

International Service–Learning, Volunteering Networks, and Social Justice Through the European Interuniversity FLY Program

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Abstract

Service–learning (SL) is pivotal for institutionalizing university–community engagement and achieving teaching and learning goals by addressing identified needs (Compare et al., 2023). This goal aligns with the European Commission’s (2017) Agenda for Higher Education, prioritizing community engagement. SL in international collaboration offers advantages: fostering intercultural growth, providing a “glocal” perspective, facilitating knowledge exchange, and promoting innovative SL pathways. This synergy addresses global challenges comprehensively (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). This article introduces the European interuniversity volunteering and service–learning program FLY, coordinated by eight universities. FLY encourages students to experience global realities during summer breaks, fostering critical thinking about power dynamics and inequality. The program emphasizes reciprocity, diversity, and social justice. Our study, examining early impacts on students and community partners, promotes equality and reciprocity between universities, community partners, and students. It analyzes the benefits for participants and community partners in the FLY Program.

Keywords: service–learning, global engagement, interuniversity cooperation, higher education, intercultural growth



We live in an era of social, political, and economic globalization, which profoundly impacts domestic policies and international relationships. Technological advances enable innovative concepts and vast amounts of information to traverse the globe rapidly. This worldwide exchange provides opportunities for universities to cross–fertilize ideas, policies, and practices and enhance the students’ preparation for a diverse and interconnected world. As Kuh (2008) stated, higher education is moving beyond classroom–based experiences to include internships, service–learning (SL), study abroad, research, and other high–impact learning opportunities in the American context. The same movement can be observed worldwide

and in European countries where service–learning is experiencing continuous development and expansion (Culcasi et al., 2024). SL is defined by the European Association of Service–Learning in Higher Education as

an experiential educational pedagogy in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically. The activities address human, social and environmental needs from the perspective of social justice and sustainable development, and aim at enriching learning in higher education, fostering civic responsibility and strengthening communities. . . . It brings together students, academ–

ics and the community whereby all become teaching resources, problem solvers and partners. In addition to enhancing academic and real-world learning, the overall purpose is to instill in students a sense of civic engagement and responsibility and work towards positive social change within society. (EASLHE, 2019, para. 1)

We consider international service-learning as a type of international community-engaged learning (ICEL), which aligns with the definition of ICEL as an experiential education process involving collaborative efforts among students, teachers, and societal partners to tackle global challenges.

Clearly, SL entails changes in teaching practices, but the educational strategies of higher education institutions are not connected only with the changes in teaching but also with the changing roles of universities and how they interact with the broader world. In the European Commission's (2017) *Renewed Agenda for Higher Education*, university-community engagement emerges as a priority. This renewed agenda emphasizes that universities must play their part in facing up to Europe's social and democratic challenges and should engage by integrating local, regional, and societal issues into curricula, involving the local community in teaching and research projects, providing adult learning, and communicating and building links with local communities.

According to Fiorin (2024), among the educational challenges is the dual nature of globalization: even as it offers opportunities through knowledge exchange, scientific collaboration, and technology-based cooperation, it also generates fear and disorientation due to rapid transformations, unequal resource access, and the local impacts of global issues. The direct consequence is that the notion of citizenship is in danger of being divisive: It can be seen as a localist retreat; this is the view of those who believe that the problems that globalization fuels can be addressed by rejecting it. Alternatively, on the contrary, citizenship can be understood as a widening of the gaze that holds local, national, continental, and global together. According to this vision, globalization can be tackled if one becomes a global citizen. At an educational level, the solution lies not in positioning oneself on one or the other of the two poles but

in finding the right way to inhabit both, making them precisely meet and thus take a “glocal” perspective. It is up to education to make this connection, helping young people to embark on this path.

Within this context, which is reflected in the European Economic and Social Committee's (2016) perspective outlined in “Engaged Universities Shaping Europe,” the evolution of universities into societal knowledge centers prompts deliberations on the fundamental traits of higher education that should underpin daily operations. A prevailing theme in these deliberations appears to be the inclination toward broadening access to higher education for public and private stakeholders, considering students' perspectives and preferences, and fostering synergy between research and teaching through increased collaboration and international engagement.

