

## THE IDEA OF UNIVERSITY FROM A HUMANIST APPROACH: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SERVICE-LEARNING AS A PHILOSOPHY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

*La idea de Universidad desde un enfoque humanista: la  
contribución del aprendizaje-servicio como filosofía de la  
educación superior*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a new line of academic work that reflects on the idea of the university and the development of higher education from a philosophical-educational approach. Our starting hypothesis is that the identity crisis that the university is going through is not negative. On the contrary, it is forcing the academic community to elaborate and propose responses that are revitalizing the very notion of higher education from a humanistic approach. In this context we propose service-learning as

a practical and normative philosophical-educational approach, and thus as an “ethical theory of human formation”, which helps to respond to the questions and challenges of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

To this end, and following a methodology of critical-hermeneutic enquiry, we examine the construction of the EHEA through its constituent documents, while at the same time delving into and contrasting with the idea of university that is being demanded. This first movement, in which we try to establish a balance between more vocational and more liberal positions, will allow us to construct and analyse the theoretical consistency of the main contributions that service-learning (SL), as a philosophy of higher education, can make to the university and to the processes of development of the EHEA. We have grouped these theoretical consistencies into three contributions: service as a value in higher education; SL as an approach that aligns the classic pillars of the University and, finally, this methodology as a virtual proposal that helps us to reflect on the meaning of digital technologies in higher education.

*Keywords:* university; higher education; liberal education; service-learning; virtual service-learning; aims of higher education; digital technologies.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo se enmarca en una línea novedosa de trabajos académicos que reflexionan sobre la idea de universidad y el desarrollo de la educación superior desde un enfoque filosófico-educativo. Nuestra hipótesis de partida es que la crisis de identidad que atraviesa la Universidad no es negativa. Antes bien, está obligando a la comunidad académica a elaborar y proponer respuestas que están revitalizando la propia noción de educación superior desde un enfoque humanista. En este contexto proponemos el aprendizaje-servicio como un enfoque filosófico-educativo práctico y normativo y, por tanto, como una “teoría ética de la formación humana”, que ayuda a responder a los interrogantes y desafíos del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (EEES).

Para ello, y siguiendo una metodología de indagación crítico-hermenéutica, examinamos la construcción del EEES a través de sus documentos constitutivos, a la vez que ahondamos y contrastamos con la idea de universidad que se está reclamando. Este primer movimiento, en el que tratamos de establecer un equilibrio entre posturas más vocacionales y aquellas más liberales, nos permitirá ir construyendo y analizando la consistencia teórica que muestran las principales aportaciones que el aprendizaje-servicio, como filosofía de la educación superior, puede realizar a la Universidad y a los procesos de desarrollo del EEES. Contribuciones que agrupamos en tres aportaciones: el servicio como valor en la educación superior; el APS como enfoque que alinea los pilares clásicos de la Universidad y, por último, esta metodología como propuesta virtual que nos ayuda a reflexionar sobre el sentido de las tecnologías digitales en la educación superior.

*Palabras clave:* universidad; educación superior; educación liberal; aprendizaje-servicio; aprendizaje-servicio virtual; fines de la educación superior; tecnologías digitales.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In higher education we must ask ourselves if what we do there consists of “filling a glass” or rather “lighting a fire” (Ibáñez-Martín, 2010), a question which every educational institution and every lecturer is personally called on to answer. Our commitment to the University is closely related to the type of response that we are able to offer. Our starting hypothesis is that the identity crisis that the University is going through is not negative. On the contrary, it is forcing the academic community to elaborate and propose responses that are revitalizing the very notion of higher education from a humanist approach, as is the case of service-learning (SL).

In this context, can we propose SL as a Philosophy of Higher Education which helps respond to the challenges of the University today? If this is the case, which theoretical elements can we identify in this methodology which shed light on the subject and help us to face the challenges and cut the Gordian knot of the current University? At first sight and from a superficial perspective of SL, we may think that this is nothing more than yet another innovative educational proposal, showing certain scepticism and reluctance with regard to its consistency and theoretical soundness. However, in this work, we shall support the theory that service-learning may form a philosophy of higher education and thus shed light on the sense and scope of the University at the present time.

