



# Social entrepreneurship and Service-Learning in higher education: A systematic review

## *Emprendimiento social y aprendizaje servicio en la educación superior: una revisión sistemática*

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### Abstract:

Higher education institutions, through University Social Responsibility (USR), are increasingly driven to assume a transformative role in society. In this context, Social Entrepreneurship (SE) and Service Learning (SL) emerge as university-level educational approaches with strong civic impact. This study presents a systematic review of 33 scholarly articles (2000–2025) that jointly address SE and SL, aiming to analyse their interrelations, applications, and educational significance. The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were used in the selection of empirical and theoretical studies indexed in reputable academic databases. A mixed-methods approach was employed: a descriptive analysis to systematically map relevant trends, and a qualitative analysis to explore relational patterns, dimensions developed, fields of application, and predominant meanings. The findings reveal a recent surge in scholarly output, primarily concentrated in the U.S. and Spain, with a notable preference for empirical research. The analysis shows that SL is predominantly framed as a methodology used to support SE, focusing on a wide range of themes across environmental, cultural, and social fields. The relationship between SE and SL is primarily interpreted through methodological and pedagogical lenses. However, a robust integrative framework linking the two constructs is missing. Dispersion and a lack of theory highlight the need to develop a solid research agenda to explore the convergence and substantial formative potential of SE and SL.

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship; service learning; higher education; university social responsibility; systematic review; educational social innovation.

### Resumen:

Las instituciones de educación superior, mediante la responsabilidad social universitaria (RSU), están abocadas a asumir un papel transformador en la sociedad. En este sentido, el emprendimiento social (ES) y el aprendizaje-servicio (ApS) emergen como propuestas

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educativas universitarias con alto impacto cívico. En esta investigación se realiza una revisión sistemática de 33 artículos científicos (2000-2025) que acometen conjuntamente el ES y el ApS, con el propósito de analizar sus interrelaciones, sus aplicaciones y sentido educativo. Se empleó el protocolo PRISMA 2020 para seleccionar investigaciones empíricas y teóricas indexadas en bases de datos reconocidas. Se aplicó un análisis mixto: descriptivo, para mapear sistemáticamente tendencias relevantes; y cualitativo, para examinar patrones de relación, dimensiones desarrolladas, dominios de aplicación y sentido predominantemente conferido. Los resultados indican un auge reciente en la producción científica, concentrada principalmente en EE. UU. y España, así como la preferencia mayoritaria por estudios empíricos. Se desprende del análisis realizado que El ApS se concibe en la mayoría de las investigaciones como una metodología al servicio del ES, denotándose una variedad notable de focos temáticos que abarcan lo ambiental, lo cultural y lo social. Las relaciones entre el ES y el ApS se enmarcan principalmente dentro de una lógica metodológica y pedagógica. Se advierte, por otra parte, una carencia de fundamentación robusta que integre ambos constructos. La dispersión y la escasa teorización existente demandan la necesidad de elaborar una agenda sólida de investigación que indague en la convergencia entre ES y ApS y en su considerable potencial formativo.

**Palabras clave:** emprendimiento social; aprendizaje-servicio; educación superior; responsabilidad social universitaria; revisión sistemática; innovación social educativa.

## 1. Introduction

Higher education is paramount when it comes to preparing new social actors capable of guiding and implementing the changes needed to construct a world that is more hospitable and more equitable. Both the Talloires Declaration (2005) on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education and the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (2010) could be considered milestones in this global shift in focus. Since the turn of the century, social responsibility has evolved into one of the cornerstones of organisations today (Almagro, 2010; European Commission, 2001). Within this context, the current version of university social responsibility (USR) has emerged.

Universities in the 21st century proactively accept their commitment to society by driving social responsibility, collaboration and positive impact on local and international communities. This social and community impact is reflected in the specific attention paid to sustainable development, social inclusion, gender equality, environmental protection, innovation and social entrepreneurship. USR integrates a complex web of elements in which the local and the global are interwoven. In the new university management models, there is a dynamic fluidity in the diverse demands: formal education, professional training, knowledge transfer and social engagement (Santos-Rego, 2020).

In the field of higher education, the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation contains a specific agenda for university transformation, with a focus on inclusion, innovation, connectivity, digital and green readiness and international competitiveness, fundamental academic values, employment and employability, as well as high ethical principles (Council of the European Union, 2022).

USR now features a much broader and more in-depth approach, with intermingling and mutually supportive university missions, breaking with their traditionally dispersed vision. Thus, for example, international inter-university networks reflect the concern for implementing responsible education aimed at a new civic approach within a new diverse and interconnected international setting (Vázquez and Escámez, 2022; Martínez-Odria *et al.*, 2024). Red Iberoamericana de Universidades por la Responsabilidad

Social Empresarial (the Ibero-American Network of Universities for Corporate Social Responsibility, or REDUNIRSE, 2018), in which Spain is a member, represents one example of USR, as a scholarly organisation aimed at connecting the diverse stakeholders in society, focusing its interests on higher education, corporate social responsibility and social issues.

This new university awareness is due to the evolution of the so-called third mission, linked to university outreach. It also finds clear justification in certain legislative amendments introduced, in keeping with this new spirit, such as those enacted in Europe with the creation of the European Higher Education Area under the Sorbonne Declaration in May 1998, seeking to make education more inclusive and accessible and at the same time more attractive and globally competitive.