Service-learning is vital for institutionalizing university-community engagement and accomplishing the teaching and learning goals by addressing the identified needs (Compare et al., 2023). It also allows for working from a glocal perspective that traces the characteristics of an education-oriented citizenship toward a plural and nonlocalistic citizenship while still firmly grounded in context to respond to complex problems through an interdisciplinary learning journey (Culcasi et al., 2024). Indeed, according to Fiorin (2024, p. 24), by interpreting learning in terms of both individual and social advantage, SL educates students to open up to others, making an authentic and supportive encounter possible. This approach aligns seamlessly with the UNESCO report (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021) titled *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, which states that education must be transformed toward cooperation and solidarity-based methods such as SL to face global challenges. This new social contract underlies a vision of extended citizenship and calls for the participation of civil society actively and creatively (Porcarelli, 2022; Tarozzi & Milana, 2022).

In this article, we explore the international interuniversity and interdisciplinary summer service-learning and volunteering program FLY (the name expresses a metaphor—students going to a place outside their university) organized by eight European partners: the University of Comillas (Spain),

the University of Deusto (Spain), the Loyola University (Spain), the LUMSA University of Rome (Italy), the Portuguese Catholic University of Porto (Portugal), the Matej Bel University (Slovakia), and the University Centres of Esade and the Sarrià Chemical Institute (IQS), both integrated into the Ramon Llull University (Spain). The FLY program aims to train students to become ethically prepared professionals capable of integrating social aspects into their professional and personal lives. The program aims at a multifold purpose: that students make an effective contribution to the project in which they are collaborating; that each student develops knowledge, skills, and competencies that will be useful in their professional future; and that, in doing so, they come into contact with different social problems, thus increasing their sensitivity and commitment. The program creates opportunities for students to engage in dialogue and debate, enabling them to take a deeper look at social reality, drawing on the experience they have gained in the field. The FLY program is based on close mutual cooperation with local community partners in Europe, Africa, and Latin America and reacts to their specific needs. The program is part of the mission of the involved universities to contribute to solving the current societal challenges with community partners and to promote solidarity and social commitment among students within the concept of the engaged university (third mission).

This article aims to describe how this European interuniversity service-learning and volunteering program, which promotes equality and reciprocity between universities, community partners, and students, is being implemented. Specifically, the first results of the program's impact from the academic year 2020–2021 to the academic year 2022–2023 are analyzed. Particular emphasis is placed on the benefits for students (focusing on developing some key soft skills) and community partners. Emerging themes for the actors involved regarding the meaning and value attributed to the experiences are discussed, and practical suggestions for effective international collaboration between universities and local communities are provided.

International Service-Learning

There is a wide range of structures and types of international SL programs developed sometimes in connection with study

abroad programs or independently, including credit-based and non-credit-based experiences. Bringle and Hatcher (2011, p. 19) defined international service-learning as a structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally.

In an international collaboration, SL offers several advantages: It improves intercultural growth by fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural differences; it allows different actors to engage in various contexts; it provides a glocal perspective, allowing an understanding of dynamics at both local and global levels within a multilingual environment; and it facilitates knowledge exchange and best practices, which, in turn, promotes the codesign of innovative SL pathways (Andrian, 2024).

Daly et al. (2014) stated that SL entails the active involvement of students in their exposure by being participants rather than merely observers. Study abroad components of educational programs are especially likely to benefit from SL's effect of further integrating the impact of local experiences on student impressions and cultural exposures. Moving from visiting and observation to direct involvement raises the bar on learning opportunities. Several research studies have documented positive outcomes related to service-learning experiences in international settings for students. For example, Xin (2011), based on research on global SL, concluded that participants could develop intercultural competency, particularly in emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, perceptual understanding, and personal autonomy. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) assessed a brief study abroad initiative integrating applied research and service-learning. Their findings revealed that the program inspired students to reconsider their academic paths, embark on further international travels, explore interdisciplinary fields, and reshape their perspectives on globalization. Another study on service-learning abroad programs (Cully Garbers et al., 2024) showed that short-term outcomes of international SL programs addressed all

four tenets of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory: (a) refining meaning schema, (b) learning new schema, (c) transforming schemes, and (d) transforming perspectives. Emergent subthemes related to SL or personal growth were discovered within these tenets. Hartley et al. (2019) identified shifts in preconceptions and the balancing of cultural biases among participants in SL programs abroad. Redwine et al.'s (2018) research highlighted changes across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive dimensions relevant to global perspectives.