SL shall therefore help us to (re)consider the constituent elements of the education phenomenon in higher education: its deliberate nature, the educational relationship and the content that we shall attribute to learning and to transmission. In short, to ask ourselves about the purposes of higher education in a hyper-technological society; to question the “ivory tower” model and the relationship that the University must establish with its environment; to reflect on the generation and transmission of scientific knowledge; to criticize any axiological models and frameworks which impoverish the education of university students as a result of exclusively focusing on their employability; to wonder about cyberspace as an education sector and about how to conduct ourselves in virtual educational environments in a civic and supportive manner. To ask ourselves, in short, how higher education can help lead a good life.

Indeed, if we consider the state of the matter, we find more and more recent work which points to the specificity of a philosophy of higher education (Stoller and Kramer, 2018; Barnett, 2022; David and Waghid, 2021; Mahon, 2021; Barnett and Fulford, 2020); the prestigious publishing company Springer has even launched a series on the subject: *Debating higher education: philosophical perspective*. This philosophical-educational approach offers unity and meaning, in the same way as the works of Ortega y Gasset or Newman, to a broad spectrum of work which, based on various disciplines, explore the idea of University and the most appropriate type of education for this institution (Esteban, 2019).

Institutionally speaking, this concern for the University has inspired the formation process for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Here we find challenges and dilemmas, but also the values and principles that must be the focus of higher education. In this respect, we understand that our work falls within a “practical” philosophical-educational approach (Bárcena, 1990; Gil Cantero and Alonso Sainz, 2019) which not only understands the aforementioned as a mere theoretical speculation but, above all, as an ethical theory of human formation (Gil Cantero, 2003), therefore, normative (Gil Cantero, 1998), which must be discovered and analysed. In this regard, we will show that service-learning has enough elements to be conceptualized from this perspective. Hereinafter we shall address the Gordian knots currently going through higher education in order to, secondly, conceptualize SL as a practical and normative philosophy of higher education. Taking on this approach, we shall lastly consider the reason for which SL drives us towards an “enriched” and “augmented” higher education.

## **2. EUROPE AND THE SORBONNE DECLARATION, THE START OF A NEW PATH FOR THE UNIVERSITY**

23 years have now passed since the European Union, beginning with two key Declarations, that of Sorbonne in May 1998 and that of Bologna in June 1999, driven by the European education ministers, promoted the proposal to harmonize the structure of higher education in this area. Years in which the European economy was given a boost as a competitiveness factor of the old continent in light of the economic growth of other regions, in order to regain the leadership that Europe had held throughout history. However, focusing European growth and leadership on the economy alone was a short-sighted approach, as no region is able to develop and grow without the help of its social, cultural and educational institutions, as well as its history and its citizens. Hence the notion of the Sorbonne Declaration, in which 4 European countries stated that

(...) they should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well. We must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities, which continue to play a pivotal role for their development (The Sorbonne Declaration, 1998, s. p.).

They aforementioned countries supported the role that these ancient institutions must play and, specifically “(...) through continuously improved and updated education for its citizens” (The Sorbonne Declaration, 1998, s. p.). 4 visionary ministers who agreed to harmonize the higher education systems to facilitate mobility, the design of a common structure for tertiary education and recognition of qualifications, in short, education for professionals in a common framework. Just one year later, this intention was supported by 28 countries which agreed on the construction of

the Europe of knowledge as an irreplaceable factor for growth which is capable of giving its citizens “(...) the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space.” (Bologna Declaration, 1999, s. p.). Both Declarations served as a basis for the construction of the European Higher Education Area, a context which has undoubtedly facilitated the modernization of the European higher educational institutions. Attention was focused on designing a new administrative structure for this university education, which intended to create a unified area that provided “(...) students and teaching staff with education which promotes quality, diversity and competitiveness and which gets rid of barriers” (Colomo and Esteban, 2020, p. 56).

