SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCES TO ENHANCE TRAINING STRATEGIES IN THE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION DEGREE

M. Solé Català, J. Andreu Daufí

Universitat de Barcelona (SPAIN)

Abstract

This paper presents the educational innovation project "Service-Learning Experiences to Enhance Practical Training in the Public Management and Administration Degree (2022PID-UB/018)", developed by the Consolidated Teaching Innovation Group of Public Management and Administration (GINDOC-UB/054) at the Faculty of Law, University of Barcelona.

The purpose of the project is to integrate the Service-Learning (SL) methodology into the courses of External Internships and Final Degree Project (FDP) courses in the Public Management and Administration Degree (PMAD). The public service aspect inherent in the degree allows students to develop a public service vocation. Therefore, the project seeks to involve students in management projects with a public and community dimension within the framework of public administrations or third-sector organizations. In terms of methodology, participating students were assigned service tasks defined to meet specific community needs, providing a practical context to apply their acquired knowledge. This fosters deeper learning and enhances the degree's competencies. Additionally, students can link their FDP to their internships, facilitating comprehensive reflection on their practical experience.

To ensure the success of this methodology, a basic guide for applying SL has been developed for students, host institutions, and tutors. This guide includes guidelines for project design and development, as well as tools to assess the learning of the students and the effectiveness of the SL experience.

The learning assessment is carried out by the tutoring team, using student-provided documentation such as reflective journals, evidence of the SL experience, internship reports, and self-assessment reports. Dimensions such as collaborative attitude, knowledge application, and creative and reflective competencies of the student are considered. Additionally, the faculty and collaborating organizations have jointly developed an assessment tool to measure the outcomes of SL implementation.

The paper will detail three significant experiences: the development of service charters for two units at the University of Barcelona and the creation of a resource and service map for people with intellectual, physical, and sensory disabilities for the Barcelona Provincial Council.

The evaluation of these experiences, based on the satisfaction of both students and tutoring teams, has led to useful conclusions for proposing new strategies that align the degree's content with the real needs of the profession. These experiences have proven highly positive for students' practical learning, offering them a unique opportunity to apply their knowledge in real-world situations, thus developing their professional skills and fostering a public service spirit.

Regarding conclusions, the project's results provide evidence demonstrating that SL experiences linked to curricular internships and the FDP enhance students' competency development and significantly improve their training in preparation for professional practice.

We can demonstrate that the SL methodology not only enriches student education but also benefits the involved public administrations, creating a collaborative learning environment that can serve as a model for other educational institutions seeking to improve their curricula.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Practical Training, Public Management.

1 INTRODUCTION

The project "Service-Learning Experiences to Enhance Practical Training in the Public Management and Administration Degree (2022PID-UB/018)" has primarily focused on the curricular internship course in the Public Management and Administration Degree (PMAD) and the Final Degree Project (FDP). The main objective is to contribute to the comprehensive and applied training for the professional integration of PMAD students.

The project seeks to introduce innovation in experiential learning in the degree program. On the one hand, the incorporation of the SL project into the PMAD should allow the host organization for internships to define and plan the learning objectives and integrate the results into the organization in the form of a product or service. On the other hand, it should enable the student to take on a leading and proactive role, demonstrating not only the skills and competencies corresponding to the professional profile of a senior public administration technician but also their competence and creative, entrepreneurial capacity by creating a product or service for the host organization.

The guidance and monitoring (checklists, milestones, deliverables, etc.) provided by the host institution's tutor during the process of designing, developing, and implementing the product or service will facilitate the provision of objective evidence for the assessment of the learning process. Simultaneously, these tools will provide the student with an experiential learning experience that can be useful for initiating their FDP at the same time or during the following course.

The project's specific objectives are:

- To transform the curricular internship and FDP courses by effectively and comprehensively incorporating SL experiences, revising and redefining the transversal competencies, objectives, and assessments in the course syllabi.
- To enhance the competency level of final-year PMAD students, particularly in mastering transversal competencies, as a result of participating in SL experiences.