We agree with Rubin and Matthews (2013) that although student outcomes hold significance, they may not be the sole or primary focus of international SL initiatives. Comprehensive research into global education integrating experiential elements and SL should also prioritize investigating the impacts on the communities hosting these programs. Despite the recommendation to focus the research on community impact, studies on the benefits and effects of SL experiences among community partners are rare, especially in higher education and European settings (Compare et al., 2023). However, meaningful SL is an instructional challenge, especially in the context of short-term study abroad. Collaboration between universities is crucial, as networking enables the exchange of knowledge and best practices, promoting the codesign of innovative reciprocal service-learning pathways.

The FLY Program

FLY is an international interuniversity and interdisciplinary summer service-learning and volunteering program that has now run for three academic years, starting in 2020–2021, and is currently in its fourth edition. This program offers around 150 posts annually for students enrolled in one of the eight European partners involved: the University of Comillas (Spain), the University of Deusto (Spain), the Loyola University (Spain), the LUMSA University of Rome (Italy), the Portuguese Catholic University of Porto (Portugal), the Matej Bel University (Slovakia), and the University Centres of Esade and the Sarrià Chemical Institute (IQS), both integrated in the Ramon Llull University (Spain). The FLY program offers a wide range of service-learning and volunteer projects annually, available for consultation on a dedicated webpage (FLY, 2024). Projects vary in duration from one week to 2 months (depending on the host

organization) and take place in the summer period between June and August. To date, 415 students from different European universities have participated in 124 projects in 11 countries.

The FLY program is not limited to providing specific opportunities for the involvement of students in different areas of social need but aims for this participation to be consciously integrated into the comprehensive training of the participants, generating sensitivity, capacity for analysis and future commitment, and even factors that are expressly linked to professional performance. The program achieves these goals by emphasizing three elements:

1. **Training and reflection:** review of motivations and expectations; development of skills necessary for SL and volunteering; and reflection on the internal impact of the experience, on the causes of inequality, and on the personal and social responsibility in it and in fighting against it.
2. **Tutoring:** This is for logistical purposes but, above all, to encourage the reflective element described above in the field. Each project has a tutor who often travels to the field with the participants. Tutors undergo their own training process and are staff members of the partner universities.
3. **Evaluation:** Universities, volunteers, and community partners participate in the evaluation process. Evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of the collaboration with the social organizations, fine-tune future collaborations, and measure the impact of the experience on the participating volunteers.

The FLY program incorporates projects that address diverse areas of social need and different target groups. Specifically, the projects are classified into three main categories:

- **Projects with migrants and refugees:** projects focused on the consequences of the migratory process endured by people, many of whom are expelled from their countries of origin due to violence or persecution.
- **Projects with people at risk of exclusion:** projects in which the protagonists are children, adolescents, and young adults in vulnerable situations; homeless persons; people

in reintegration processes after a time in prison; people with addiction problems; women victims of gender violence and their children; young rural women in situations of exclusion; and rural, Indigenous, and migrant families. Interventions focus on their social integration to guarantee more dignified living conditions.

- Projects related to caring for people and the community: initiatives with a solid environmental commitment and a strong component of caring for people in vulnerable situations; projects to promote participation and social organization and rehabilitate housing in rural areas together with the beneficiary community.

The projects follow the service-learning methodology so that the students can enjoy the experience of serving others while acquiring knowledge, skills, and competences valuable in their academic development and learning practical ways to apply what they learn to building a fairer world.

Origins and Development of the FLY Program

FLY is the result of the convergence of two preexisting programs: an international volunteering experience in Peru in the 1990s for students from the University of Comillas, which expanded over the years to include several destinations in Latin America and the participation of the University of Deusto and the Ramon Llull University (particularly the Esade center); and a volunteer program in Spain, jointly promoted by the universities of Comillas, Deusto, and Esade, all Spanish university study centers.

