

Service-Learning at Universidade Católica Portuguesa: A journey of institutionalization through the lens of student, faculty, and community partner perceptions and international standards

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Abstract

Service-learning (SL) has emerged as a transformative pedagogy in higher education. While institutionalization in Europe remains incipient, case studies illustrate how universities can advance this process through intentional strategies. This paper presents a reflection on the journey of implementation and institutionalization of SL at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP) between 2020 and 2025. Looking at the perspectives of students, faculty, and community partners, this work examines the extent to which UCP's SL strategy aligns with global standards and contributes to a sustainable model of institutional integration. Throughout eight semesters, a total of 124 SL experiences were conducted, involving 147 curricular units, 24 extracurricular activities, and 9 interdisciplinary projects. These initiatives engaged 2 495 students, 62 faculty members, and 176 community partners, including 28 international organizations, and reached over

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46 000 final beneficiaries. The results highlight key achievements while also identifying ongoing challenges related to quality assurance, faculty engagement, and long-term sustainability. Lessons learned underscore the importance of strategic alignment, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and evidence-based planning in embedding SL as a core institutional practice.

Keywords: Service-learning, higher education, institutionalization, reflection.

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Aprenentatge servei a la Universidade Católica Portuguesa: Un viatge d'institucionalització a través de la perspectiva de les percepcions d'estudiants, professors i socis comunitaris i estàndards internacionals

Resum

L'aprenentatge servei (ApS) ha sorgit com una pedagogia transformadora en l'educació superior, integrant l'aprenentatge acadèmic amb la participació comunitària per fomentar la responsabilitat cívica, la motivació i les habilitats transversals. Tot i que la institucionalització a Europa continua sent incipient, els estudis de cas il·lustren com les universitats poden avançar en aquest procés mitjançant estratègies intencionades. Aquest article presenta una reflexió sobre el procés d'implementació i institucionalització de l'ApS a la Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP) entre 2020 i 2025. Analitzant les perspectives d'estudiants, professors i socis comunitaris, aquest treball examina fins a quin punt l'estratègia de l'ApS de la UCP s'alinea amb els estàndards globals i contribueix a un model sostenible d'integració institucional. Al llarg de vuit semestres, es van dur a terme un total de 124 experiències ApS, que abasten 147 unitats curriculars, 24 activitats extracurriculars i 9 projectes interdisciplinaris. Aquestes iniciatives van involucrar 2.495 estudiants, 62 membres del professorat i 176 socis comunitaris, incloent-hi 28 organitzacions internacionals, i van assolir més de 46.000 beneficiaris finals. Els resultats destaquen fites clau, al mateix temps que identifiquen desafiaments continus relacionats amb l'assegurament de qualitat, la implicació del professorat i la sostenibilitat a llarg termini. Les lliçons apreses subratllen la importància de l'alineació estratègica, la col·laboració multiactor i la planificació basada en l'evidència per integrar l'ApS com una pràctica institucional central.

Paraules clau: Aprenentatge servei, educació superior, institucionalització, reflexió.

Aprendizaje-servicio en la Universidade Católica Portuguesa: Un viaje de institucionalización a través de la perspectiva de las percepciones de estudiantes, profesores y socios comunitarios y estándares internacionales

Resumen

El aprendizaje servicio (ApS) ha surgido como una pedagogía transformadora en la educación superior. Aunque la institucionalización en Europa sigue siendo incipiente, los estudios de caso ilustran cómo las universidades pueden avanzar en este proceso mediante estrategias intencionadas. Este artículo presenta una reflexión sobre el proceso de implementación e institucionalización del ApS en la Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP) entre 2020 y 2025. Analizando las perspectivas de estudiantes, profesores y socios comunitarios, este trabajo examina hasta qué punto la estrategia del ApS de la UCP se alinea con los estándares globales y contribuye a un modelo sostenible de integración institucional. A lo largo de ocho semestres, se llevaron a cabo un total de 124 experiencias ApS, que abarcaran 147 unidades curriculares, 24 actividades extracurriculares y 9 proyectos interdisciplinarios. Estas iniciativas involucraron a 2.495 estudiantes, 62 miembros del profesorado y 176 socios comunitarios, incluyendo 28 organizaciones internacionales, y alcanzaron a más de 46.000 beneficiarios finales. Los resultados destacan logros clave al tiempo que identifican desafíos continuos relacionados con el aseguramiento de calidad, la implicación del profesorado y la sostenibilidad a largo plazo. Las lecciones aprendidas subrayan la importancia de la alineación estratégica, la colaboración multiactor y la planificación basada en la evidencia para integrar el ApS como una práctica institucional central.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje-servicio, educación superior, institucionalización, reflexión.

