

Inclusive School: a collaborative and community-based service-learning project

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Abstract

This work provides an overview of the 'Inclusive School: Service-Learning' project, an institutional initiative at the Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo. Based on the principles of Service-Learning methodology, the project aims to foster experiential and collaborative education by integrating community service with academic learning. Each year, local institutions and social organizations present their challenges and needs, which are addressed collaboratively by students and faculty through projects developed within the scope of various courses at university. The project follows a structured methodology, involving planning, execution, and evaluation, and has successfully engaged numerous students, teachers, and community partners. This initiative fosters both personal and professional growth while responding to real community needs. It creates a positive social impact by not only enhancing technical skills but also cultivating the transversal skills essential for active citizenship. The outcomes demonstrate significant student engagement, improved teamwork, heightened ethical awareness, and tangible benefits for the community. The following work presents a comprehensive overview of the project, detailing its implementation process, outcomes, and showcasing several example projects.

Key words: higher education, service learning, collaboration, social responsibility.

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Escola Inclusiva: un projecte d'aprenentatge servei col·laboratiu i comunitari

Resum

Aquest treball presenta una visió general del projecte "Escola Inclusiva: Aprenentatge Servei", una iniciativa institucional de la Universitat Politècnica de Viana do Castelo. Basat en els principis de la metodologia d'aprenentatge servei, el projecte té com a objectiu fomentar una educació experiencial i col·laborativa mitjançant la integració del servei comunitari amb l'aprenentatge acadèmic. Cada any, les institucions locals i les organitzacions socials presenten els seus desafiaments i necessitats, que són abordats de manera col·laborativa per estudiants i professors a través de projectes desenvolupats dins del marc de diversos cursos a la universitat. El projecte segueix una metodologia estructurada, que implica planificació, execució i avaluació, i ha aconseguit involucrar amb èxit nombrosos estudiants, docents i socis comunitaris. Aquesta iniciativa fomenta tant el creixement personal com professional mentre respon a les necessitats reals de la comunitat. Genera un impacte social positiu no només millorant les habilitats tècniques, sinó també cultivant les habilitats transversals essencials per a la ciutadania activa. Els resultats demostren compromís estudiantil significatiu, bon treball en equip, més consciència ètica i beneficis tangibles per a la comunitat. L'article presenta una visió general completa del projecte, detallant-ne el procés d'implementació, resultats i mostrant diversos projectes exemplars.

Paraules clau: aprenentatge servei, educació superior, col·laboració, responsabilitat social.

Escuela Inclusiva: un proyecto de aprendizaje-servicio colaborativo y comunitario

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta una visión general del proyecto "Escuela Inclusiva: Aprendizaje-Servicio", una iniciativa institucional de la Universidad Politécnica de Viana do Castelo. Basado en los principios de la metodología de aprendizaje-servicio, el proyecto tiene como objetivo fomentar una educación experiencial y colaborativa mediante la integración del servicio comunitario con el aprendizaje académico. Cada año, las instituciones locales y las organizaciones sociales presentan sus desafíos y necesidades, que son abordados de manera colaborativa por estudiantes y profesores a través de proyectos desarrollados dentro del marco de diversos cursos en la universidad. El proyecto sigue una metodología estructurada, que implica planificación, ejecución y evaluación, y ha logrado involucrar con éxito a numerosos estudiantes, docentes y socios comunitarios. Esta iniciativa fomenta tanto el crecimiento personal como profesional mientras responde a las necesidades reales de la comunidad. Genera un impacto social positivo no solo mejorando las habilidades técnicas, sino también cultivando las habilidades transversales esenciales para la ciudadanía activa. Los resultados demuestran un significativo compromiso estudiantil, buen trabajo en equipo, mayor conciencia ética y beneficios tangibles para la comunidad. El artículo presenta una visión general completa del proyecto, detallando su proceso de implementación, resultados y varios proyectos ejemplares.

Palabras clave: educación superior, aprendizaje-servicio, colaboración, responsabilidad social.

1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions are key drivers of local eco-innovation ecosystems, contributing to their growth and long-term viability. By engaging with administration, academia, businesses, and society —the core pillars of the quadruple helix— they foster collaboration and drive sustainable innovation. At the same time, Higher Education Institutions need to cultivate their own educational and cultural identity, focusing on nurturing the human, scientific, and technical competencies necessary to address the evolving challenges of modern and increasingly complex societies. Higher education also has a transformative role to play in sustainability, facing the challenge of integrating sustainable development into curricula and enabling learning towards a more sustainable future, as advocated by UNESCO in Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2020).