Upon analysing the history of university and looking over the respective timeline, we see that it has undergone its greatest transformation in the last 20 years, if we compare the aforementioned to what it has gone through since the 18th century (Ruiz-Corbella and López-Gómez, 2019). The university has undoubtedly evolved in recent centuries, in response to the social, cultural and economic context of each moment, but this change has never come about in such a short period of time. In many cases, this has given rise to the denunciation of its loss of identity or meaning, or for even having surrendered to the commercialization of its educational offer. Without doubt, this is often a true accusation in light of an “(...) excessively pragmatic vision in the outlining of syllabuses in order to make them suitable for the labour market, thus moving away from the humanist approach of university education (...)” (Colomo and Esteban, 2020, p. 63). However, we must also highlight opinions which in the same decade pointed out that

Universities are socially responsible and seek to improve the common good. Their perceptions and priorities change as those of their society change around them. Universities reconcile a transcendent mission of establishing understanding of the true nature of things with a social mission of relevance to their ambient population. (Boulton, & Colin, 2008, p. 7).

However, did this new design of higher education destroy the meaning of university? Must we recover the humanist approach of this education? Is it possible to put forward a balanced proposal which comprises both stances? In addition and of more relevance: what interests and, specifically, is required by society and the citizens of our century and what is expected of our universities?

### *2.1. Determining factors that indicate the scopes for action of our society*

In the evolution of the University, another key factor that we cannot forget about was, and continues to be, technology, in its broadest sense. Digital resources have a large part to play in this economic and social evolution, and without them we would be unable to explain the transformation of our vital behaviour. Mobile communication,

ubiquity, interaction on social networks and online services have shaped and made our daily lives easier. Instant communication transformed our way of connecting with our equals, defying what until now has defined human beings: space and time. Now the key lies in connectivity, which has generated this liquid modernity marked by temporary information, overexposure, large incentives, but which generally end up being insignificant and uninspiring. In short, the digital world undoubtedly opens up spaces for possibility, at the same time as it creates spaces for exclusion.

Furthermore, this change would not be understood without other factors, as rightly stated by Valle and Pedró (2021), such as the increasing incorporation and involvement of women in all sectors, which is transforming the dynamics that were in place until now. Or international migration, which is unstoppable and necessary in light of the inequalities and catastrophic situations which are being experienced in many areas of the planet. Migration which has changed the face of the old Europe. However, without doubt if anything defines the future it is uncertainty, all the more so in environments marked by volatility, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA settings), characterized by continuous and constant change at a speed which gives rise to a lack of being, a naked life (Han, 2019). Furthermore, if we consider our on-campus or virtual classrooms, we would be unable to confirm for certain that the education received will be enough for our graduates to find work on a labour market which is also subject to numerous changes. It is not a problem of recognising qualifications between countries, as a lot of progress has been made in this respect, but of educating professionals and, above all, educating people so they know how to essentially manage and handle this uncertainty. As a professional, citizen and person, will they know how to integrate into the context that they will find themselves in? Will they know how to contribute their knowledge to the reality that they must fit into? Act with a commitment to ethics? Will they have a sense of community, of society?

In this context we must be aware of the ever faster obsolescence of the (in)formation that we receive and of the knowledge that we build, while being able to constantly reinterpret this in light of the uncertain settings in which we live. In this respect, it is more important to offer education in skills, particularly in soft skills, which prepare us to face different situations, and to look up information and techniques to deal with them. "(...) educate independent individuals whose exercise of civic responsibility indeed improves the communities in which they live together with others" (García-García, *et al.*, 2021, p. 238). But this is only achieved, in accordance with the aforementioned authors, if universities make it possible for their students to value learning by themselves, a means to be able to live well in the communities that they will inhabit in the near future. Preparing students to act and commit themselves as active, critical and responsible citizens, giving them opportunities to learn throughout their whole life, supporting them in their social role (López López, *et al.*, 2021) is another one of the objectives proposed based on SL, as shall be described later.

## 2.2. *What has been proposed by the Bologna Process in the last 23 years?*

Between the first meeting of education ministers of the EHEA, in 1998 in The Sorbonne, and the most recent one which took place in 2020 in Rome, regular meetings have been held to supervise the extent to which the objectives proposed upon the establishment of this framework have been achieved, as well as any problems or changes which have occurred. 11 meetings which have highlighted both the results and the obstacles in achieving this common area, and each one has ended with a Declaration which defines the lines of continuity of this Process. Not all countries have made progress at the same pace, and this common area has still not been made a reality, but there is indeed a clear road map. This has also included economic, environmental and demographic situations and crises, etc. which have occurred and which over these two decades have determined the transformation of our societies. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that this is a cross-border governmental proposal which is extremely ambitious, as until today, it has been capable of joining 48 countries together in order to promote cooperation in higher education. This is cooperation which has also been successful in blurring the traditional borders of what we identify as Europe.