1. Introduction

As a student-centered pedagogy, Service-Learning (SL) integrates academic learning with community engagement, fostering motivation, reflection, and civic responsibility while developing essential skills through projects that address social and environmental challenges (Carev et al., 2024). The institutionalization of SL requires universities to align civic engagement with their mission, traditions and community assets (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019).

Despite its expansion, institutionalization in Europe remains incipient (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021a). Most initiatives are still isolated, funding depends largely on internal sources, and mechanisms for equity and recognition are scarce. Coordination units and advisory boards are rare, evaluation focuses mainly on students, and faculty seldom receive rewards or acknowledgement. Curricular integration is uneven, research limited, and dissemination platforms are largely absent. Nevertheless, evidence shows significant student gains in social awareness, civic agency and problem-solving, though community partnerships often face resource and reciprocity gaps (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021b).

SL institutionalization is a long-term, non-linear endeavour that demands the involvement of leadership, faculty, staff, students, and community partners (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996; Furco, 2002; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). As Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala and Paz-Lourido (2021b) noted, SL is an experiential methodology where students engage in activities sensitive to human, social and environmental needs, reinforcing its role in the third mission of higher education. International experiences illustrate diverse trajectories: at Ngee Ann Polytechnic in Singapore, senior leadership adopted SL as the signature pedagogy, rapidly achieving institutionalization through a central office of Service-Learning, structured reflection and strong faculty training (Ti et al., 2021). By contrast, at the University of Barcelona the process was gradual, advancing from isolated initiatives to formal structures such as an SL office and strategic integration, though constrained by resources and cultural resistance (García-Romero, 2021).

Furco (2003) conceptualizes institutionalization as a continuum across five dimensions –Philosophy and Mission, Faculty, Students, Community, and Institutional Support– progressing from Critical Mass Building to Sustained Institutionalization, where SL is fully embedded in policies, culture and programs, supported by stable resources and systematic evaluation (Furco, 2002, 2003). The Guidelines for the institutionalization of SL in European higher education (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021a) stress the need for mission statements that articulate civic responsibility, sustainable funding, coordinating units, recognition for faculty and students, interdisciplinary collaboration, participatory mechanisms, evaluation systems and enduring community partnerships (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021b). Importantly, they highlight institutionalization as a continuous process requiring adaptation and stakeholder mobilization.

These guidelines also build on prior scholarship: Furco (2002) had underlined the importance of a campus-wide definition of SL to give “meaning, focus, and emphasis” (p. 5); Bingle and Hatcher (2000) stressed embedding SL into

institutional practices and teaching guides; and Aramburuzabala, McIlrath and Opazo (2019) emphasized the need for SL across disciplines and organizational levels. Together, Furco's rubric and the European Guidelines provide complementary conceptual and practical tools for advancing institutionalization in diverse contexts.

Research on outcomes reinforces the transformative potential of SL. Students consistently report stronger creativity, teamwork, professional preparation and civic responsibility compared to traditional learning (Xavier & Jones, 2021). In addition, studies confirm transformative outcomes such as psychological growth (Nino et al., 2011), development of leadership and digital skills (Culcasi et al., 2022), and deeper critical reflection and civic engagement when supported by institutional structures (Choi et al., 2023). Faculty recognizes it as a pedagogy that enhances teaching, connects academic content with service experiences and renews professional motivation (Arellano & Jones, 2018; Camus et al., 2022; Compare et al., 2024). Community partners benefit from strengthened collaboration while underscoring the importance of reciprocity and sustainability (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021). Moreover, SL generates meaningful benefits for both service users and organizations, including reduced experiences of discrimination, the provision of additional human resources, methodological innovation, and enhanced institutional recognition (Compare et al., 2025).