In 2020, due to the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent risk of launching projects in the Global South, and thanks to the contacts developed with other European universities in the field of promoting service-learning initiatives, some of these universities were invited to join, making it possible to launch a European program. The Portuguese, Italian, and Slovak universities joined in. Thus, in the academic year 2020–2021, the European volunteering and service-learning program FLY was created. In the second edition, Loyola University (Spain) joined, and projects in Latin America and Africa were included for the first time. In the current edition, the fourth, the Sarrià

Chemical Institute (IQS, Spain) has also joined the program.

Eight partners are currently involved in the FLY program, and the collaboration is formalized through an agreement that is renewed annually upon signature by legal representatives of the participating institutions.

Objectives and Expected Results

The FLY program aims to train students to become ethically prepared professionals, integrate social aspects into their hard and soft skills, and develop intercultural citizenship. Specific objectives include

- To integrate the SL or volunteering service into the university training process and the development of the professional profile of the students;
- To create and develop attitudes of service, altruism, and solidarity;
- To live in a community and to insert themselves into a complex and culturally different reality;
- To stimulate teamwork and coexistence with people from different social and cultural backgrounds;
- To recognize and understand the causes of inequalities;
- To contribute to constructing a fairer and more caring world through students who become potential agents of social change.

The program aims to achieve the following results:

1. Address community needs through collaboration with stakeholders in different areas of social intervention. Indeed, the FLY program searches for volunteers based on the needs of community partners, not for projects based on the needs of the volunteers. Projects arise from the dialogue with different realities, ensuring that authentic needs are met rather than imposed from above.
2. To be a transformative experience for the students. In order to do so, projects with diverse levels of complexity and demand are offered, enabling participation from very different starting points:
 - a. Initiatory projects for students with little or no previous SL or volunteering experience.

- b. Projects that consolidate the students' previous itinerary of social commitment.
- c. Projects with a solid link to the students' academic training: generally aimed at postgraduate students with consolidated experience and previous commitment and with a vocation to integrate their future professional performance and social engagement.

Organization, Coordination, and Implementation Schedule

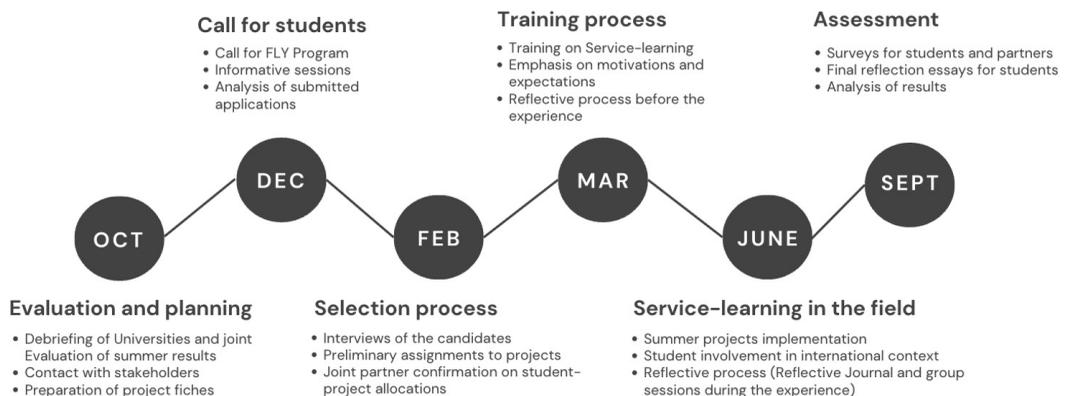
Each academic year, the FLY program involves the partner universities' intensive coordination and preparation work (Figure 1). The professionals from each participating university work in the service or department responsible for promoting social engagement and solidarity among students or are professors or researchers. These professionals contribute their theoretical and practical knowledge to analyzing the local and global reality, mechanisms for correcting inequalities, citizen participation, interculturality, and conflict resolution. Among other tasks, they contribute to the design and execution of the training sessions and accompany students individually and in groups before, during, and after participating in the field, encouraging awareness and reflection on what they have experienced and learned.