In this context, Service-Learning offers a powerful approach to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application, enabling students to engage with sustainability in a practical and impactful way. According to the European Observatory on Service-Learning in Higher Education, Service Learning is an experiential educational pedagogy in which students engage in community service, critically reflect on that experience and learn from it on a personal, social and academic level. Service-Learning is a powerful tool that inspires student engagement through active participation and practical application, forming the foundation of effective education, enhancing learning outcomes, and fostering greater involvement that promotes a more enriching educational experience and better academic performance (Kumari, 2024).

In Service-Learning, Higher Education Institutions and communities co-construct a development strategy to consolidate and enhance community projects, encouraging the active participation of students in social projects embedded in curricula and course objectives within the scope of the curricular units and coordinated by the respective teachers. Service-Learning practices are integral to the university environment, supported by several reasons: holistic personal development, enhanced student employability, and fostering university civic engagement (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023).

At the Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo, Service-Learning has become an essential part of its culture and is promoted as a key pedagogical practice, aligning with the institution's social responsibility policy, which aims to contribute to societal development by supporting and actively engaging with the local community. This approach is in line with the strategic axes of Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo, namely Axis 6. Partnerships and Community Relations, and Axis 3. Training, Curricular, and Pedagogical Innovation. Service-Learning is embedded in the curriculum units and aligned with the respective objectives, study programs, and assessment systems. The Service-Learning

projects are primarily developed in collaboration with long-term partners and local communities, who contribute to and benefit from the initiative, impacting all involved (Henry, 2004): students, teachers, partners, and the university. The Service-Learning practice follows a distinct management process, which is regularly monitored. This pedagogical strategy contributes to the positive transformation of society and is a lever for exploiting the potential of Higher Education Institutions to achieve the vision of Education for Sustainable Development. Grounded in the principles of the 5 Ps, the Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo shapes its strategies and actions to address global challenges and foster a sustainable future. In the context of this project, the university prioritizes Partnerships, People, and Peace, aligning with its strategic plan to drive meaningful change. Sustainability is a core principle embedded in its strategic vision and mission as a Higher Education Institution. The Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo Inclusive School Project reflects this commitment by addressing Goal 4/4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), promoting education for sustainable development based on local premises of social and human development, inter and intra-disciplinary knowledge transfer, social leadership, and public engagement, fostering intersectoral and institutional dialogue. Furthermore, it aligns with Goal 17, specifically 17.16, by promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and resources to support the achievement of the SDGs.

2. Description of the experience

The Inclusive School IPVC – Service Learning project has been running since 2013, initially launched by one of Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo six Higher Schools (School of Technology and Management) as a teacher-led initiative. Since then, the project has grown and become more established, now implemented across all schools. To strengthen and sustain the project, providing teachers with comprehensive training in service-learning methodology has been essential. This professional development equips teachers with the necessary tools to integrate service-learning into their curricula, foster innovative pedagogical approaches, and instill a culture of social responsibility within the academic environment. Such preparation ensures the methodology's effective implementation, encourages best practices, and enhances its overall impact on students, teachers, and the wider community.

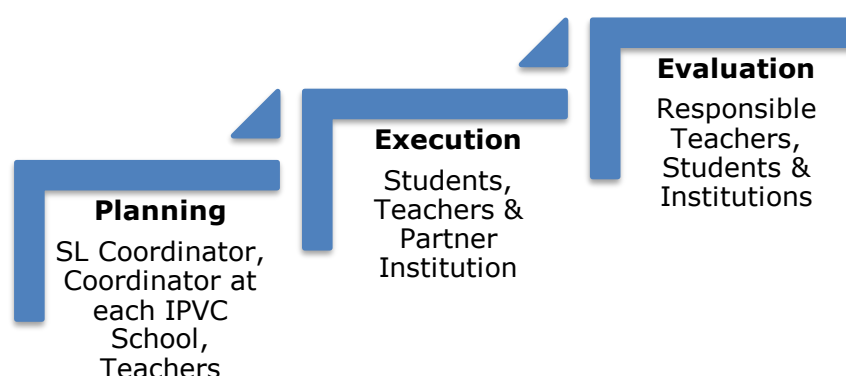
The project places a strong emphasis on empowering students, teachers, and the community by integrating targeted skill development into the curriculum. Through service-learning, it blends experiential education with community service, seamlessly connecting academic learning with real-world needs. By actively engaging students in meaningful initiatives, the project fosters a sense of responsibility and deepens their commitment to societal challenges. Furthermore, by tackling real-life issues, students develop transversal skills such as critical

thinking, problem-solving, communication, and leadership, which contribute to both their academic and personal growth.