2. Steps Towards Institutionalizing Service-Learning at Universidade Católica Portuguesa

The case of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP) illustrates an intentional approach to SL institutionalization. Consistent with calls to align civic engagement with institutional mission and traditions (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019) and anchored in UCP's Strategic Development Plan, which positions Social Responsibility and Sustainability as institutional priorities, SL was adopted as a UCP's national initiative to promote pedagogical innovation and civic engagement across all four campuses (Braga, Lisbon, Porto, and Viseu). SL was formally recognized as a Strategic Initiative within UCP's Quality Plan, with the ambitious goal of integrating at least two SL-based courses per undergraduate program and one per master's program by 2025. This strategic alignment has provided a strong foundation for embedding SL into the academic culture and operational structures of the university.

The CAPS Project (2020–2024), "Catholic University and Service Learning: Innovation and Social Responsibility", funded by Porticus, played a pivotal role in operationalizing SL at UCP. It introduced a structured implementation model based on three modalities: 1) Modality I: Curricular and extracurricular SL activities; 2) Modality II: Transversal and interdisciplinary SL curricular units; and 3) Modality III: International and interdisciplinary SL experiences.

Between 2020 and 2025, SL experiences were designed, implemented, and evaluated across all four UCP campuses –Braga, Lisbon, Porto, and Viseu–spanning 13 out of 17 academic units and 25 academic programs (including bachelor's, master's, integrated master's, and postgraduate levels). A total of 124 SL experiences were conducted, involving 147 curricular units, 24 extracurricular

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activities, and 9 interdisciplinary projects (Table 1). These initiatives engaged 2 495 students, 62 faculty members, and 176 community partners, including 28 international organizations, and reached over 46 000 final beneficiaries. Participants represented a wide range of academic disciplines, from Bioengineering and Law to Psychology, Social Work, and Dentistry, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of SL at UCP.

Table 1: Quantitative characterization of SL projects and participation across eight semesters.

Number of SL experiences	124
Number of curricular units/courses	147
Number of extracurricular units	24
Number of interdisciplinary projects	9
Number of students involved	2 495
Number of teachers involved	62
Number of partners involved	176
Number of which foreigners	28
Number of recipients involved	46361

Looking now at the number of times the same SL project was implemented over the eight semesters (Table 2), we see that some projects have been implemented continuously over time, but a large number of projects (n=28) were implemented only once. This is a concern, as teachers are experimenting with adopting the SL methodology but then abandoning it, which calls into question the sustainability of the methodology at the university. From the consultation with teachers, the reasons seem to be related to the workload associated with implementing the methodology and the still incipient mechanisms for recognizing teachers.

Table 2: Number of implementations of the SL projects, across eight semesters

Number of SL Projects	Number of implementations
2	8
1	7
3	6
2	5
5	4
5	3
5	2
28	1

UCP’s engagement with international networks further accelerated SL institutionalization. In 2021, UCP joined the network UNISERVITATE-Service Learning in Catholic Higher Education, gaining access to technical assistance, training, and external evaluation. Recognition followed: in 2022, UCP received an Honourable Mention for the “Empower to Protect” project, and in 2024, won the Uniservitate Award for “Ser Cuida(I)doso” project. In 2023, UCP secured two Uniservitate Small Research Grants to explore students’ perceptions of community before and after participating in SL and the challenges of interdisciplinary SL, and

in 2025 UCP secured one Uniservitate Small Research Grant to develop and validate a Self-Determination Theory-informed scale for intrinsic/extrinsic civic motivation to support instructional design in service-learning.

Additionally, in 2023 UCP assumed a leadership role in the Transform for Europe (T4EU) European Alliance, coordinating Task 8.5 on developing a T4EU life-long learning center and promoting curricular service-learning. This includes the development of SL guidelines, teacher training workshops, and cross-university SL collaborations.

The institutional journey has also been marked by academic dissemination and recognition. UCP researchers presented findings at international conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Ribeiro, Doroftei et al. 2023; Ribeiro, Miranda et al., 2023). Notably, the university received the 2023 Laura Rubio Award for the study "Students' Perceptions of Competences Developed and Changes in Life Purpose after SL Experiences".