Not surprisingly, within this framework, educational initiatives, experiences, programmes, materials and resources have multiplied with a view to promoting and bolstering the social dimension advocated with new energy (Corrales and Andrade, 2021). Under the international approach to competency training, these new aims are to be achieved by developing competencies in general (Guerrero and Cebrián, 2024) and, specifically, in certain areas such as civic competency and entrepreneurial competency. Two examples stand out from the numerous contributions made.

In terms of attempting to solve social or environmental issues in an innovative manner, social entrepreneurship (SE) has gradually developed with the intention of generating social value in addition to financial returns. In turn, a concept called service learning (SL), which seeks to align formal education with a response to the actual needs of the surrounding community, has gained extraordinary traction. SE and SL share an explicitly social mission and their transformative nature.

However, both SE and SL have also received criticism (Enos, 2015): for focusing too heavily on social justice, neglecting formal education, failing to critically examine the origins of inequality and power, being predominantly based on business viewpoints, and underestimating other means of social transformation, etc. However, despite the wealth of critical nuances, the fact remains that both SE and SL in higher education highlight the benefits of pedagogical practices that place the community at the centre, in keeping with the general direction taken by universities. Their widespread success bears witness to this.

## 1.1. Social entrepreneurship and service learning

There are an estimated ten million social enterprises in the world, generating some two trillion dollars in revenue annually and creating nearly two hundred million jobs (Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, 2024). SE combines philanthropy with business models, but it also contains non-profit models.

The data found in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (Bosma *et al.*, 2016) indicates that innovation-driven economies are more inclined to participate in SE, harbouring institutional support mechanisms and cultures that value post-materialism (Welzel, 2013). Western Europe, Australia and the United States, the regions with the highest average levels of economic welfare and institutional development, show the highest rates of SE in both the initial and operational phases. Furthermore, there is evidence that people with higher educational levels are more likely to participate in SE activities, and the gender gap is smaller in SE than in commercial entrepreneurship.

Everyone can, in some way, learn the entrepreneurial spirit and, what's more, it is not limited to the field of economics or the workplace (OECD, 2005). Entrepreneurial competence harbours a fundamental ethical and civic dimension. In this regard, SE seeks to transcend the economic dimension in order to develop social welfare (Alourhzal and Hatlabou, 2021). Entrepreneurial competence training is not linked solely to economic growth and wealth generation, but may also be tied to environmental, cultural and social improvement projects (Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2023).

Problems that may exist in the community are a special focus of concern in the development of social entrepreneurship initiatives (Bhatt, 2022). SE aspires to benefit the community by implementing innovative solutions to the needs and deficiencies detected, thus fostering sustainable social change (Ndou, 2021). Through SE, universities promote the entrepreneurial training of students as agents of social change (García-Jurado *et al.*, 2021). Their impact can be seen in the subsequent development of the community and in the consolidation of strategies that reduce existing inequalities (Parga *et al.*, 2023).

SE is often introduced as a key to solving numerous persistent social problems. Thus, SE has taken shape as an excellent means for addressing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and promoting the resulting objectives. Educating socially responsible entrepreneurs is linked to the acquisition and enhancement of problem-solving skills, empathy, application of knowledge and a sense of responsibility.

In response to today's economic and social challenges, SE, as an innovative approach, acts in favour of sustainable, equitable development, in which higher education is a driver of change, empowering social entrepreneurs capable of creating a positive impact in social settings (Mugarra-Elorriaga *et al.*, 2024).

Thus, SE can be considered a pedagogical approach that not only teaches technical skills but also generates awareness and the necessary capabilities for tackling complex social problems (Ng *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, SE seems to contribute directly and indirectly to 'professional adaptability' through the construction of perceived self-efficacy (Elwakil, 2023). By emphasising entrepreneurial competence as a resource for social change, SE encourages the development of more critical education with a greater social impact.

In turn, starting in the second decade of this century, the concept known as service learning (SL) has become widespread in higher education, in keeping with new demands on education focusing on student activity and university outreach into the surrounding communities (Ruiz-Corbella and García-Gutiérrez, 2020), although it was previously implemented at diverse educational levels, with theoretical foundations dating back to the early 20th century (Bringle *et al.*, 2004; Sigmon, 1979).

In the broadest sense, SL's global expansion can be seen not only in Europe and North America but also, especially, in Latin America, where the success of the solidarity model offered by SL has great potential due to its civic orientation toward active engagement in the construction of social cohesion, the strengthening of democracy, the fight against social and educational exclusion, environmental degradation and the defence of cultural diversity (Tapia *et al.*, 2023).

Although it is influenced by volunteering, community service and community-based learning, SL is clearly distinct in that it combines service to the community with formal and academic learning, thus giving rise to related terms such as 'learning and service', 'learning and civic engagement' and 'curricular community engagement', to name a few (Sotelino *et al.*, 2016). The rise of Dewey's pragmatism in SL today, the fundamental epistemic cornerstones of which are experience, action and reflection, is plain to see (Maddux and Donnett, 2015). 'Experiential learning' (Kolb and Kolb, 2005) can be gleaned from this pragmatic approach, giving the educational experience a strong central community component.

Although the terminology is widely accepted, it is not necessarily unambiguous. The predominant interpretation is perhaps foundationally restricted to the methodology or the field of methodological strategies, but SL can also be classified as pedagogy, a harmonic way of viewing education, and even as philosophy, a comprehensive view of human and community development (García-Gutiérrez and Ruiz-Corbella, 2022). The different perspectives (technical, cultural, political and post-structuralist) often cited in epistemological analyses seem to find space and pertinence in an SL approach that shies away from any dogmatic versions to embrace the complexity of all the factors involved (Santos-Rego *et al.*, 2020).