Beyond skill development, the project acts as a transformative educational tool, reinforcing social responsibility and strengthening community ties. It plays a crucial role in shaping professionals and citizens who are socially conscious and equipped to address pressing societal issues. Additionally, by fostering personal development and igniting a passion for learning, participation in these initiatives enriches technical training and contributes to holistic personal growth. This comprehensive approach aligns with Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo pedagogical model, serving as a key strategy to promote academic success, reduce dropout rates, foster personal transformation, and enhance employability prospects.

The project follows a dedicated methodology structured into three key stages: planning, execution, and evaluation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Process matrix: Inclusive School – SL. Source: Author's elaboration



Planning is led by the Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo SL Coordinator and the SL Coordinator of each university school, execution is carried out by students, teachers and partners, and the evaluation is carried out by the course coordinators, the teachers responsible, students and partners. All stages of project development/implementation are essential, from identifying needs to designing solutions and reflection by students with teachers and partners. It features a platform that serves as a central hub for all stakeholders, enabling seamless interaction between the Inclusive School – SL coordination team, internal management teams, and partner entities, while integrating the monitoring of key performance indicators and promoting clarity and coherence in the activities and interactions among the various parties involved. The project is organized into two academic semesters, with an annual meeting involving all partners and three internal meetings each year between the SL Coordinator, Course Coordinators, and Process Managers. Every year, the project invites organizations and institutions involved in social issues to present their challenges and problems. These

challenges are then shared with students and teachers, who collaborate to propose and develop projects and solutions that address these community needs and leverage the resources of the participating organizations. The aim is to generate a positive social impact in alignment with the organizations' missions. Students take part in collaborative learning experiences, addressing real-world needs integrated into the curriculum. An annual student survey is carried out to find out the level of satisfaction with the projects carried out, which leads to a reflection on the experiences, the transversal skills developed, the relevance for working on curricular content, which makes it possible to gather a set of perspectives and an overall evaluation with the Service-Learning methodology. The project currently meets all the requirements for both internal and external transferability. Extensive documentation and simplified procedures have been developed to facilitate this transfer.

The successful implementation of SL projects depends not only on their execution, but also on the inclusion of an evaluation policy based on performance indicators, as Culcasi & Venegas (2023) point out. At the end of each academic year, project evaluation is carried out, focusing primarily on key performance and organizational innovation indicators, such as the total number of projects developed, the number of students, teachers, and partner institutions involved, the number of projects per SDG, and the number of projects per course. Considering the last four academic years, a total of 98 service-learning projects were implemented within the framework of the Inclusive School-SL project. These projects were driven by the needs identified by community partners from 44 institutions and engaged over 570 students and 60 teachers. The projects span a broad range of fields, including food, arts, health sciences, life and earth sciences, computer graphics, design, education, electronics, electrical engineering, IT, marketing, multimedia, building renovation, networks, and tourism.

The following graph shows the evolution of SL projects over the last four academic years for each school of the Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo. As observed, the number of projects has significantly increased in the last academic year, reflecting the consolidation of the project and its expansion to all Schools.

Graphic 1. Evolution of SL Projects - Inclusive School, by IPVC Schools. Source: Author's elaboration

	0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45
	ESTG	ESA	ESCE	ESE	ESDL	ESS	IPVC			
■ 2023/2024	13	3	4	14	4	3	41			
■ 2022/2023	9	4	1	1	1	0	16			
■ 2021/2022	7	2	2	9	0	0	20			
■ 2020/2021	13	1	1	4	2	0	21			

The results of the evaluation and feedback provided by students through the EIN-SL Satisfaction Evaluation Questionnaire highlight the learning outcomes and relevance of the project. Overall, students positively assessed the usefulness of the activities for working on curricular content, the project's relevance for understanding social needs, the development of transversal skills, and its impact on personal development. They highlighted improvements in organizing and planning, teamwork, and ethical commitment.

These results demonstrate a significant commitment by students to SL projects, revealing that their participation was driven by the opportunity to apply course content in real-world contexts and to contribute to the community in a meaningful way. In addition, students emphasized the development of key transversal skills, such as teamwork, ethical commitment, and the ability to organize and plan. They also highlighted the importance of understanding diversity and multiculturalism, as well as honing their capacity to comprehend complex ideas and concepts. Through their involvement in Service-Learning activities, students were able to apply professional skills, contribute to societal improvement, bridge the gap between theory and practice, and cultivate core values that support their personal and professional growth.