1. Debriefing of the Partner Universities and Evaluation

The internal process begins in October with a debriefing of the partner universities and a joint evaluation of the results obtained in the previous summer. The work for the new edition is divided into five working commissions: (1) communication, (2) selection of

candidates, (3) logistics, (4) training and determination of projects to be included in the next call, and (5) evaluation. Each participating university presents service-learning or volunteering projects in their country, in third countries in Europe, in Latin America, or in Africa, with the possibility of receiving students from other partner universities. At the same time, each organizing partner can send students to projects at the other universities. In the last completed edition, 2022–2023, projects were conducted in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Slovakia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, and Kenya. In particular, at this stage, each partner university is responsible for drawing up or confirming together with the respective stakeholders a project sheet (subsequently published on the program webpage) detailing the required student profile (preferred degree course, previous experience, level of expertise, etc.); available places; location of the project; language (indicating whether there are minimum competence levels or second languages useful for the project); presentation of the organization and its mission; the activities that will take place in the field; the target group and identified needs; training prior to the experience (if there are any online training meetings before the project or other helpful material for students' preparation); project contact person in the field (generally a contact person from the host university, a contact person from the partner association, and an accompanying person mentor); and logistics (food, accommodation, and transport conditions). Furthermore, testimonials from students who have participated in the project in previous years are generally included.

Figure 1. FLY Program Timeline During an Academic Year



2. Call for Students

The call for students is launched around December or January and comprises informative sessions and an analysis of submitted applications. Students must submit their curriculum, a letter of motivation, and a reasoned statement of their preferences in terms of areas of intervention or projects. They can access this information through the website developed annually with information about the program and the projects it encompasses. The website is public and available in several languages.

3. Candidate Selection

Each university carries out the selection process of their candidates, including personal interviews of the candidates and provisional assignments to specific projects. Then an online working day is held between all university partners to decide the final allocation of all candidates. Universities coordinate closely to decide on the allocation of positions not accepted by the initial candidates, which are offered to candidates on the waiting list until all the positions have been allocated or all candidates have been assigned to a position, whichever comes first.

4. Training Process

At this point in the process, the training of the selected students begins. The training process is a core part of the program. A great deal of emphasis is put into the attitudinal element, raising awareness of the personal motivations and expectations concerning the personal and social needs of the people and collectives they will serve. The training that precedes the in-field work introduces the reflective process into the personal meaning of such an experience and its alignment with the life itinerary of the student.

5. Service-Learning Project Implementation

Each project has a different summer implementation schedule. The students have a reference person for the project they are participating in. The reference person belongs to the university coordinating that particular intervention. In addition, the students have a mentor related to one of the partner universities who will be present with them in the field. Each participant's hours of service range from a minimum of 60 to a maximum of 300 according to the length of the project, with an average dedication per student of 120 hours. In addition,

60 hours of training precedes the in-field collaboration.

6. Evaluation Process

Finally, the evaluation process takes place. Each university is responsible for sending the program evaluation surveys to its students and local partners. In addition, students are invited to submit a final reflection essay on the experience. The working committee on evaluation defines all tools and translates them into different languages.

The FLY Program's Evaluation Process

The evaluation of the FLY program uses various tools such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups to monitor and assess its impact on stakeholders. These evaluation and measurement tools are developed for all participating universities and involve students, teachers, program coordinators, and community partners. Evaluations are carried out between these groups.

The evaluation process is constantly reviewed and analyzed during program planning to see if it provides the relevant data; if required, it is revised. In addition to the structured tools, the joint meetings of the universities involved in the program are an essential evaluation moment, where the results of the students' and community partners' assessments are always analyzed in the final phase. Furthermore, the cooperation between the universities and the overall communication process and setting up of the program are discussed each year. These results are centrally incorporated into the program planning for the following year.

From 2020–2021 to date, different questionnaires have been used for the evaluation, particularly for students, so it is impossible to provide a comprehensive assessment for all three years. Based on the aims of the present article, several key elements were selected to analyze project impact. We posed three research questions for the early evaluation:

1. What is the impact of the program on students and community partners during the academic years 2020–2021 to 2022–2023?
2. What meanings and values do the involved actors attribute to their experiences in the program?
3. What practical suggestions can be

derived to foster effective international collaboration between universities and local communities?