## 1.2. Defining the problem and the research aims

Under international scientific and economic policies, funds are earmarked for the generation and promotion of social innovation, business development is closely tied to it and research funding plans use it as a decisive vector. Faced with issues stemming from digitalisation, the fourth industrial revolution, migratory movements, natural resources and more, the collective gaze turns to the autonomy wielded by organisations to develop new service models (Schröer, 2021).

Educational institutions and social services are heavily involved in this. Higher education institutions, as pioneers in knowledge and knowledge transfer, are destined in particular to have a leading voice in this process (Belcher *et al.*, 2022). Rather than a top-down influence from the university to society, it is more like a complex network of interacting forces in which the roots of the problems, which are often external, require innovative alternatives and solutions capable of generating social value. Thus, it is not hard to recognise the intimate relationship between learning, creativity and innovation. The participants (primarily students and teachers), teams and even the organisations learn to solve problems creatively with a view to generating original products and services. Social innovation can be encouraged through a number of approaches and, given its relevance at both the individual and collective levels, it is important to take a closer look at the factors that promote and hinder it. Both SE and SL seem to be moving in this direction.

Given their parallel social focuses and orientation toward transformative action, one particularly interesting point to look at is the body of studies that have discussed SE and SL.

The intention of this systematic review is to explore the possibilities and limitations of SE and SL in higher education, observing how the relationship between the two is expressed and attempting to highlight the prevailing development of the two in the same research agenda on educational social innovation, the points at which they are likely to intersect based on the detection of specific domains, the integration models used and the orientation or meaning predominantly bestowed on them.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to conduct a systematic review of the scholarly articles published from 2000 to 2025 that discuss the relationship between SE and SL within a shared research framework. The time frame was chosen because SE emerged in the early years of this century and SL developed gradually over this period.

This general aim is broken down into the following specific aims:

1. To identify scholarly articles that include research reporting on both SE and SL from any perspective.
2. To create a description of the documents, distinguishing their contents based on the geographic region in which they were produced, the original sources of the publication, methodologies applied and their frequency and timeline.
3. To develop a critical assessment of the findings, focusing on the nature and magnitude of the relationships found between SE and SL.

## 2. Method

The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were used to conduct documentary research based on a systematic review of an educational topic (Page *et al.*, 2021). The procedure is based on an analysis of identifying features and subject matters by mapping and reviewing the research. Specifically, bibliographic references, contents, characteristics, typology and the meaning of the relationships between SL and SE are examined. An analysis of the data afforded a general overview of educational social innovation in relation to the SE-SL binomial, endeavouring to discern deviations and similarities.

## 2.1. Research questions

Five research questions are raised, the first of which is of a descriptive and quantitative nature, aimed at mapping the current state of the research (PMS, *Pregunta de Mapeo Sistemático* or Systematic Mapping Question). The remaining four questions are of a qualitative and epistemological nature, the purpose of which is to understand how the relationships between these two concepts are arranged by means of a literature review (PRS, *Pregunta de Revisión Sistemática* or Systematic Review Question).

PMS-1. How is the relationship between SE and SL expressed in the research as a whole?

PRS-2. What dimensions are being cultivated through the relationship between SE and SL?

PRS-3. What patterns are featured in the relationship between SE and SL?

PRS-4. What is the meaning given to the relationship between SE and SL?

PRS-5. What specific domains stand out in the relationship between SE and SL?

## 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In the selection of the studies, the following inclusion criteria were taken into account: (1) empirical and theoretical studies, (2) published between 2000 and 2025, (3) written in English and/or Spanish (4) study focus: SL, SE and higher education, and (5) indexed in Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC and Dialnet. In turn, the exclusion criteria were: (1) systematic reviews, (2) published before 2000, (3) written in languages other than Spanish or English, (4) study focus does not include the three descriptors, (5) lower educational levels, and (6) publications that are not indexed articles.