Critics of the Bologna Process (Linde Paniagua, 2010; Broucker, *et al.*, 2019) state that this is only a structure to make it easier for students and graduates to travel based on the recognition of qualifications and having the same measurement system (the European Credit Transfer System), which is able to make it easier for the education received to be recognised. The first Declaration, that of Sorbonne (1998), was undoubtedly centred on the design of a unified framework, not the same framework, based on which mobility is made easier for students and teaching staff, and qualifications are mutually recognised. However, this Declaration also deals with the necessary education for the Europe of Knowledge, thus addressing the imminent changes that were starting to take place in society and to which the university also had to respond. Naturally, this structure of the higher education systems has continued to be considered throughout all meetings. A concern for quality was combined with the subjects that started off this Process, beginning with the Bologna Declaration in 1999, in addition to the plans based on lifelong learning, addressed for the first time in the Prague Declaration in 2001. Precisely in this meeting was where the content of the social dimension of the university was dealt with, which has been present since then and which, as we will subsequently see, backed the revitalization of innovative methodologies, as is the case of SL, which were focused on facilitating learning processes that connected the university with society.

It must be mentioned that the driving force of this intergovernmental cooperation has, from the beginning, resided in economic reasons in order to build a competitive European society which is able to regain its leadership at an international level in an environment where knowledge will no longer be pinpointed to a location. Educating professionals with initiative, independence, adaptation, resilience and responsibility who are able to meet the demands presented by society at any time gives rise to the



strengthening of the professional aspect (job training) and employability of future graduates (Colomo and Esteban Bara, 2020). It is from this point exactly where the risk arises which may prevent this objective from being achieved: that society is divided into those who know how to act and behave in the world around them, those who only know how to use fragments of information and are uncertain about adapting to a reality which is constantly changing and those who remain on the sidelines. This situation, together with the necessary modernization of the university, was the precise origin of the social dimension being included in the Bologna Process.

### 2.3. *The social dimension in the EHEA*

Throughout the different stages of the Bologna Process, two key points are identified in the handling of the social dimension. On the one hand, the principles that make it possible and set out the actions which are the backbone of these institutions and, on the other hand, the necessary adaptation of pedagogical planning to this new reality. What is clear is that each higher education institution must open up to both the local and global society, interconnected with the social agents in its context, open to the constant changes of our time, to meet the needs and interests of its students. But this opening and flexibility shall mean nothing unless all those who wish to be educated are guaranteed access. Equality in relation to access and the continuity of their studies, while considering all sectors of the population. In short, that access, participation, progress and completion of studies depends on each student, not on personal or external situations which are permanent or have occurred without warning (López López, *et al.*, 2021).

In this respect, university is developed for all males and females where the education and qualifications offered as key elements of personal and social development and progress are recognised. The accessibility of groups which have been marginalized until now, such as disabled people, or individuals who, due to unforeseen circumstances, are not able to study their course on campus, for example in cases due to diseases, accidents, deprivation of freedom, professional mobility, necessary migration, living in deprived areas or to find a balance between work and family life. Accessibility not only as regards fitting into university life, but also with respect to student support services. All in all, favouring equal opportunities for all vulnerable groups, in their broadest sense at any stage of life, recognising the diversity of the student population as being valuable to our times.

This social dimension, in turn, calls for pedagogical planning to be adapted to these new settings and groups, as this is claimed to be student-centred learning. In other words, if we must prepare for an uncertain future, in which the opening-up, flexibility and constant attention to transitions as a life model are characteristic features, it is logical, on the one hand, that individual plans are proposed, which are adapted to the different learning styles and, on the other hand, education plans which are not only carried out at universities, but also away from these facilities in



environments designed or promoted by teaching staff, by the students themselves or in informal situations. Education situations which bring society closer to university, for which it shall be necessary to contribute

(...) to the development of independent learning and meta-learning. (...) which encourages students to be independent and promotes constructive research, the setting of objectives, collaboration, communication and reflection within practices in real contexts (García-García, *et al.*, 2021, p. 237).