As Professor Robert G. Bringle (Indiana University) mentioned in the external evaluation report in 2023, *"My overall evaluation is that CApS at UCP is a clear success. It successfully implemented an innovative pedagogy that contributes in powerful and unique ways to the educational experiences of UCP students, it provided instructors with professional development opportunities, and it contributed to the community in meaningful ways."*

3. What They Say: Perspectives from Students, Faculty, and Community Partners

In addition to the pedagogical and institutionalization dimensions, the research and evaluation dimension has also received attention within the CApS Project. Over the last four years, data have been collected from students, faculty, and community partners in order to analyze the impact of SL experiences, its benefits, and areas for improvement. Data were collected over eight academic semesters across UCP's four campuses (Braga, Lisbon, Porto, and Viseu), through various methodologies and instruments:

- Quantitative data from structured surveys administered to students, faculty, and community partners, focusing on perceived impact, quality of SL experiences, and institutional support mechanisms;
- Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses, capturing in-depth reflections on challenges, enablers, and transformative outcomes;
- Document analysis of strategic plans, project documentation, and external evaluations, providing contextual and procedural insights.

Quantitative data have been analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and patterns in stakeholder perceptions and institutional reach. Qualitative data have been subject to thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology, allowing for the emergence of key themes aligned with the institutionalization frameworks. Triangulation across data sources have been used to ensure credibility and robustness of findings.

All participants provided informed consent, and data collection procedures adhered to UCP's ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. The study was

reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities.

In this paper, we aim to highlight some results that help us understand the perceived impact of SL and identify some areas for improvement.

One of the works focused on the role of SL in students' life purpose (Ribeiro, Doroftei, et al., 2023). Questionnaires were answered by 112 graduation and master students, from different areas, involved in 15 SL courses (82 female; 73.2%; age ranging from 18 to 51; $M = 23$; $SD = 6.51$). There was an open-ended question about students' purpose in life and four closed-ended questions to understand student's perceptions of change in their purpose in life arising from the SL courses and other perceptions about their SL course. Results showed that students' life purpose ranged from social-related goals, such as helping or caring for others, to personal-related goals, including personal growth and well-being. The majority of the students (71.4%) reported that their life purpose changed moderately or a lot after participating in a SL course.

Another work focused on the perceived impact of a SL experience titled "Educating for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," at the Porto campus of UCP, in which 15 university students from different programs were challenged to train other students about the SDGs (Ribeiro, Miranda, et al., 2023). University students' perspectives about the competences developed showed an impact not only on academic learning and students' personal and professional domains, but also on their literacy about the SDGs.

Qualitative data available from student discourse show that SL contributes to students' sense of usefulness and personal growth, impacting their academic and professional path: *"Contact with the community provided a sense of usefulness and personal growth."*; *"I have made or plan to make a serious career change because of my Service-Learning experiences."* They also value SL as an enriching experience linking theory and practice, indicating perceived transformation as an overall person and acquisition of important skills/knowledge: *"I have gained very important skills and knowledge through this experience I otherwise would not have learned."* Students also perceived that beneficiaries reported high satisfaction and perceived improvements in quality of life of the beneficiaries. However, students mention the importance of a more frequent presence in the community: *"Need for more direct contact time with the beneficiaries."*

Qualitative data collected from faculty show perceived impact related to pedagogical innovation and the development of students' transversal skills: *"As far as students and teachers are concerned, the impact is similar: a new way of teaching and learning"*; *"Students develop soft skills that can be used throughout the course"*. Faculty also perceived impact on the community partners: *"For the beneficiaries, the activities developed allow to meet some of the organization's urgent needs"*; *"Final beneficiaries - Elderly very isolated in the face of the pandemic context, there was a very significant interaction"*.

Qualitative data collected from community partners show that SL brings new ideas: *"The students brought new ideas and enthusiasm to our organization."*, while also calling for more time in the field and specific training: *"More time in the field is*

needed to build close relationships.”; “Need for more specific training to deal with certain realities.”.

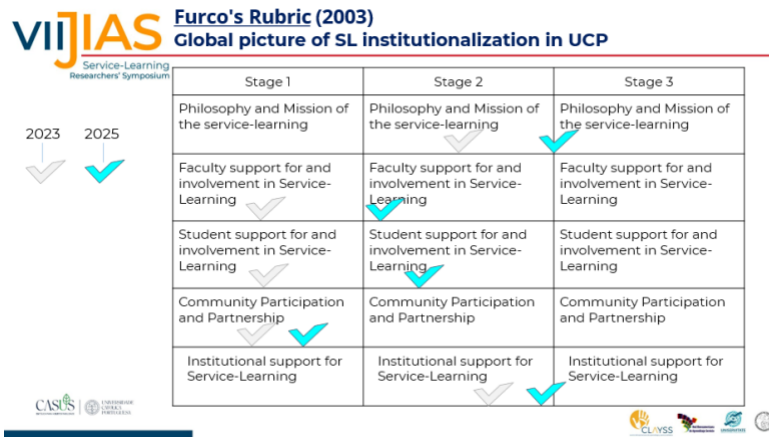
4. Reflecting on Institutionalization through International Standards