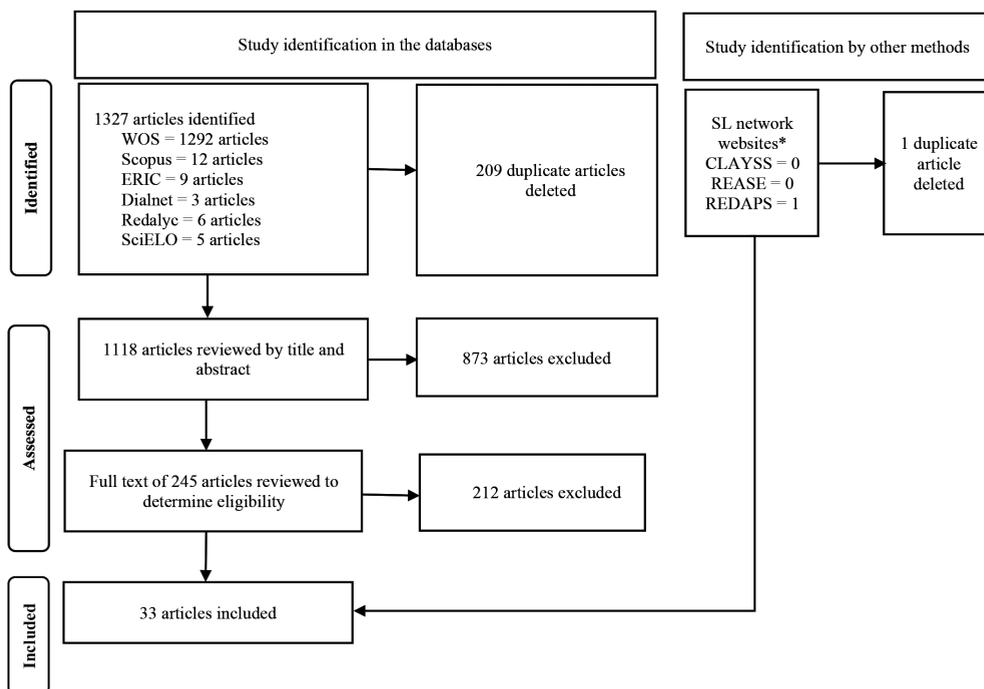
## 2.3. Research strategy

In the first phase of the research questions, the keywords were identified: social entrepreneurship, service learning, university and higher education. Next, the search string was defined for the WOS, Scopus, ERIC and Dialnet databases: (TITLE-ABS-KEY (Social entrepren\*) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (service learning) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (Service Learning) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (service-learning) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY(Service-Learning) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(University) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (higher education)).

The second phase began in March 2025, involving the search process in the four databases. Two further databases (Redalyc and SciELO) were added in November 2025. The search string for Redalyc, using the Google search engine, was: “Aprendizaje Servicio” (Service Learning) + “Emprendimiento Social” (Social Entrepreneurship) site:redalyc.org; and for SciELO: ab:(ti:(“Aprendizaje Servicio” AND “Emprendimiento Social”)) (*Service Learning / Social Entrepreneurship*). In addition, a manual, iterative, directed search was conducted of three websites of SL networks in Ibero-America and Spain recommended by diverse experts. Once the data were saved in the reference manager, all the duplicates were deleted.

## 2.4. Inter-rater selection and reliability

Phase three involved an initial screening by reading the titles and abstracts in an inclusive manner. To achieve interjudge agreement in the inclusion and exclusion criteria, Cohen’s kappa coefficient was used (Cohen, 1960), and a value of  $\kappa = .76$  was obtained, which is considered excellent. Once this screening was complete, phase four, involving a more in-depth reading of the texts, was carried out to obtain the final sample (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page *et al.*, 2021).

Note: Latin American Centre for Service Learning (CLAYSS): <https://www.clayss.org/>

National Network of Service Learning Chile (REASE): <https://www.rease.cl/>

Spanish Service Learning Network (REDAPS): <https://www.aprendizajeservicio.net/>

Source: Page *et al.*, 2021.

## 2.5. Coding system, data extraction and analysis

The information was classified by codes arranged into two blocks: first, descriptive codes related to the systematic mapping (PMS-1): publication year, first author's affiliation, methodology and journal in which it was published. The data was systematically mapped by means of percentage analysis. The second block consisted of qualitative codes related to the systematic review of the contents: SE and SL conceptualisation, theoretical foundations and conclusions about the relationship between the two concepts. In this case, a qualitative analysis was conducted using a system of emergent categories of an inductive nature (Table 1). The main themes of the contents, patterns, fields and the meaning of the relationship between SE and SL were identified. The researchers verified and discussed the data extracted in an iterative reflection and comparison process during the data analysis phase. Afterwards, a descriptive percentage analysis of the themed contents detected was drawn up (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Inductive emergent category tree.

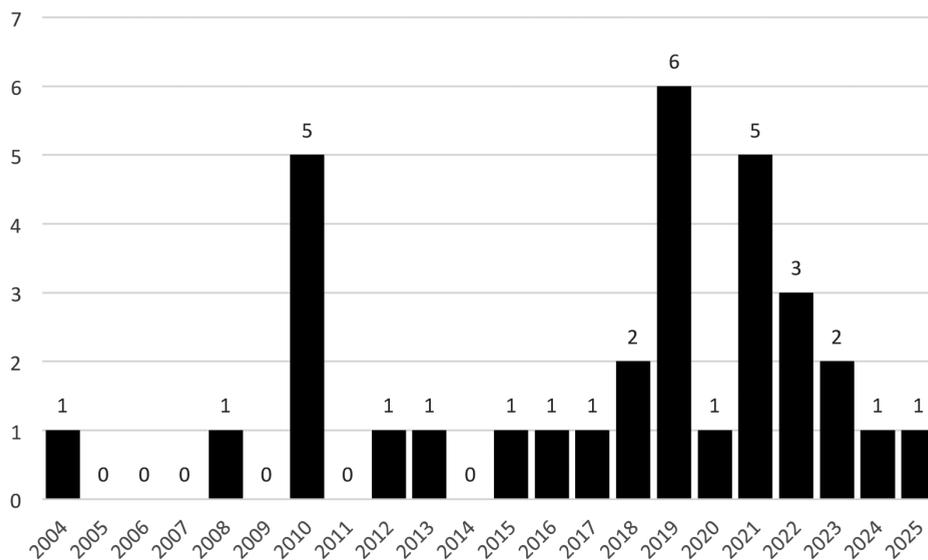
Research questions	Category	Subcategory	Codes
PRS-2	Dimensionality	Social	Social engagement
			Interpersonal communication
			Solving social problems
		Personal	Responsibility
			Proactivity
			Volunteering
			Transformational leadership
			Critical Thinking
			Business management
		Professional	Innovation and social impact
			Generic competences
			SE-sl
PRS-3	Relational patterns	Subordination	se-SL
		Juxtaposition	SE+SL
		Equivalence	SE=SL
PRS-4	Meaning	SL meaning	Methodological SL
			Pedagogical SL
		SE meaning	Pedagogical SE
			Philosophical SE
PRS-5	Specific domains	Cultural	Physical Education (PE), international learning and technological literacy
		Environmental	Sustainability
		Social-enterprising	Consulting, labour management and employment
		Social-community	Poverty, marginalisation and diversity assistance