2 METHODOLOGY

In the context of the curricular internships of the Public Management and Administration Degree (PMAD) and the FDP, we understand Service-Learning (SL) as a learning methodology that integrates service to the host institution of the curricular internships with academic learning into a single project. SL allows students to professionally develop based on the real needs of the professional environment, aiming to improve it.

Through an immersion methodology in the professional activity, the student's activity in the internship center is monitored by both the host institution's tutoring team and academic tutors (University). The role of the host institution's tutor is to guide the student during their internship so that they integrate into a team of professionals, gaining an understanding of the organization and the functioning of public administration processes and services, as well as the needs and requirements of actual or potential citizens.

In this context, the student acquires knowledge, incorporates attitudes and values, and certainly, also develops skills and abilities. However, these skills are not always fully practiced during the internship period.

To facilitate the experience, a Basic Guide for the Application of SL in the PMAD Degree has been developed. The guide is directed to students selecting their curricular internship placements, to the centers hosting the students, and to the internship tutoring team within the PMAD degree framework.
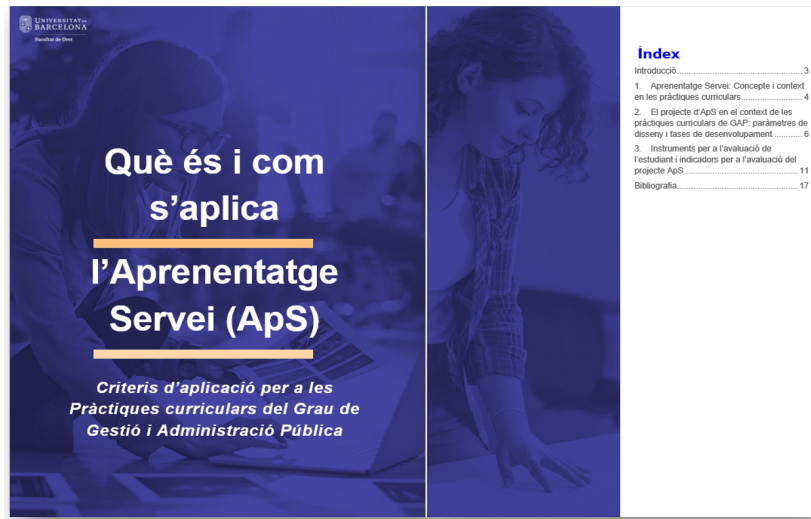
Figure 1. Basic Guide for the Application of Service-Learning (SL)

The guide is designed to promote:

- The development process of curricular internships within the SL methodological context.
- The resource dimensioning (human, material, etc.) required from the host institution.
- Prioritization of the most relevant activities the student must perform during the internship.
- Establishment of learning and assessment criteria and tools for the student.

The guide is structured into three sections:

1. Definition and contextualization of SL within the framework of curricular internships.
2. Presentation of the design parameters and development phases of an SL-based curricular internship project.
3. Proposal of tools for assessing the student and evaluating the SL project.

In the section regarding the definition and contextualization of SL, the guide argues the benefits of applying this methodology to curricular internships and explains the characteristics of learning within this methodological context (practical and meaningful learning and systemic reflection by the student).

Regarding the presentation of design parameters and development phases of an SL-based curricular internship project, the guide establishes the following phases:

- Diagnosis and project planning
- Project design
- Project execution
- Project evaluation and impact

Concerning the proposed tools for assessing curricular internships within the context of the SL experience, two dimensions are differentiated:

a) Assessment of student learning
b) Assessment of the SL experience

a) Student learning assessment is carried out by the tutorial team (host institution tutor and academic tutor). The evidence provided by the student includes:

- A reflective journal about their learning process
- A selection of evidence from the SL experience outcomes.
- An internship report.
- A self-evaluation report.