The article's authors participate in the evaluation as program coordinators at the involved universities. They are part of the evaluation working group and are responsible for designing and evaluating the program's impact with the rest of their colleagues.

Below, we discuss in detail the evaluations of students and community partners. Both parties are informed about use of the assessment results for program evaluation and research.

From a methodological perspective, the decision to analyze the impact of FLY not solely from the perspective of students or exclusively from that of community partners but by considering both sets of actors involved in service-learning reflects the foundational dimension of reciprocity that underpins this educational approach. According to Culcasi and Cinque (2021), reciprocity, as realized in the pedagogical-social sphere, must also find its place in the evaluation process. Thus, collecting data that broaden the perspective from which even a single aspect of the educational proposal is analyzed is essential for deepening understanding and assessing its impact (Dymond et al., 2008; McNatt, 2020).

Students' Evaluation

Students play a crucial role in the FLY program's evaluation process. They are involved in both self-evaluation, which is closely linked to reflection before, during, and after the service-learning experience, and the evaluation of the program itself. Program evaluation by students includes providing feedback on their cooperation with the community partner, the university coordinator, preparation, and the overall logistics and cycle of the program. Their insights and experiences are invaluable in shaping and improving the entire process for future cohorts. Student evaluation is focused on their professional and personal development, different aspects of the program, and cooperation with community partners. Students engage in several forms of evaluation.

Preexperience reflection occurs after the selection phase when students are introduced to the service-learning pedagogy. Sometimes, two-day meetings are organized to reflect with students and prepare them for the program (in Spanish universities). When possible, faculty and students from other universities join remotely in sessions dedi-

cated to exploring specific projects, getting to know the students, reflecting on expectations, and introducing the context that will welcome them during the experience.

During the projects' implementation, ongoing reflection and evaluation—primarily group-based—take place. These activities are carried out by those responsible for implementing the program at the universities: accompanying persons, mentors, and supervisors in the host organizations.

A joint final evaluation is also carried out with students at the end of the projects. They are required to produce a structured self-reflection in several parts: In Part 1, they describe their activity and work in the host organization; Part 2 focuses on their learning process and the knowledge, experience, and skills acquired; Part 3 involves critical reflection on self-development and social and civic learning. Each area has questions to help guide the student's reflection process.

In addition to this written reflection, the student completes a structured questionnaire based on a Likert scale and open questions that focus on self-assessment of the development of selected knowledge, skills, and competencies resulting from the program, as well as an overall evaluation of the learning experience. The questionnaire also has sections for assessing the program and community partner collaboration. Furthermore, some universities integrate the evaluation process with oral communication. Before completing evaluations and reflections, students are informed about the aims of using the outputs for internal evaluation and research. Questionnaires and instructions for the students' reflections are translated into the students' native languages: Spanish, Slovak, Italian, and Portuguese. Reflections are written in their native languages or English (for example, a Slovak university also involves Ukrainian students, who can fill in either Slovak or English versions of documents). Evaluation questionnaires are anonymous; reflections are anonymized after the students' assessment.

Community Partners' Evaluation

After project implementation, evaluation with community partners also takes place. Each partner is sent an evaluation questionnaire mapping the collaboration with students, the university, the project results, the fulfillment of needs and expect-

tations, the length of the project, and other topics. Sometimes, the responsible persons at the universities conduct face-to-face evaluation meetings. Based on the evaluation, involvement in the following year and possible project adjustments are discussed.

The questionnaires sent to the social partners were almost identical in the three editions. Only minor aspects were introduced or modified to improve community partners' understanding and adjust the survey to the program's developing reality. In 2021 and 2022, the questionnaire referred only to service-learning and university teachers, whereas in 2023, the vision was broadened to include volunteering specifically and used university coordinators instead of university teachers. It should be noted that from 2022, projects and community partners outside Europe have been included.

The evaluation form for the community partners is available in English and Spanish. However, some responsible universities have in-person meetings with community partners, during which they directly translate documents and discuss the answers with the partners. The questionnaire comprises 28 questions, including the identification details of the organization and the project, whether the organization has previous experience in service-learning or international volunteering, and whether it would participate again or recommend that others do so. The survey also aims to assess the support from the organizing universities to the social organizations, as well as the involvement of the community partners and the contribution of the participating students as perceived by the social partners.