There are several theoretical models that guide the institutionalization of SL in higher education, each offering a structured approach to embedding SL as a sustainable and transformative practice. One of the most widely recognized frameworks is the Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education, developed by Andrew Furco (2003). This rubric outlines five key dimensions that help institutions assess their progress from initial implementation to full institutional integration of SL. In the European context, the Guidelines for the institutionalization of SL in European higher education, published by the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala, & Paz-Lourido, 2021a), provide a complementary model tailored to the specific realities of European universities. These guidelines emphasize alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), interdisciplinary collaboration, and strong community partnerships. Together, these models serve as essential tools for guiding strategic planning, fostering reflective practice, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of SL within higher education institutions.

In this paper, these two models serve not only as conceptual references but also as analytical tools to assess the institutionalization process of SL at UCP. By drawing on Furco’s rubric and the Guidelines for the institutionalization of SL in European higher education, we examine the extent to which UCP’s strategic actions, stakeholder engagement, and pedagogical practices align with internationally recognized dimensions of institutionalization. This dual-framework approach allows for a nuanced analysis that links global standards to local implementation.

Figure 1 shows the self-assessment carried out in 2023 and 2025 at UCP, taking into account the five dimensions and stages presented by Furco (2003).

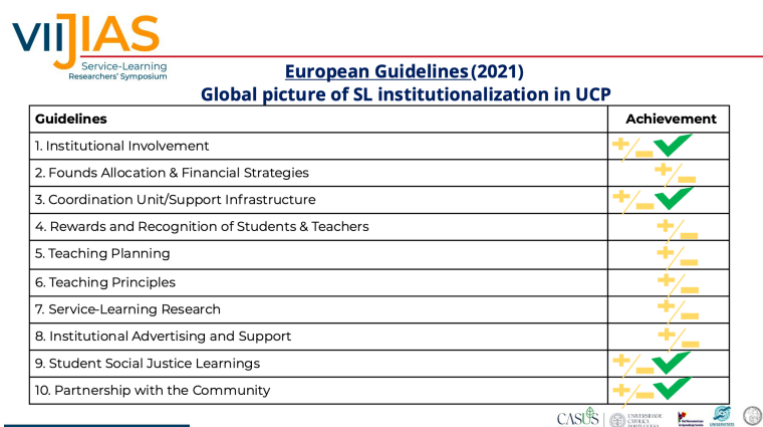
Figure 1. Self-assessment of SL institutionalization at UCP according to Furco’s rubric (2003). Stage 1 = Critical Mass Building. Stage 2 = Quality Building. Stage 3 = Sustained Institutionalization.



Comparing 2023 with 2025, we see that all dimensions have evolved positively. Dimension 1 - Philosophy and Mission of SL and Dimension 5 - Institutional Support for SL seem to be the most consolidated, moving towards the stage of Sustained Institutionalization, where SL is fully embedded in policies, culture, and programs, supported by stable resources and systematic evaluation (Furco, 2002, 2003). Dimension 2 - Faculty support for and involvement in SL and Dimension 3 - Student Support for and Involvement in SL appear to move towards the stage of Quality Building, where it is necessary to promote faculty knowledge and awareness, incentives and rewards, as well as student leadership. Dimension 4 - Community Participation and Partnerships seems to be the dimension that is located in the stage of Critical Mass Building, being a priority area for short-term work, particularly in terms of community partner awareness, voice, and leadership.

Figure 2 shows the self-assessment carried out in 2025, taking into account the ten key guidelines for the institutionalization of SL in European higher education (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala, & Paz-Lourido, 2021a).

Figure 2. Self-assessment of SL institutionalization at UCP according to the Guidelines for the institutionalization of SL in European higher education (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala, & Paz-Lourido, 2021a).



Key guidelines 1 - Institutional Involvement and 3 - Coordination Unit/Support Infrastructure appear to be moving towards consolidation, as well as 9 - Student Social Justice Learnings and 10 - Partnership with the Community. The remaining

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key guidelines seem to be in progress, showing various dimensions to be worked on in the near future in the process of institutionalizing SL at UCP.

