Students	Intercultural Pedagogy 22 Philosophy of Education 34	S. C. Vedruna 100 IES Ramón Llull 125	Students

Groups	Intercultural Pedagogy 4 Philosophy of Education 8	S. C. Vedruna 4 IES Ramón Llull 6	Groups
Technical	1	5	Teachers

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The secondary school students expressed their perceived learning and their assessment of the workshop through a sticker-based activity. Before starting the workshop, they were asked to record their perceived knowledge of five global concepts in a grid (scale of 0 to 5) and, at the end of the workshop, they were asked the same question.

TABLE 2. Secondary school students' ratings of their perceived knowledge of the topics related to the workshop.

	Pre-test. Perceived knowledge			Post-test. Perceived knowledge		
	Total	S. C. Vedruna	IES Ramón Llull	Total	S. C. Vedruna	IES Ramón Llull
Refugees	2.27	3.13	1.60	3.97	4.41	3.56
Xenophobia	2.31	2.41	2.23	4.04	4.24	3.85
Climate change	3.47	3.44	3.50	3.95	4.10	3.79
Gender perspective	2.15	2.26	2.06	3.44	3.67	3.20
Agenda 2030	2.61	3.54	1.89	3.42	3.66	3.17
N (approximate)	200	98	102	200	98	102

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The results shown in table 2 show a clear increase in their perceived knowledge of refugees and xenophobia (from an average of 2.27 to 3.97 and from 2.31 to 4.04, respectively). The smaller increase observed in the other topics, which are addressed less intensively in the workshop, demonstrates the effectiveness of the information-gathering strategy, as it distinguishes between these two levels of intervention, and mitigates (at least partially) the effect of social desirability.

In addition, based on the reflections gathered through the post-it note activity on the effects of the workshop on their perceptions, feelings, and knowledge, statements such as the following can be highlighted:

"I really liked the workshop and have noticed changes; from now on, I will try not to spread negative content on social media, put myself in the other person's shoes, and think about what I say first".

"I liked it. I learned how people feel when they have had to leave their home."

"I really liked the workshop and it changed my opinion about foreigners."

"I have noticed changes regarding foreigners, for example, their situation in complicated cases".

The secondary school students' ratings of the workshop's effectiveness are also positive, as shown in table 3, highlighting their general satisfaction and the usefulness of the content. In the two schools where the workshop was carried out, despite the positive assessment given to methodologies, students indicated participation as the dimension with the least favourable assessment.

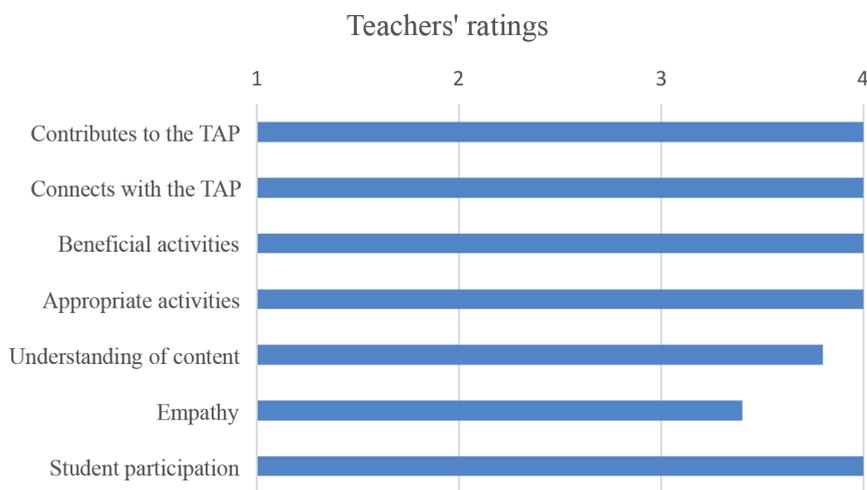
TABLE 3. Students' ratings of the workshop's effectiveness.

