

University students' perceptions of the impact of Service-Learning on the final beneficiaries

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Abstract

Service-learning (SL) is a methodology that contributes to outcomes in students' academic learning, civic participation, and personal growth (Bringle & Clayton, 2021). There are several studies that analyze the impact of SL on university students (e.g., Allen et al., 2021; Fong et al., 2021; Samino García, 2023; Smith et al., 2021). However, research focused on the impact of SL on final beneficiaries is still scarce.

The present study aimed to analyze university students' perceptions regarding the perceived impact of SL experiences on the final beneficiaries. It may be challenging to directly access the final beneficiaries to assess the impact or there might be ethical restrictions on collecting sensitive data from them. We believe that students' perceptions can provide valuable insights into the perceived impact on the final beneficiaries, considering their direct involvement in the activities and their deeper understanding of the changes and benefits they observe. Moreover, adopting this research approach allow us to give voice to university students, recognizing the significance of their perceptions and interpretations as active and reflective participants.

This study involved 58 students from *Universidade Católica Portuguesa*, mostly female (77.6%) and aged between 19 and 61 years ($M = 24.11$; $SD = 8.55$). Students were enrolled in different programs (management, nursing, psychology, and social work) and were involved in 9 different SL projects.

Most of the students developed SL projects in elderly care home/day care center, but there were also SL projects in daycare/kindergarten/school, institution that supports vulnerable families, community intervention project, foster home, and institution that supports social reinsertion. Thus, the final beneficiaries of the SL projects included elderly people (mostly), children and/or youth, homeless people, vulnerable families, and people with addiction problems.

After the conclusion of the SL projects, students were asked to complete an online questionnaire that included an open-ended item about the impact of the projects on the final beneficiaries (*“Analyze how the service developed had an impact on the community/final beneficiaries (group of people addressed by the project)”*).

Data were analyzed using NVIVO. The results point to a perceived positive impact of the SL projects on the final beneficiaries, in several domains, such as: high satisfaction/enthusiasm, improved quality of life, improved health, higher self-esteem, reintegration into society, development of knowledge (e.g., about managing emotions). The results contribute to understand the perceived impact of the SL methodology on the final beneficiaries, a topic that has been understudied in the literature. Practical implications will be discussed, considering practical guidelines for the design and improvement of future SL projects.

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