For the tutorial team, the student learning assessment is based on three dimensions:

- Organizational learning dimension: The student's collaborative attitude with the institution (understanding of the institution; level of engagement; responsibility; teamwork; ethical commitment; sustainability).
- Instrumental learning dimension: Application of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned in the degree.
- Systemic learning dimension: The student's creative, innovative, and reflective competence aimed at quality, continuous improvement, and leadership capacity.

b) Assessment of the SL experience: The university and the host institution jointly develop an evaluation tool based on parameters and indicators that measure the outcomes of the implementation and development of the SL experience and allow for an assessment of it:

- Meaningful learning [Level of relevance – Quantitative]
- Curricular connection [Level of efficiency and effectiveness – Quantitative]
- Reflection [Level of impact – Qualitative]
- Student voice [Level of maturity – Qualitative]
- Collaboration with institutions [Level of sustainability – Qualitative].

Table 1. The project Service-Learning: Monitoring and control of the product and/or service production process: compilation of documentary evidence

ID	Activity	Execution	Control/ Monitoring	Documentary evidence (suggestions)
AV04.01	Product/Service Planning			
AV04.01.01	Product/Service requirements	Student	Entity tutor	Specifications of the entity's needs
AV04.01.02	Product/Service objectives	Student	Entity tutor	Expectation of intended product/service usage
AV04.01.03	Activities necessary to meet the entity's requirements	Student	Entity tutor	Work plan: activity timeline
AV04.02	Product/Service Specifications			
AV04.02.01	Technical specifications	Student	Entity tutor	List of technical specifications required for the product/service
AV04.02.02	Quality requirements	Student	Entity tutor	List of applicable quality specifications
AV04.02.03	Legal and regulatory requirements	Student	Entity tutor	List of applicable technical, legal, etc. standards

ID	Activity	Execution	Control/ Monitoring	Documentary evidence (suggestions)
AV04.03	Design control for product/service development			
AV04.03.01	Design requirements	Student		Product/service sketch or diagram
AV04.02.02	Design review	Student	Entity tutor	Product/service prototype
AV04.02.03	Design validation	Student	Entity tutor	Product/service prototype: material/component validation
AV04.02.04	Design approval	Student	Entity tutor	Approved product/service model
AV04.04	Control and monitoring of the production process			
AV04.04.01	Control of the production process	Student	Entity tutor	Production planning
AV04.04.02	Result of production process monitoring	Student	Entity tutor	Production monitoring and verification records
AV04.05	Control of non-conformities			
AV04.05.01	Detection of non-conformities during the production process	Student	Entity tutor	Record of detected non-conformities
AV04.05.02	Corrective actions	Student	Entity tutor	Records of actions taken to resolve non-conformities
AV04.05.03	Preventive actions	Student	Entity tutor	Corrective and preventive action plans
AV04.06	Delivery and follow-up of the product/service			
AV04.06.01	Delivery and receipt of the product/service by the entity	Student		Product/service delivery report: characteristics, tests performed, results, versions, etc.
AV04.06.02	Receipt of the product/service by the entity		Entity tutor	
AV04.06.03	Product/service compliance by third parties within the entity		Entity tutor	
AV04.06.04	Follow-up on the implemented product/service by the entity		Entity tutor	Entity satisfaction report

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of the developed experiences

During the 2021-2022 academic year, a pilot experience was developed (two curricular internships) related to the role of analysis, improvement, and audit of administrative processes characteristic of the curricular internships of the Public Management and Administration Degree (PMAD) professional profile. In both cases, the students prepared user instructions for new software applications related to business processes, as well as training materials and sessions. The two applications were: the

Gestió d'Òrgans Col·legiats (GOC), an application that facilitates the management of collegiate bodies and tracks the entire process of meetings conducted by boards and commissions of the University of Barcelona, and the *Gestió de Convenis* (Gconvenis), an application for the comprehensive management of all procedures aimed at processing agreements between the University of Barcelona and external entities.

Following the positive results obtained, two additional SL projects were conducted during the 2022-2023 academic year within the framework of curricular internships. In one of them, the student combined the curricular internship with the Final Degree Project (FDP); in the other, the student applied Service-Learning (SL) methodology in the internship and used the context of the SL project to substantiate the practical framework of their FDP. The following sections provide details of both experiences.