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Systematic mapping

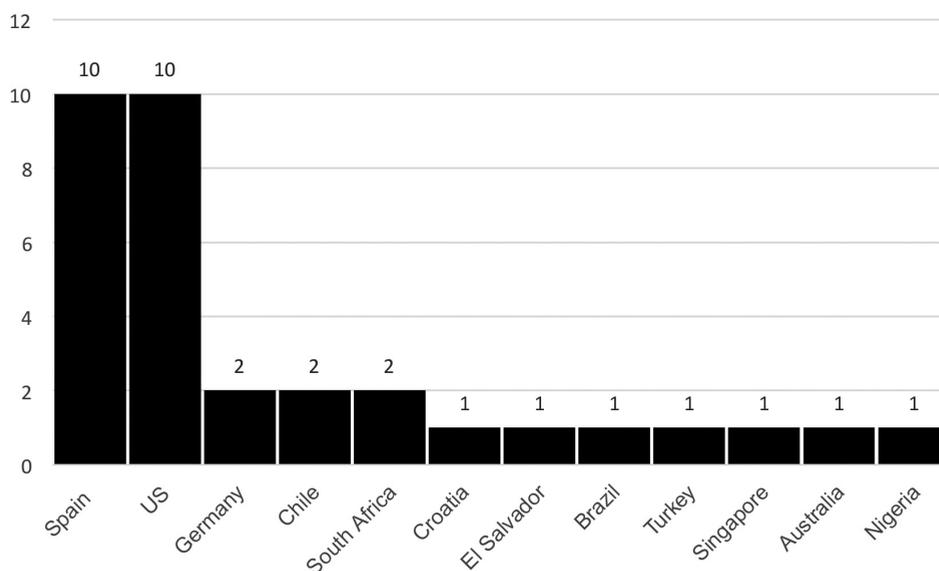
No studies were found on the relationship between SE and SL prior to 2004. Chronologically, the scholarly output can be divided into two periods. The first spans from 2004-2014, representing 27.17 % of the studies, with the greatest number of studies published in 2010. In this period, there is limited continuity in the research, with a single publication in some years, while others have none at all. The second period spans from 2015 to 2025, representing 72.74 % of the studies, with the greatest number of studies published in 2019.

FIGURE 1. Timeline of publications.



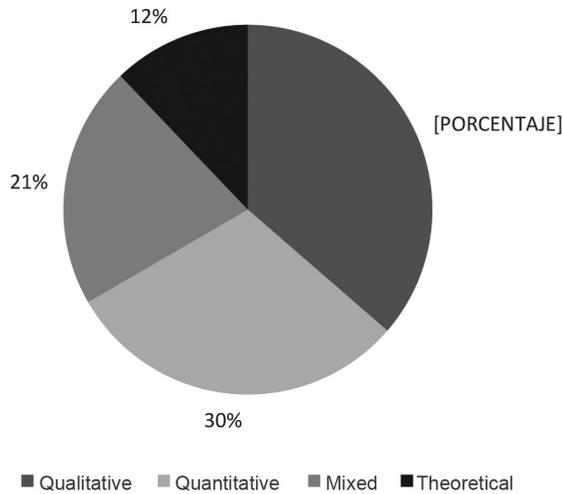
The origin of the studies, based on the first author's affiliation, is as follows: the main contributions come from Spain and the United States, with ten publications, respectively, representing 60.61 %. Germany, Chile and South Africa follow, with two publications per country, reaching an overall sum of 18.18 %. Croatia, El Salvador, Brazil, Turkey, Singapore, Australia and Nigeria contributed just one publication each, representing 21.21 %.

FIGURE 2. Breakdown of output per country.



In terms of the methodology used, 87.87 % of the studies were empirical: 36.36 % qualitative (1, 3, 5, 8, 12, 14, 19, 21, 26, 28, 29, 33), 30.30 % quantitative (7, 9, 11, 13, 17, 20, 22, 23, 27, 31) and 21.21 % mixed (2, 4, 6, 10, 15, 16, 32). The remaining 12.13 % are theoretical (18, 24, 25, 30).

FIGURE 3. Methodological representativeness.



The papers were published in thirty different journals, with the greatest number of articles about SE and SL being published in *Sustainability* and *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (two each). The other journals contained just one article each.

### 3.2. Relational analysis

This section outlines the findings of the content analysis, structured around the four aforementioned research questions.

#### 3.2.1. What dimensions are being cultivated through the relationship between SE and SL?

From an evaluation standpoint, three dimensions are described in the studies analysed: social, personal and professional (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Dimensions per type of research.

Setting	Type of research	Dimensions	%	No.
Business and non-business	Evaluative		39.3	1, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 20, 21, 26, 29, 31
		Social-personal	39.3	2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 22, 23, 28, 33
	Theoretical	Professional	6.07	24, 30
		Applied	3.03	17
	Descriptive	Social-personal	12.3	19, 25, 27, 32

By comparing how SL was applied in business and non-business settings, we found differences in the composition and relevance of these dimensions. In both cases, the social and personal domains are strengthened. In the social domain, attention is paid to 'social engagement', to 'interpersonal communication' and to 'solving social problems', which is reflected in the community collaboration. In the personal domain, on the other hand, the focus is on 'responsibility', 'proactivity' and 'volunteering' to implement projects, in addition to 'transformational leadership' and 'critical thinking'.