5. Conclusions

The reflection presented in this work highlights the significant progress made by UCP in institutionalizing SL as a strategic, pedagogical, and civic commitment. The findings reveal a trajectory marked by meaningful achievements – such as the integration of SL across diverse academic programs, the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, and increasing international recognition – while also exposing persistent challenges. These include the need to further enhance the quality and consistency of SL experiences, ensure systematic recognition and support for faculty, recruit and train new teachers, and secure the long-term sustainability of the methodology within institutional structures.

Empirical data corroborate the literature on SL transformative potential for students and faculty and on the benefits for partners when adequately supported, converging with evidence of enhanced motivation, creativity, teamwork, professional preparation, intercultural competence and civic responsibility in SL (Carev et al., 2024; Nino et al., 2011; Xavier & Jones, 2021). And also closely aligning with the idea that SL connects academic content with service and reinvigorates faculty motivation (Arellano & Jones, 2018; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Camus et al., 2022; Compare et al., 2024). This convergence underscores the importance of institutional structures (guides, offices, training) for sustained practice (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Simultaneously, the underdeveloped areas - sustainable funding and systematic recognition - corroborate European-level constraints repeatedly identified in prior research.

These results demonstrate not only the breadth and depth of SL implementation at UCP but also its strategic coherence, international visibility, and transformative potential. This trajectory resonates with international cases showing how leadership, formal offices and staff development accelerate institutionalization (Ti et al., 2021), while also reflecting European reports that progress can be gradual and resource-constrained (García-Romero, 2021).

UCP's SL strategy shows alignment with international standards, but several dimensions are still in progress. In short, UCP exemplifies progress along Furco's continuum, with dimensions that are consolidated, in development, or still underdeveloped, while demonstrating how strategic alignment, structured coordination and international networking can accelerate institutionalization within a European context. Together, these models serve as essential tools for guiding strategic planning, fostering reflective practice, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of SL within higher education institutions.

UCP's experience confirms that institutionalization is long-term, non-linear and context-sensitive (Ribeiro et al., 2021), requiring leadership, faculty, student and community mobilization (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Relative to international comparators, UCP sits between rapid, leadership-driven institutionalization and gradual, resource-constrained pathways. Its breadth of curricular integration, international visibility and evidence-based monitoring

exceed what is commonly reported in Europe, yet its dependence on external funding and lack of systematic recognition mirror continental bottlenecks identified previously (Ribeiro et al., 2021).

The lessons learned throughout this journey underscore the value of a multi-level, evidence-based approach to institutionalization – one that is grounded in both global frameworks and local realities. UCP’s experience demonstrates that embedding SL in higher education as a core institutional practice requires not only strategic alignment and operational infrastructure, but also a deep cultural shift that embraces co-creation with communities, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a commitment to social transformation. By offering a conceptually grounded and data-informed analysis, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on SL institutionalization in European higher education and provides transferable insights for institutions seeking to advance SL as a transformative educational approach placed in the center of their mission and identity.

The institutionalization of SL at UCP reflects a strategic, multidimensional trajectory of integration and consolidation, aligning with scholarship that frames SL as a student-centered pedagogy integrating academic learning with community engagement to develop motivation, reflection, civic responsibility and transversal skills (Carev et al., 2024; Ilić et al., 2021).

The institutionalization of SL at UCP demonstrates how intentional strategy, structured implementation, and international engagement can accelerate the integration of civic engagement into higher education. UCP’s trajectory confirms that SL fosters significant benefits for students, faculty, and community partners, while contributing to the university’s mission of social responsibility. At the same time, the process highlights persistent challenges in ensuring sustainable funding, systematic recognition, and long-term reciprocity with community partners – constraints that mirror the European context more broadly.

By positioning itself between rapid leadership-driven and gradual resource-constrained models of institutionalization, UCP illustrates both the opportunities and limitations of embedding SL within higher education systems. Ultimately, this case reinforces the view that institutionalization is a long-term, non-linear endeavor that requires strategic alignment, stakeholder mobilization, and adaptation to socio-cultural realities. Advancing this process will depend on consolidating structural supports, strengthening recognition mechanisms, and ensuring sustainability, thereby contributing to the transformative potential of SL in shaping higher education’s civic and social mission.

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