Methodologies based on learning, such as plans based on projects, on service-learning, the flipped classroom, etc. In short, ensuring that our students graduate from our universities and are able to provide society with goods and services, as indicated by the aforementioned authors, not only in order to receive a salary, but also for their own gain, as well as that of the community and of the common good.

This social dimension contributes a third factor, further pressure which helps us better understand its content and significance. Here we are referring to the demand of the so-called transfer of knowledge to society, as we will see more specifically through the “transfer with social value”. However, in this case it would be more suitable to discuss transmission of knowledge insofar as all university institutions must also favour the promotion, value and transmission of knowledge in order to contribute to social and economic development.

### **3. ETHICAL DIMENSIONS AS A TRANSVERSAL REQUIREMENT**

This social dimension of the EHEA is linked to the need for ethical-civic education and to the social responsibility of universities (Martínez Usurralde, *et al.*, 2019; Gaete Quezada, 2021). Collaborating to go beyond immediate issues (urgent problems which are faced) and instrumental issues (educating graduates in their specialization for professional integration) in order to make our future possible knowing, deep down and while being critical, where we come from in order to know where we must go (Ruiz-Corbella and López-Gómez, 2019) as a society, as a person and as a professional in the area of work specialized in. And this requires the training of human capacities understood as potential which we make easier in order to learn and, based on this learning, to acquire the skills to be, do, try, behave... In short,

(...) the responsibility of all citizens (to) take on the duty of building a society in which everyone has a minimum quality of life, in which social justice is a reality felt and experienced by the population, in which the term “freedom” is not identified by “choosing the consumer product” and is associated with critical, responsible and supportive independence, in which participation is not qualified and encourages everyone, not just a privileged group, to take charge of the political transformation (Guichot-Reina, 2015, p. 48).

This is also the aim of the university.

All in all, if we consider the role that university institutions play in this success, we recognise that “we need an extended concept of responsibility for an era of systematic interrelations” (Innerarity, 2018, p. 38). Learning to recognise, reflect on and understand the interdependence of humans with everything in existence. Being once again certain that we depend on our surroundings, which requires us to learn to live together in our environment free from aggressions, waste, or actions which do not know how to weigh up the respective consequences. In short, by contributing to social cohesion, as to the same extent that we defend interdependence with our physical environment, we cannot avoid it with everyone around us, people close to and distant from us (Novo, 2018). Nobody should be a stranger to us, while the difference with diversity is that it delivers value to a society. Recognising and incorporating this is one of the most significant contributions of the university institution, which leads to protecting equal opportunities for all men and women, at any stage of life, both in the access and time spent at university institutions, in accordance with the abilities of each student. In this context, grant programmes are undoubtedly necessary, as well as student support services, personalized assistance, the planning of educational actions while bearing in mind the differences, etc., in such a way that “(...) knowledge makes it possible to call existence itself into question, (...) in short, it helps us to question what we are given and make better use of ourselves in the world” (Bárcena, 2021, p. 185) and to include other people in this world, with no exception, from a local environment to other more universal settings. Educating each student, subject of action and responsibility, as indicated by the aforementioned author, facilitating innovative learning experiences which contribute to the development of a diverse, resilient and democratic society based on their profession and their behaviour as a citizen and as a person.

#### **4. FROM THE THEORETICAL FORMULATION OF SERVICE-LEARNING TO ITS INFLUENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

##### *4.1. Pedagogical normativity of service in higher education*

The theoretical framework of service-learning benefits from an extensive and varied group of pedagogical influences, authors and movements which, at times, are difficult to track. In spite of this diversity of theoretical origins, SL demonstrates its value as a “catalyst” for generating a homogeneous philosophical-educational approach. This has previously been accepted by some authors<sup>1</sup>, who in this point see an explanation for the creation of social bonds and the possibility to build human communities based on coexistence, as well as pointing to the main purposes of

1. This has even been confirmed in institutional terms in the recent *Declaración de Canarias sobre aprendizaje-servicio en la educación superior* (APS-U, 2021): “Service-learning is a philosophy of higher education which strengthens the humanist approach of the university in the 21st century, recognising its social responsibility and offering relational reading of the traditional pillars of teaching, research and knowledge transfer in favour of the entire university community and the common good of society”.

the learning process (Martín and Puig, 2017). In this respect, SL is useful to both identify and indicate valuable educational goals as well as revitalizing and setting in motion the processes required to achieve them, as we are urged to do, and as we have seen, by the development of the EHEA itself.