	Total	S. C. Vedruna	IES Ramón Llull
Satisfaction	4.44	4.65	4.24
Usefulness of the content	4.44	4.40	4.47
Methodologies	4.38	4.48	4.28
Participation	3.74	3.88	3.60
Improved understanding	4.21	4.32	4.09
N (approximate)	200	98	102

Source: Prepared by the authors.

With regard to teaching staff, a total of five teachers from the secondary school completed the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC questionnaire, with likewise positive ratings, as shown in figure 1 (scale of 1 to 4).

FIGURE 1. Secondary school teachers' ratings of the workshop on awareness-raising and reflection carried out with their students.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

In the open-ended questions, teachers highlighted the importance of the workshop in dealing with issues such as empathy, tolerance and respect, which they consider “important and which are not addressed through other channels”. Regarding suggestions for improvement, the contributions are also rated positively, as participants suggest “accompanying the activity with proposals to continue working on these same objectives in tutorial sessions (to expand or supplement them)” and propose “that the group’s tutor be present”.

SL projects are usually rated positively by the participants. In this case, these data show that the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC Refugee SL projects are also positively rated by the host community. Given the limited duration of the workshop (only one and a half hours), this positive assessment is particularly relevant, as it demonstrates a positive (immediate) effect and an openness towards topics that, according to one teacher, “primarily contribute to educating citizens for both the immediate and long-term future”.

4. Conclusions: the transformative perspective of SL in refugee and immigration contexts

The SL projects focusing on the issues of refugees and immigration described in this article create channels for collaboration between university students and the educational community targeted by the awareness-raising and reflection activities. In this sense, future university-trained specialists in Education (Pedagogy and Social Education) engage in a service of an educational nature, while at the same time providing a valuable and effective opportunity for all parties involved (students and teaching staff at different educational stages) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of migration, so critical in our global and intercommunicated world. Thus, these are projects which, as analysed, contribute in an experiential way to fostering global civic awareness and to broadening the sense of community, while at the same time forging social cohesion in multicultural and diverse contexts such as ours.

Although such projects have been designed and implemented since 2022, owing to the link between the “UNESCO-UV Chair in Global Education in the Mediterranean” and the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, this article reports the evaluation of the 12 projects carried out in the 2024-25 academic year, drawing on data gathered using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The results clearly show the positive and significant learning for the community receiving the service, in this case one primary and one secondary school, with a total of 225 students, as reflected in the article. However, the university students, acting as service agents ($n = 56$), likewise expressed an equally positive assessment, as reflected in the SL reports drawn up per group (a total of 12 reports). In said reports, students acknowledge having worked experientially on the competencies and content of the degree programme and the subjects involved (Intercultural Pedagogy and Philosophy of Education), particularly with regard to the design and implementation of educational projects, participation in cooperative working groups, the design of educational resources and institutions, the planning of study techniques, and the development of didactic and methodological strategies adapted to different educational contexts, as well as learning about global citizenship and Human Rights education.

In short, the results of the study show the effectiveness and validity of the SL projects in question, projects which, in collaboration with social organisations such as the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC, build bridges between the university and society, in accordance with the third mission of the university, with the objectives of knowledge transfer, and with the current university reform, which stresses the importance of higher education contributing to social cohesion, the creation of culture, and the idea of an open community, through university volunteering projects. The SL projects between the UV and the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC embody, as outlined above, such aspirations in their understanding of the mission of higher education.

Nevertheless, there is scope to continue advancing in this direction by further developing university transfer processes in collaboration with the Spanish Committee for UNHCR-VC so as to implement SL projects in other primary and secondary schools. The aim would be to detect potential limits in other socio-economic contexts with a higher incidence of xenophobic and racist prejudices, in order to improve the design and implementation of subsequent service learning projects.

Author contributions

Vicent Gozálvarez Pérez. Conceptualisation, data processing, supervision, writing, review.

Marta Rivas. Writing, data management, funding acquisition, review.

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