However, there are distinctions in the professional domain. In business settings, elements linked to 'business project management' of a social nature are explicitly mentioned, such as identifying needs, applying economic management and planning principles for social purposes, and developing 'innovation and social impact' processes aimed at meeting needs in a financially feasible way. In non-business settings, in contrast, the analysis does not explicitly reflect these characteristics related to knowledge and skills inherent to classical business entrepreneurship. The data indicate that the participants in SL projects in these settings acquire 'generic work-related competences' such as teamwork, managing execution timeframes and spaces, human and material resources and assessing community projects.

In addition, the theoretical research analysed corroborates this three-fold structure, highlighting the interest in building skills in economic aspects of SL applied in business settings, in contrast with non-business settings. As noted in article 30, 'considerable emphasis is placed on income creation and management processes' (p. 6). Similarly, the applied research (17) confirms this dimensional arrangement, validating a scale for evaluating SL in SE in training for PE teachers, the factor structure of which contemplates these dimensions. The descriptive research on this matter discusses SL project characteristics that complement social and personal dimensions linked to SE.

### 3.2.2. What patterns are featured in the relationship between SE and SL?

Four categories, arranged according to the predominant educational aim in the relationship, have been established to answer this question (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Types of relational models.

Models	%	No.
Subordination 1: SE-sl	63.64	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 22, 24, 26, 29, 31
Subordination 2: se-SL	15.15	4, 15, 28, 2, 33
Juxtaposition: SE+SL	9.09	20, 21, 23
Equivalence: SE=SL	6.06	25, 27

Note: Articles 17 and 30 are excluded because they are a test validation and a theoretical reflection.

In the first relational pattern, the aim of the SE —to generate social transformation and impact— guides the development of the SL: 'SL is an ideal methodology for stimulating social entrepreneurship competence' (2, p. 368). Thus, SL is added as a methodological component of SE training. The relationship is reversed in the second category: the SL aims vary according to the setting in which it is applied and are prioritised over the SE aims, thus shaping the educational process. SL here is deemed to feature components linked to social entrepreneurship skills.

A relationship of equivalence is established in the third category, meaning that neither the aims of SL nor of SE are prioritised, but instead granted the same relevance. The case of

the non-profit organisation Enactus is significant, because projects are implemented to meet local community needs through SL and SE experiences integrated into the curricula of diverse university degrees (21). A juxtaposed relationship is observed in the fourth category, in which the aims of SL and SE remain completely separate. Article 27 shows how the institutional university settings in which the SL and the SE take place are shaped independently in two distinct organisational areas.

### 3.2.3. What is the meaning given to the relationship between SE and SL?

The conceptualisation of both SE and SL can be identified in a semantic area in which three main meanings are found: 1) methodological: a systemic or strategic procedure is followed in the research; 2) pedagogical: related to a comprehensive, coherent perspective on education; and 3) philosophical: a holistic approach to reality, encompassing human and social development (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Meanings in the relationship between SE and SL.

Concepts	Meanings	%	No.
SL	Methodological	87.5	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 29, 31, 32, 33
	Pedagogical	12.5	25, 27, 28, 30
SE	Pedagogical	84.38	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33
	Philosophical	15.62	5, 7, 22, 23, 24

Note: Article 17 is excluded because it is a validation.

Looking at the meaning of each concept separately, the study shows that SL is mainly approached from a methodological perspective. Proof of this orientation is repeatedly found in numerous studies: 'SL is a methodology [...] that combines curricular, professional and civic and social development [...] with the provision of a service to a community' (11, p. 85). To a lesser extent, SL appears to have a pedagogical meaning: 'SL is positioned as pedagogy [...], as a reflexive form of inquiry drawing from Dewey's principles' (28, p. 134).

The research fundamentally acknowledges the pedagogical nature of SE, given that it articulates a view of learning that promotes training in certain competences such as strategic management and action, systemic thinking, normative, foresighted and interpersonal competences (5, p. 3). In turn, the articles highlight that the meaning of SE boasts a philosophical dimension. From this approach, SE can be viewed as a holistic human development process aimed at training students in areas such as critical capacity, ethical engagement and sensitivity to social challenges, beyond the mere acquisition of business techniques (6, p. 1929).

Thus, a two-fold meaning is identified in the relationship between SL and SE, depending on the weight given to each concept. Initially, a methodological and pedagogical orientation is dominant, in which SL is viewed as a teaching and learning method, while SE is a pedagogical objective to be met: 'The findings [...] show that SL projects for Sustainable Entrepreneurship can contribute to overall training (10, p. 17). To a lesser extent, there is a pedagogical and philosophical meaning in the relationship between the two concepts. Under this approach, SL is often viewed as a kind of 'transformative pedagogy, since it prompts the participants to thoroughly examine their beliefs' (28, p. 135), while SE is identified as a broader approach related to the training of critical citizens capable of becoming agents of change.

### 3.2.4. What domains stand out in the relationship between SE and SL?

Four domains and their respective themes are found, depicted in Table 5.

TABLE 5. Domains in the relationship between SE and SL.

Domains	Themes	%	No.
Cultural	PE	18.18	2, 9, 14, 15, 16, 17
	International learning	3.03	1
	Technological literacy	3.03	3
Environmental	Sustainability	21.22	5, 10, 11, 18, 19, 21, 26
Social-business	Consulting, labour management	24.24	4, 6, 8, 13, 24, 31, 32, 29
	Employment	3.03	7
Social-community	Poverty, marginalisation and diversity assistance	24.24	12, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 33

Note: Article 30 is excluded because no domain was identified.