3.1.1 Development of a service charter for a University of Barcelona unit

The outcome of SL for the first student was the creation of a Service Charter for the Historical Archive and Documentary Heritage Office (OAHPD) of the University of Barcelona. The hypothesis of the FDP was that a service charter is an effective tool for promoting transparency and good governance in public administration. The practical demonstration was made possible by incorporating a case study based on the student's own SL project.

3.1.2 Creation of a Resource and Service Map for People with Intellectual, Physical, and Sensory Disabilities for the Barcelona Provincial Council

The second SL project developed by a student resulted in the creation of a Resource and Service Map for People with Intellectual, Physical, and Sensory Disabilities in the province of Barcelona. To create the map, a bibliographic and legal review, data collection, sociodemographic analysis, and mapping of agents and services were carried out.

The map compiles resources and services provided by third-sector organizations, as well as those offered by local governments (municipalities and regional councils). It is a practical tool that provides Barcelona Provincial Council with information on the quantity, type, and distribution of services and resources for personal autonomy and dependency for people with disabilities in the province of Barcelona.

This tool allows the institution to make informed decisions on the level of service and resource coverage for people with disabilities, which leads to more efficient use of administrative resources and an increase in the well-being of service users, in this case, people with disabilities in the province of Barcelona.

In both projects, the guide was applied on a pilot basis to validate its suitability and, if appropriate, to extend it to future SL projects in the PMAD degree program.

3.2 Assessment of Student Learning

The following results were obtained in several dimensions:

> a) Collaborative Attitude: Students worked closely with the tutors from the host institutions, showing a more proactive and committed attitude compared to internships where SL was not applied.

> b) Application of Knowledge: Students applied the theoretical knowledge acquired during the degree in a practical context, demonstrating their ability to transfer theory into practice. They identified gaps in the content of their training and communicated these to their academic tutors, providing feedback to improve the course syllabi.

> c) Creative and Reflective Competencies: Students developed innovative solutions and critically reflected on their experiences, contributing to the continuous improvement of the project within the institution.

3.3   Results of the Joint Assessment by the Involved Stakeholders

The introduction of the SL methodology in curricular internships has been positively evaluated by the host organizations and involved managers.

a) Benefits for Students: Students valued the acquisition of valuable practical experience, which improved their professional skills and developed their public service vocation.

b) Benefits for Collaborating Organizations: Host institutions that welcomed students for internships gained practical tools and relevant information resources, enabling them to improve their services and better meet the needs of the groups they serve.

c) Benefits for the University: The PMAD degree program management obtained evidence and improvement proposals that allow for objective enhancement of teaching content and services, better meeting student needs.

Both students and tutors expressed a high level of satisfaction with the project, highlighting its usefulness and the positive impact it had on student training and the quality of services provided by collaborating organizations.

4   CONCLUSIONS

4.1   Description of the developed experiences

The analysis of reflections from those involved in the experience reveals several key aspects regarding the impact of the Service-Learning (SL) methodology on the students' academic and professional training. Key evaluative conclusions include:

a) Development of Professional Competencies: Students demonstrated a significant ability to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired during the degree in a practical context. By conducting internships under the SL methodology, students were able to develop specific competencies such as project management, data analysis, and collaboration with both professionals within the organization and external entities, such as third-sector organizations or other public administrations.

b) Improvement in Communication Skills: Both the student and the host institution tutor's reflections highlighted the importance of effective communication in the project's development. Frequent meetings with the host institution's tutor and interactions with other team members contributed to improving their communication skills, especially in oral communication. This improvement is crucial for their ability to work in a team and communicate ideas clearly and concisely.

c) Strengthening of Self-Confidence: One of the most notable aspects of the reflection process was the increase in the student's confidence in their own abilities. Praise and recognition from the host institution's tutor played a key role in this process. This confidence is essential for their future professional career, as it will enable them to tackle new challenges with assurance and determination.