First Results

Impact on Students

Different questionnaires were used over the years to assess students' evaluation of the FLY program and self-assessment of their skills development through experience. Questionnaires were developed for the program. For analysis, we selected those skills covered in all three years (Table 1). Average values were measured on a scale of 1 to 5, such that the higher the number, the more significant the subjectively perceived impact on the development of a particular skill and skill group. Using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *I do not agree*, 2 = *Somewhat disagree*, 3 = *Neither disagree nor agree*, 4 = *Somewhat agree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*), a sample question from

the student questionnaire related to soft skills asked: "Please evaluate how strongly you agree with the following statements: 'the participation in this project allowed me to develop the following professional and personal competencies: Creativity and initiative.'" In 2023, 2022, and 2021, respectively, 102, 66, and 74 students completed the questionnaire. Students were from different study programs, including law, business and economy, education, social work, psychology, environmental studies, international relationships, and politics.

As documented in Table 1, students expressed a relatively high level of agreement with developing specific skills through participation in the FLY program, specifically in personal skills, relationship skills, social and ethical skills, and working skills. Therefore, the students were asked to describe their experience in the program with a keyword reflecting their consideration of the initiative as a whole and not necessarily explicitly concerning evaluating their specific contribution to the projects. By analyzing over 480 words that students have indicated over the years, we created a word cloud in which the most frequently mentioned words appear on a larger scale (Figure 2). Concepts that emerge more frequently are indicated by the words "learning," "love," "empathy," and "commitment," followed by "community," "growth," "enriching," "understanding," and "companionship."

In the open-ended questions, students described having experienced an encounter with several cultures. In particular, the analysis of the answers shows that this encounter took place on two levels:

- The first level concerns the group of international students with whom the experience is shared and, thus, the possibility of engaging with peers from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Slovakia. In this regard, representative student comments include "I enjoyed our shared experiences and co-living with other students"; "I enjoyed the closeness generated, the learning about the cultural differences between all of us and the feeling of belonging to a supportive group"; "I enjoyed talking with people of different nationalities"; "I liked interacting with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures which lead to valuable insights and broaden my perspectives.

Also, working in a collaborative and supportive environment with like-minded individuals fosters a sense of camaraderie and shared accomplishment.”

- The second level concerns the context in which the experience takes place and the possibility of getting in contact with different cultures, even very distant from one’s own (as in the case of students involved in Latin America or Africa). In this regard, some students claim to have “developed cultural intelligence”; to have experienced “contact with another way of life” or “an immersion in the culture, strengthening ties and helping the whole community,” “meeting people with a very different way of facing life than mine,” “getting to know the country and immersing myself in its routines and traditions with my peers at FLY,” and “having the possibility of getting to know at first-hand other realities which, although they may seem distant, are not so different.” It is interesting to note how some students have underlined the importance of “the cultural support provided by the members of the NGO in order to contextualise themselves about the country and city where the program took place” and “the involvement of the tutors as something fundamental.” One student stated: “You feel supported at all times in any adverse situation.”

These two levels of cultural encounter have allowed students to

- Come out of their comfort zone (e.g.: “be in touch with reality, get out of the bubble”; “Flexibility and adaptation”; “open more my mind”);
- Become aware of specific social issues and social injustice (e.g.: “I could say that what had the greatest impact on me was to learn about a reality that was totally invisible to me even though it was so close to me,” or “to get to know in first person those affected by a situation that I have been aware of for many years but never paid much attention to,” or “commit to social transformation, eliminate unnecessary prejudices, know the social and po-

litical problem and their impact in the country, analyse the patriarchal system and the physical and psychological consequences that this structure generates in its victims”);

- Develop critical thinking (e.g.: “develop the ability to see things differently from what I see in my day-to-day life”; “the ability to be able to understand others with critical thinking, how to deal with the problems that a person at risk of social exclusion may have”);
- Moreover, from the analysis of the answers it also emerges that the experience has provided orientation, allowing, for example, some students to understand where they want to direct their professional lives. For instance, some students say: “The experience has made me realise that I feel much more comfortable working in the social field as a language interpreter rather than in the legal field and I think it is much more useful for society,” or “Personally FLY made me realise that it doesn’t have to be just another experience, that I would like to focus my professional life on something in cooperation and development,” or “understanding that you are choosing the right path by helping people in need as well as our planet, promoting ecology,” and “the transformation of my beliefs and my initiative and ambition to continue to be part of this.”