The theoretical influences attributed to Dewey and his *learning by doing* in the formation of SL, including the New School, are considered to be classic. From a critical perspective, P. Freire has also been considered as another one of the “fathers” of service-learning, due to the critical reading that he does of social reality based on pedagogy, or the contributions of socialist pedagogy or the scouting movement (Trilla, 2009). Some components of this methodology are emphasized in these influences, such as: the prominent role of students; the concern for bringing their interests closer to the reality which takes place outside the learning environment, therefore bringing together learning and social needs; the pre-eminence of experience and practical work; the relationship of educational institutions with their social reality; and lastly, the identification of social and civic educational goals or aims which help people to reach their prime.

The pedagogical normativity of the second element of SL can be observed in all of these components. Indeed, while many people think that learning is the pedagogical element of the pairing of this innovative methodology, a philosophical-educational perspective shows us that service is the normative element which modulates and gives an educational meaning to learning. Despite this, perhaps, being the most interesting and original proposal, we also consider it to be the least studied proposal from a pedagogical point of view. It may seem that service only marks out either a “field of practical activity” of learning or the purpose for which a certain practice is carried out in order to continue learning. However, by understanding service-learning as a philosophy of higher education, service leads us to an anthropology and is a source of pedagogical normativity inasmuch as it offers an ethical-moral meaning of educational action which shall also guide and lay the foundations of the content of learning.

On the one hand, by generating ethical relationships in education, “service” leads us to a humanist anthropology. Indeed, in this respect, the first thing we can confirm is that service leads us to a certain anthropological approach. Irrespective of the educational level or field, we must not stop thinking about the type of human which is promoted from the University, and more specifically from education studies (García-Gutiérrez, *et al.*, 2017). For all human beings, service is a key concept for the development of social and civic ethics inasmuch as it implies respect, responsibility and caring for others. For this reason, service is not just an act of charity or altruism, but the free response that we give to recognising another person’s dignity, which leads us to take on an attitude of service, care and responsibility.

Secondly, we may see help and service as normative elements, which shape the essence of the educational relationship itself. This does not mean taking away

the asymmetry typical of the educational relationship, rather placing it in a specific moral outlook: that of service. Therefore, asymmetry may be interpreted as “power relations” but may also be understood in terms of “service”. It would be very wrong to think that, on its own, the equality of educational relationships gets rid of the differences between agents, as though asymmetry were only able to establish power relations. Thus, service intervenes in the educational relationship to give a new meaning to asymmetry and authority. Service gives authority back its original etymological meaning (from Latin: *auctoritas*, the root of which is *augere* “aug”) which means “augment”, “increase”. This coincides more closely with its specific pedagogical meaning, such as someone who makes it easier for and encourages something to grow, improve and prosper. Therefore, anyone who maintains an asymmetric relationship based on power shall make use of others; anyone who maintains an asymmetric relationship based on authority shall be useful to others; they will try to be of benefit to them, rather, look for the good in them. One is manipulative; the other, educational and pedagogical (Izquierdo and García-Gutiérrez, 2021).

Thirdly, service is revealed to us as a pedagogical criterion based on which morally valuable personal and social purposes are identified. Indeed, as has been defended by several authors (Nussbaum, 2012; Ordine, 2013), higher education should not be subordinated to market interest or productivity alone. Although it is true that training is a key element for carrying out a profession, as education, it may not be limited to this alone. SL therefore offers us a fuller educational outlook of the aims, without this being detrimental to the development of professional skills.