d) Critical and Reflective Thinking: The student demonstrated a remarkable capacity for critically analysing their experiences and identifying both strengths and weaknesses. This skill is fundamental for continuous improvement and adaptation to different professional situations. Critical reflection on their experiences allowed them to learn from mistakes and adjust their work strategies.

e) Social Impact and Public Service Vocation: The SL methodology had a significant impact on the student's development as a professional committed to public service. The completion of the project enabled the student to better understand the needs of the service recipients and contribute to the improvement of the services provided. This experience strengthened their public service vocation and their commitment to improving the quality of life for citizens.

f) Continuous Learning and Adaptability: The student's reflection highlighted the importance of continuous learning and adaptability in the professional context. The need to immerse themselves in the profession of public service required a proactive attitude and a willingness to continuously learn. This adaptability is essential for their future career in a constantly changing environment.

4.2 Recommendations for Future Implementations of Service-Learning in the Public Management and Administration Degree

To apply the Service-Learning (SL) methodology specifically to the Public Management and Administration Degree (PMAD), it is important to consider the particularities of this field, which focuses on the management of public resources, public policies, and service delivery to citizens. Below are specific recommendations tailored to this domain.

a) Curricular Integration

- Projects Related to Public Policies: Connect SL projects to the analysis, implementation, and evaluation of real public policies, such as municipal resource management, participatory budgeting, or improvements in social services.
- Multidisciplinarity: Combine public management with other disciplines such as administrative law, public economics, or political science, encouraging students to apply their knowledge in complex projects involving multiple fields.

b) Identification of Real Needs

- Collaboration with Local Governments: Work with municipalities, provincial councils, public enterprises, and third-sector organizations to identify real public management issues that students can help resolve. These could involve improvements in citizen services, transparency, or the digitalization of public services.
- Public Interest Themes: Identify specific needs such as sustainability in resource management, administrative efficiency, or citizen participation.

c) Active Student Participation

- Public Project Design: Encourage students to participate in the proposal and execution of public management projects, such as improving communication between institutions and citizens or creating more efficient processes for administrative procedures.
- Simulation of Governmental Processes: Include simulations where students act as public managers in real-life scenarios, such as managing a municipal budget or creating a strategic plan for a specific institution.

d) Institutional Support

- Network with Public Institutions: Establish agreements with public administrations to ensure active participation of institutions in SL projects, fostering smooth collaboration and continuous monitoring of the projects.
- Mentorship by Public Professionals: Include mentors from the public sector to guide students in developing projects.

e) Impact and Sustainability

- Evaluation of Administrative Impact: Measure the impact of students' interventions on the efficiency of public services or citizen satisfaction, using public policy evaluation methodologies.
- Continuity of Public Projects: Set mechanisms in place to ensure that successful projects are implemented long-term by public institutions, maintaining active collaboration between students and administrations.

f) Use of Technology

- Digital Transformation of Public Administration: Promote projects where students contribute to the digitalization of administrative services, such as the implementation of online management systems for bureaucratic processes or transparency portals, and the application of artificial intelligence in public management.
- Open Data and Transparency: Encourage students to work with open data provided by public administrations to improve transparency and accountability.

g) Diversity and Inclusion

- Improving Accessibility to Public Services: Work on projects that promote equal access to public services, addressing the social, economic, and cultural diversity of citizens. Students can collaborate in designing inclusive and equitable policies.
- Citizen Participation: Promote projects that encourage citizen participation in public decision-making, especially those sectors of the population often excluded from democratic processes.

h) Reflection and Dissemination

- Dissemination of Good Practices in Public Management: Publish the results of SL projects on platforms specialized in public management and public policy, as well as in administrative forums, to share innovative solutions.
- Critical Reflection on Public Administration: Encourage students to reflect on current challenges in public administration, such as bureaucratization, the need for reforms, or ethical management of public resources.

These recommendations, under the SL methodology framework, can help PMAD students acquire practical skills and reflect on their role as future public managers while contributing to improving public services and policies in the community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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