As some students testified, "This challenge was accepted by me, leading to the development of skills as a programmer and the recognition of difficulties we don't normally encounter, and finding the best solutions to overcome them." Another student mentioned, "Openness to the community, training socially aware and responsible professionals, and having a positive impact on local dynamics and reality." Additionally, one student highlighted, "I got to know other contexts that I might not have had the opportunity to experience if it weren't for this project." Another shared, "The fulfillment of our real need to interact directly with children with specific needs, always with the help and guidance of both the responsible teachers and the school coordinator."

Starting from the 2023/2024 academic year, a prize system was introduced to recognize three Service-Learning projects. The primary aim of this initiative is to acknowledge the efforts of the teaching teams behind these projects, highlight the active engagement of students, and encourage the development of new initiatives within the framework of Service-Learning. The award criteria assess the feasibility of the project, considering whether a needs assessment was conducted and its potential for innovative impact on the community. The connection between curriculum and service is evaluated to determine if academic learning is effectively integrated with social engagement. Student participation is particularly valued when students are actively involved in all phases of the process. The role of partner institutions is also considered, especially if they act as co-creators and play an active role in the project. Finally, reflection is essential, ensuring that students critically analyze their experience and the project's social impact.

Among the candidate projects, the following were recognized for effectively applying the service-learning methodology, in alignment with its core principles: bridging the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, fostering collaboration among students, teachers, and partners, linking curricular content with both service and reflection, and promoting the development of both academic and civic skills through community engagement.

"O meu quarto, a minha sala"

This project was developed as part of the degree in Environmental Design, as part of the Introduction to Design course. Its aim was to create a new design for the living rooms and bedrooms of children and young people in foster care at Casa dos Rapazes, customizing the spaces (rooms) to the characteristics of the children and young people, taking into account their specificities, interests and individual tastes. The problem was introduced to the students by members of the institution's management, followed by a tour of the facilities and a visit to a real estate agency. The projects were developed collaboratively by teachers, students, and technicians from the institution, spanning from the identification of needs to the presentation of the final work. These projects were then showcased to the institution, culminating in an exhibition open to the community. This SL experience provided an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world context, promoting integrated and meaningful learning. By focusing on the real needs of the institution and working directly with its staff, it encouraged the active participation of students, leading them to reflect on their experience and the learning process.

"Juntos pelos Patudos – Cuidar, Aprender, Fazer"

The project was implemented as part of the Veterinary Nursing degree course in Nutrition and Critical Feeding. Its aim was to promote active and collaborative learning, contributing to animal welfare and enabling students to develop technical and transversal skills. In practical terms, the project involved a set of specific activities aimed at improving the physical well-being of the shelter's animals, taking into account their physical characteristics and existing health conditions. As part of the activities, a database was created to record the individual characteristics of each animal, along with their therapeutic and prophylactic interventions. All the animals in the shelter underwent a complete physical examination by the students, under the teacher's supervision, with more experienced students paired with those who were less experienced. The students also weighed them, dewormed them and vaccinated them. In addition to the interventions carried out at the shelter, some students also became foster families for the animals, taking responsibility for feeding, administering medication, monitoring primary vaccinations, providing electronic identification, and interacting with potential adopters. The project clearly contributed to the development of transversal skills, beyond technical learning, including autonomy,

resilience, effective and positive communication, empathy, flexibility, organization, initiative, leadership, and creativity

"Trilho por Refóios"

This project was carried out in collaboration with two courses: the Higher Professional Technical Course in Rural Tourism and the Degree in Environmental Engineering and Geoinformatics. Its aim was to create a circular pedestrian trail in Refóios do Lima, actively engaging the local community, promoting hiking, and enhancing the parish's appeal within the context of rural and nature tourism. To do this, it was necessary to define the final route, points of interest on the trail, draw up the relevant technical sheet and mark the trail with PR signs (first course). As part of the degree, it was necessary to gather information on the content by interviewing local informants, preparing interpretation content on the natural and cultural heritage, publishing the route on WIKILOC and creating a promotional video. The trail left tangible marks on the landscape, posts, markers, and digital information elements accessible to the public. The project was developed in collaboration with the parish council and the local community, and two hikes were held at the end. A key outcome of the project was the valuable learning experience for students and participating entities, who acquired essential skills for collaborative work processes and multidisciplinary, multi-institutional co-creation. A final reflection was held with the students, who highlighted positive aspects of Service Learning in the context of the subject: "a deeper learning of the conditions, procedures, success factors, and challenges in the process of creating hiking trails and promoting actions for the enhancement of natural and cultural heritage in a rural context."