In the cultural domain, the studies on PE are focused on the development of psychomotricity in students with special educational needs. Projects related to 'international learning' and 'technological literacy' are linked to students who are unable to participate in international education proposals and those with limited access to information technologies, respectively.

The articles categorised in the environmental domain discuss proposals geared towards protection of the ecosystems, rural development and the creation of 'sustainable' projects.

The social and business domain refers to SL activities aimed at students in business-related fields for 'consulting' in marketing projects and 'business advising and job creation' through the development of competences for the participants' inclusion in the job market.

In the social and community domain, the training focuses on 'poverty support' through activities related directly to eradicating 'marginalisation and supporting diversity' among vulnerable groups, developing teamwork and leadership skills.

## 4. Discussion

A chronological examination of the literature reveals two periods: the first, spanning from 2004 to 2014, is defined as an exploratory phase, featuring a limited, sporadic number of articles and publication dates. The second, from 2015-2025, can be deemed a consolidation phase, given the consistency over time and the increase in the number of studies published.

The studies were conducted across numerous geographic regions, with scholarly output falling into three groups: The majority come from Spain and the United States, followed by a moderate number from Germany, Chile and South Africa, while other countries offered a single article. A noteworthy concentration is found in Spain and the United States while distribution in the rest of the world is disparate, with limited numbers of articles from Latin America. Recent bibliometric studies show a similar breakdown in the evolution of scholarly output on SL in indexed databases (Salazar-Botello *et al.*, 2023).

In terms of the methodologies used, most are empirical studies, encompassing nearly 90 % of the total number, two thirds of which are evenly divided between qualitative and quantitative methods. The limited number of theoretical studies indicates an interest in empirical research aimed at assessing and understanding the impact of the link between SE and SL, rather than the foundations on which that relationship is built.

*Sustainability* and the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* are the journals with the greatest number of studies on the subject matter, with two articles each. The other journals feature just one article each. Thus, a strong degree of dispersion is seen, both in terms of scholarly journals and in the areas of knowledge in which research on this subject is done (PMS-1).

SL linked to SE promotes the social, personal and professional dimensions, irrespective of the setting in which the activities are applied (PRS-2). The development of personal and social aspects coincides with SL studies that do not bear a link to SE in university settings (Luna *et al.*, 2024). Thus, SL is found to be highly versatile in meeting community needs and providing university training more akin to USR. However, the employment dimension features a specific trait that distinguishes it: SL applied to SE in business settings fosters professional competences geared toward project design and management, adding the economic sustainability variable. This finding suggests the emergence of a business training component that combines social impact and economic feasibility. In this regard, recent research has highlighted the demand for a more inclusive educational framework that also features wide-ranging economic theories, particularly social and solidarity-based economics (Arcos-Alonso *et al.*, 2025).

In terms of prevalence, four relational patterns were detected: subordination 1 (SE-sl), subordination 2 (se-SL), juxtaposition (SE+SL) and equivalence (SE=SL) (PR-3). The data indicate that the preferred relationship is subordination 1, in which SL is perceived as a methodology within SE. This contribution is aligned with a widespread, sometimes tacit, interpretation of SL as a methodological practice. In the field of entrepreneurship education, SL, as experiential learning, falls within the methodologies for entrepreneurship competence (Hammoda and Winkler, 2024). This range of relationships shows just how complex it is to coherently define how the relationships between the two terms converge (*cf.*, 30).

The meaning attributed to the relationship between SE and SL is determined by the specific orientation of each concept (PRS-4). SL is predominantly defined by its methodological function, acting according to the operational logic of the teaching and learning process. SE, on the other hand, is supported by a pedagogical framework aimed at student training for social impact (Blanco-Cano and García-Martín, 2021). This conceptual distinction creates an asymmetrical relational meaning in which SL, understood methodologically, is interpreted as being subordinate to the pedagogical concept of SE, as the defining core of social impact learning elements.

The risk of theoretical and practical reductionism of SL, consisting in viewing it exclusively as a methodology, is clearly revealed here. Considering SL as an instrument in the service of SE reduces its critical, reflective and community potential. Perhaps the most effective way to deter this risk is to unequivocally link SL to social transformation and understanding (Deeley, 2016; Kawai, 2020). Furthermore, by harmonising projects that include SE and SL based on critical, transformative epistemological assumptions, the risks of relational subordination between the two are minimised.

In the relationship between SE and SL, a balanced distribution among themes pertaining to the cultural, environmental, social-enterprising and social-community domains is found, drawing a complex picture. The social-enterprising domain, in which entrepreneurship is combined with social engagement and impact, provides a suitable space for the development of entrepreneurial competences with ethical significance (Rodríguez-Gallego *et al.*, 2025). In this regard, the emphasis on fostering the capacity to design economic projects with social impact has led to the growth of a new field of action. Likewise, the cultural domain, PE and technological innovation in the virtual SL mode in international settings emerge as innovative avenues that broaden the scope of SL. In turn, the environmental domain, focusing on sustainability issues, has also become an emerging area, as a reflection of environmentally-favourable political, cultural and ethical frameworks (Rodríguez-Zurita *et al.*, 2025). The social-community domain features themes —poverty, marginalisation and diversity assistance— that are recognised in other SL approaches.