#### 4.2. *Beyond the ivory tower, service-learning in knowledge transfer with social value*

From the practical approach of the philosophy of education that we have taken in this work, we can say that SL represents an area where “educational knowledge develops in each person based on pedagogical experience” (Altarejos and Naval, 2004, p. 14). Therefore, from the perspective of the lecturers involved in carrying out projects, the aforementioned are already part of a context in which educational knowledge is generated and, therefore, from which actions may also be carried to transfer knowledge with social value, although this is a relatively new field in pedagogy (Tourinán, 2020; Santos Rego, 2020).

From this perspective, this is a double contribution, as on the one hand it helps to “decentralize” the higher education of employability-based discourses, giving rise to broader and less instrumental outlooks, thus connecting with the social responsibility of the Universities, as we have already stated; and, on the other hand, it helps lecturers to carry out actions of knowledge transfer with social value. Therefore, from this viewpoint, service-learning brings together social responsibility actions of the University itself, thus bringing its three mainstays into line in the same direction: teaching, research and knowledge transfer (García-Gutiérrez and Corrales, 2021).

This is an evolution that we notice in the development of the European higher education policy. In fact, a wide variety of European research projects aimed at studying the social and civic commitment in higher education have been carried out, such as *Europe Engage* or *Eelisa*<sup>2</sup>. In turn, this research has led to an “extension” of the vision held of the social dimension of the EHEA. Such is the case that in the last meeting of European ministers for Higher Education, this “expansion” of the social dimensions of universities was dealt with, while also addressing and including social and civil values. In other words, higher education must not only prepare students to carry out a profession, but also to lead an examined life.

#### 4.3. *University in the network society, towards virtual service-learning*

On the other hand, reflections on how to include and use digital technologies in education, including higher education, processes are a constant concern for both specialized literature and international bodies (this is clearly shown in the latest reports by the OECD or UNESCO). This is particularly the case if we bear in mind the education system that we have experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, service-learning may also contribute a great deal, from the specific form of “virtual service-learning” (vSL), in which it offers both a meaningful outlook in response to the reason for which technologies are used, and the opportunity to develop the ethical and civic dimension of learning in digital-mediated contexts.

Conceptually, virtual service-learning is a type of SL in which technologies appear to be fully integrated. In this form, technology does not appear instrumentally, rather in a pedagogically intentional way. To that effect, we understand vSL as an innovative form that blurs the space-time categories with a pedagogical purpose, expanding the educational experience, while widening the possibilities of service for the local and global community from a technology immersion which promotes human values throughout the entire educational process. This is a specific SL model which is characterized by bringing together:

1. Humanist and humanizing mediation, as in online higher education there should be a clear awareness of the pedagogical purpose of the supremacy of human values above technological values. There is no reason why the use of digital technologies alone should involve a relationship or dialogue, learning, or meeting. However, if the purpose of par excellence education is connected to this “humanization”, we must, at least, take this into account too when we develop virtual educational processes.

On the other hand, like in all learning processes, introducing technology requires and demands “accompaniment”. Despite the wealth of social networks and immediacy in digital communication, it is sometimes very easy to feel

2. Information on both projects may be found at <https://www.eoslhe.eu/europe-engage/> and <https://eelisa.eu/>

“alone” in online education settings, with everything involved in a lack of motivation, exhaustion and abandonment. In vSL, as well as other technology-mediated learning environments, accompanying resources and process which are appropriate for the activities must be brought together.

2. If the first feature indicates the purpose, the second one is related to the pedagogical possibilities of ubiquity and totality. As mentioned previously, vSL frees learning and service from space-time limits, therefore, based on mobile devices and digital technologies, it brings in the notion of ubiquitous learning: learning which is not restricted by physical coordinates. As a result, in vSL, “educational dialogue” is “opened up” and is decentralized, making it easier to be more horizontal and in more of a network as it covers any place and any time, while including all agents involved.
3. The last feature is related to totality. Considering the projects from an international perspective undoubtedly makes it easier for us to be able to link them to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, to human rights or to the promotion of global citizenship from a responsible, interdependent and supportive approach. Rather, vSL projects make it easier for us to offer students a comprehensive ethical experience in and through digital technologies. In this respect and in order to better understand the idea of “ethical experience” we must draw the distinction between “to experience” and “to have experience”, in which the latter is unforeseeable, as it cannot be controlled completely, which allows us to appreciate the need to reflect and find meaning. Therefore, a SL project is not so much a laboratory as a journey. In other words, instrumental logic is more permeable to market demands than to demands of practical reason. In some cases, this is the reason for which the idea of experience is compared more to the emotive and commercial notion of “customer experience” than to the idea of “pedagogical experience” or “ethical experience” (Bárcena & Mèlich, 2000).