"Refood"

The project was developed as part of the Higher Professional Technical Course in Digital Marketing and E-Commerce, within the scope of the subjects "Advertising Communication & Digital Advertising" and "Digital Marketing Project." It was carried out in collaboration with Refood and aimed to create a comprehensive digital marketing plan for the medium and long term. The objectives of the project were to increase the organization's online visibility, expanding its reach, and to effectively communicate the importance of Refood's mission, raising awareness in the community about the issue of food waste. The learning outcomes were significant, students not only enhanced their technical skills, such as creating marketing plans and producing digital content, but also developed interpersonal skills. Interacting with the Refood team, managing deadlines, and adapting to real-world contexts strengthened their communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. Additionally, the flexibility shown by the students when working outside regular class hours highlighted their responsibility and commitment.

"Educação e Arte: Podemos Cativar-te?"

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This project was a continuation initiative, which received awards in both years, further highlighting its enduring value and impact. Implemented within the framework of the "Arts, Pedagogy, and Critical Citizenship" course in the Bachelor's degree in Basic Education, the project aimed to foster genuine collaboration between students and partner institutions, which are social solidarity institutions for the monitoring and care of children and young people at risk, promoting a mutual exchange of knowledge and experiences. The initiative focused on developing artistic activities and resources to meet the needs of the institutions, while also enhancing their resources and providing students with valuable learning experiences in the artistic field. The project collaborated with five local institutions, fostering strong community partnerships and expanding the impact of its activities. Beyond its impact on technical skill development, the project strengthened socio-affective relationships, contributing to greater social integration among participants. A key element of the project was continuous reflection, which encouraged students to assess both the impact of the activities and their own learning process. This reflective approach not only informed future interventions but also drove the innovation of the project by involving participants directly in the ongoing improvement of practices. Direct interaction with the community allowed students to gain a clearer understanding of how academic knowledge applies in real-world social and educational interventions, making the experience both enriching and meaningful.

3. Conclusions

The Inclusive School-Service Learning project stands as a robust initiative of the Polytechnic University of Viana do Castelo strategy, offering more profound and enriching learning experiences. It plays a pivotal role in the holistic development of students, training them not only for the professional area but also for a heightened sense of awareness and social responsibility as citizens. Regarding the challenges confronting academia and the community, it's noteworthy to highlight the reluctance of some teachers to depart from traditional teaching methods and embrace new, less predictable methodologies. Additionally, scaling these methodologies across all courses and disciplines at IPVC poses a significant challenge, necessitating concerted efforts to increase awareness and adoption. In addition to these obstacles, there's also a notable lack of funding, which is essential for the realization of some projects. And the necessity to organize and manage the expectations of teachers and institutions concerning the project's objectives, implementation methods, expected outcomes, potentialities, and impacts. This entails clear communication and alignment of goals to ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page and understand their roles and responsibilities within the project framework. The development of a dedicated platform and website has been fundamental to the project's success, enabling more efficient monitoring, management, and dissemination of project activities. These tools provide a central

hub for stakeholders, facilitating interaction, tracking progress, and promoting transparency in the project's implementation.

Looking ahead, the project is prepared for further advancements and growth, establishing itself as a reference in higher education for promoting social responsibility and community impact. In terms of strategic planning, the goal is to expand its geographical reach, extending its impact to new communities and establishing strategic partnerships to strengthen cooperation between academia and society. Additionally, the aim is to enhance both internal and external collaboration, fostering greater integration between schools and courses. As previously mentioned, one of the key pillars for the project's sustainable growth is the continuous training of teachers, ensuring the innovative and effective integration of the Service-Learning methodology into their teaching practices. To this end, training sessions, workshops, and ongoing sharing of best practices will be developed, fostering a collaborative learning environment and encouraging a growing number of teachers and researchers to adopt this approach. Moreover, there is a commitment to exploring the potential of the SL pedagogical approach in nurturing socially conscious students who actively contribute to sustainability and social responsibility initiatives. Despite the challenges and obstacles, the Inclusive School-Service Learning project has proven to be a key initiative with highly positive outcomes, both for the academic training and personal development of students, as well as for the local partners. It illustrates that the integration of education, service, and social impact is crucial for transforming higher education, fostering a more sustainable and inclusive society, and contributing to the sustainability of the partners themselves.

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