Both SE and SL have a significant bearing on general well-being dimensions focusing on social progress. Investing in social development, improving basic human needs and opportunities for individuals, has an unequivocal impact on society as a whole, including the economic dimension. As Berdieu and Saunoris (2025) have shown, improvements in social progress clearly reduce the size and functionality of the underground economy. This progress is seen as an antidote to structural and functional imbalances in social systems. As Bauman noted (2020, p. 270) in reference to the importance of education, as a cornerstone and means of progress, in the world today, what is needed is 'the reconstruction of a public space in which men and women can participate in a constant ebb and flow of individual and shared, private and community interests, rights and duties'.

## 5. Conclusions

The scholarly output is limited, focusing primarily on the assessment of SL experiences, and spread out considerably across the published media. Furthermore, the sources of the articles published are scattered across numerous geographic regions, with a significant concentration of articles from the United States and Spain (PMS-1). This is suggestive of an emerging line of research, featuring a noteworthy lack of theoretical analysis of these constructs, which are often used with little meaningful nuance, thus generating terminological confusion and hindering relational studies. There is an evident need to create a well-defined research agenda to thoroughly explore the joint possibilities of SE and SL.

The personal, social and professional dimensions are involved in the relationship between SL and SE. The inclusion of business management in the professional dimension spotlights the tensions existing between the social impact and the economic sustainability of the projects (PRS-2). However, their differential nuances do not conceal the points that social impact and economic sustainability have in common, in which ethical and strategic responsibility are clearly intertwining dimensions. Professionals in today's settings not only acquire technical competence, but also an awareness of the social repercussions of their work. All of this has led to a vision of professional development measured not only in terms of profits or productivity, but also by the capacity to build a more just, inclusive and sustainable society, as repeatedly stated from a critical perspective (Enos, 2015).

The main relational pattern is represented by a subordination model in which SL is viewed as a method aimed at achieving the goal of social innovation, consubstantial to SE (SE-sI). This model coincides with the widespread idea that SL is a teaching method, at the expense of other types of relationships identified: subordination of SE to SL (se-SL), juxtaposition (SE+SL) and equivalence (SE=SL) (PRS-3). For the most part, SE is conceived as a framework for pedagogical action, while SL is deemed a community-based experiential learning method (PRS-4). This type of relationship has been implemented in a nearly uniform manner in the cultural, environmental, social-enterprising and social-community domains (PRS-5).

It seems necessary to find feasible formulas for the creation of SE and SL projects that encompass all three areas: methodological, pedagogical and philosophical meaning. If SE offers a framework for innovation and sustainable development while SL contributes to the integration of knowledge and social engagement, the continuing educational experience sparked by the two together is bound to promote and strengthen the ethical and civic dimension, thus fostering a truly transformative educational process (Bernal-Guerrero *et al.*, 2025; García-Gutiérrez and Ruiz-Corbella, 2022).

This pioneering systematic review describes, for the first time, the essence and scope of the simultaneous presence of SE and SL in the global scholarly field. This research spotlights the need for a more in-depth examination of interactions among participants, the degree of curricular integration and the learning principles applied, among other aspects related to existing research. But above all, it reveals an urgent need for a thorough conceptual definition that can counteract theoretical ambiguities, offer more critical guidance and inform the connections and undeniable potential that may be found between SE and SL. This study has

certain methodological limitations, such as the language bias, given that only documents written in English and Spanish are included. In future studies, it is advisable to extend the search string to include terms like sustainable entrepreneurship or community service in order to gain a broader vision. While not the focus of this research, the abundant documentation found on SL network websites suggests that it would be beneficial to conduct studies on grey literature, thus expanding the geographic coverage to include Latin America and reducing the potential bias of the databases used.

## Author contributions

**Antonio Bernal-Guerrero.** Concept creation, data cleaning, formal analysis, garnering funding, research, methodology, project management, resources, oversight, validation, writing the first draft, review and proofreading of the text.

**Antonio Ramón Cárdenas-Gutiérrez.** Concept creation, data cleaning, formal analysis, research, methodology, resources, validation, display, writing the first draft, review and proofreading of the text.

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

The authors state that they did not use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to prepare this article.

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## APPENDIX. List of 33 articles reviewed.

No.	Articles
1	Ballesteros-Sola, M. y Magomedova, N. (2023). Impactful social entrepreneurship education: A US-Spanish service learning collaborative online international learning (COIL) project [Educación en emprendimiento social con impacto: un proyecto COIL de aprendizaje-servicio colaborativo en línea entre Estados Unidos y España]. <i>The International Journal of Management Education</i> , 21(3), 100866. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2023.100866">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2023.100866</a>
2	Capella Peris, C., Gil Gómez, J., Chiva-Bartoll, Ò. y Salvador García, C. (2021). Contraste de dos modalidades de Aprendizaje-Servicio en la formación de profesorado de Educación Física. <i>Profesorado. Revista de currículum y formación del profesorado</i> . <a href="https://doi.org/10.30827/profesorado.v25i2.9381">https://doi.org/10.30827/profesorado.v25i2.9381</a>
3	Ciesielkiewicz, M., Nocito Muñoz, G. y Herrero Pou, Y. (2017). Impacto y beneficios de la metodología aprendizaje servicio para el profesorado de educación superior. <i>Aula de encuentro</i> , 19(2), 34-57. <a href="https://doi.org/10.17561/ae.v19i2.2">https://doi.org/10.17561/ae.v19i2.2</a>
4	Ganga-Contreras, F., Guiñez-Cabrera, N. y Rodríguez-Quezada, E. (2023). Percepciones de estudiantes y empresarios sobre aprendizaje-servicio en costos y marketing. <i>Human Review</i> , 16(5). <a href="https://doi.org/10.37467/revhuman.v12.4681">https://doi.org/10.37467/revhuman.v12.4681</a>
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