## **5. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: FOR AN “ENRICHED” AND “AUGMENTED” HIGHER EDUCATION**

Throughout this work we have aimed to analyse the current development of higher education by explaining and laying the foundations of service-learning as a philosophy of higher education, which allows us to analyse the University in order to provide clarity and proposals for it to be renewed and updated. From this perspective and by way of conclusion, we would like to stress two limitations, while emphasizing the risks present in these actions, and two significant contributions made by SL to higher education. The following is therefore considered.

Limitation is related to the risk of bias which, as an educational philosophy, may represent an excessively biased vision of service. This bias is relevant insomuch as

its knowledge gives rise to us placing the university lecturer in a position opposed to that of the social activist (David and Waghid, 2021). Indeed, as a philosophy of higher education, SL takes the moral denseness and complexity of the educational phenomenon into consideration, and it is therefore important to address the risks faced by teaching staff when involved in these projects (Tapia, 2010).

The first limitation is related to the ideologization of service itself. Thus, it is our duty to rigorously and authentically consider the extent to which attention to one specific service (and not another) responds to pedagogical reasons or to any other type of reasons or interests. In other words, although these are not exclusive reasons, this does not mean we can subordinate interest in full development of the human personality to any other type of interest based on social needs. Indeed, the ideologization of service may entail activities of political or social criticism in which the commitment is not so much to the dignity of the people to whom it is directed as to the ideology that supports it. Therefore, in order to overcome the risk of “activism”, it is necessary to also be critical with the service proposals themselves which are made, in addition to questioning and having a conversation about where their foundations are laid.

The other limitation can be placed right at the opposite end, and this is the scarce or non-existent connection between solidarity and learning. In other words, the type of service does not offer an appropriate context for students to develop their learning, or civic and ethical commitment. There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, the duration of actions, at times too short or not frequent enough, hinders the development of appropriate thinking processes. And on the other hand, service is considered to be more directed at the product than the relationship, which may complicate and pose a risk for meeting and contacting the target individuals. These cases result in the project appearing to be more focused on the outcome and the products than on the development of the process itself; on an excessive theorizing of service, finally turning needs into an abstraction which is far removed from reality. We must not forget that education is more closely related to the development of processes than results being achieved.

These two risks may result in an excessive “all-embracing” image of the contributions of SL to higher education and draw the conclusion (which is obviously incorrect) that there are no other education means which help to build a more human future and a more comprehensive education. The contribution of SL that we highlight as a philosophy of higher education is precisely based on the fact that it is useful for us to clear up and indicate factors, purposes and guidance in order to achieve humanist education. Here we believe there is a significant difference between the vision of SL as an innovative mechanism and the proposal that we make as an educational philosophy. If we consider it as an innovative mechanism, we may be tempted to think that these objectives or aims may only be achieved through SL; but if we look at it as a philosophy, we recognise the diversity and the ability of SL to propose, clarify and investigate these aims and content, as well as the guidance



that a humanist higher education should have. Therefore, SL must contribute to the expansion and enrichment of the educational experience. This leads us to point out two relevant contributions which stem from this methodology: developing a higher education that we have described as “enriched” and “augmented”.

Certainly “enriched” because, as we have been able to see, it “decentralizes” education from the idea of employability, giving rise to an outlook which is less instrumental and more humanist, and therefore broader. This is a place where students, as we know, do not only acquire valuable skills from a professional point of view, but through reflection, experiences, relationships with social organisations, and with social needs and problems, they also become committed and responsible citizens. On the other hand, SL, particularly in its virtual proposal, also promotes an “augmented” higher education precisely due to the types of relationships that may be established, beyond space and also time, with the local community as well as in international settings, while being aware of the responsibility taken at the current time, but also with future generations.

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