- To apply the knowledge acquired during the study course in a practical context and to enrich it with other competences: (e.g.:

All the skills and abilities that I have acquired during the course have been useful. In general, this has allowed me to see and analyse each situation from a holistic perspective, focusing on the details, focusing on the possible actions to be taken and not on mere observation. In addition to these more theoretical skills, the project required other social skills such as openness to new cultures, prudence and respect for the unknown and different, and above all, a high capacity to adapt and manage uncertainty,

or “During the experience I was able to apply my business-related training from a critical and problem-oriented perspective to respond to the social problems in context,” or “I used a lot of the skills previously learned in courses as a leisure and free time worker,” or “In this project I was able to put into practice some knowledge in the field by studying international relations,” or “My training in law was very useful to be able to advise migrants when requested”).

The overall feeling of the students is possible to perceive from these statements: “The feeling of being part of a cause that I consider important” and “the personal gratification I have felt in helping this collective,” or “feeling useful and seeing that this is just the beginning,” or

You feel that you are creating a positive impact on their lives, for which they are enormously grateful, and leaving lasting memories, while simultaneously they are doing the same with you. This experience reminds you of the transformative power of empathy and dedication to others.

At the same time, students realize that their participation/engagement is symbolic concerning the social issues they face. In this regard, one student says:

I would say that the participation was symbolic in the following sense: our role there during the three weeks, taking into account the family and economic circumstances of some families, was not to change their lives but to make them have the best possible time during the camp, hoping to do our part.

Every year, 100% of students who filled out the questionnaire recommended participation in the project to other students. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the program need to be improved. According to the students, action is needed in four main areas. We aggregated categories of the suggestions based on open coding and constant comparative analyses.

1. Selection phase: Students emphasize the importance of accompanying the choice of the project according to the personal characteristics of the candidates (e.g.: “Give more importance to the selection phase of each person according to the characteristics and interests of the candidate”);
2. Orientation and training before the experience: Students generally believe that preexperience orientation and training should be enhanced by offering more detailed information on each project and by giving more details on logistics “that will facilitate adaptation to the site where they are going.” In particular, for the Spanish universities organizing the FLY program training weekend, students consider it very useful. However, since the summer projects are very diverse, they believe that ad hoc training on single projects is essential “so that the volunteer can start even before arriving at the destination, by preparing activities, developing the projects to be implemented, etc.” Some students also believe it is essential to provide study materials to better prepare for the experience or language classes to enable participants to reach minimum levels of knowledge so that the language barrier will not be an issue. Furthermore, as students come from different backgrounds, they feel it is crucial to dedicate more time to forming a group among the volunteers who participate. Finally, the students suggest creating a network of students who have already participated in the program, inviting them to give their testimony, discuss expectations, and provide information. Again, they ask to contact students who have chosen the same project in previous years.
3. Financing: Students underline the need to increase the financial coverage of projects, which does not always correspond to the real costs (e.g.: “The financial funding of the project was too little for the real costs that had to be paid there,” or “It is true that the funding, although it helps, is too little”).
4. Tutoring: Students consider it essential to strengthen monitoring during the experience through ad hoc organized feedback sessions, both group and one-to-one; they also consider it essential to have more contact with the local university even if the project is carried out in close collaboration with a specific community partner. Monitoring for them is also a way of exchanging views “enhanc-

ing relationships between volunteers.” They believe that monitoring is also vital after the experience by organizing posttravel reflection; in this regard, one student stated:

The objective of going to another country to get to know a particular reality requires putting into practice what has been learnt in a more local setting. In this sense, I believe I will improve the program with a follow-up reflection in the form of a local social project.

Finally, some students point out that the tutors they accompany are not always familiar with the context of the project and believe that this is a vital aspect of being better supported.

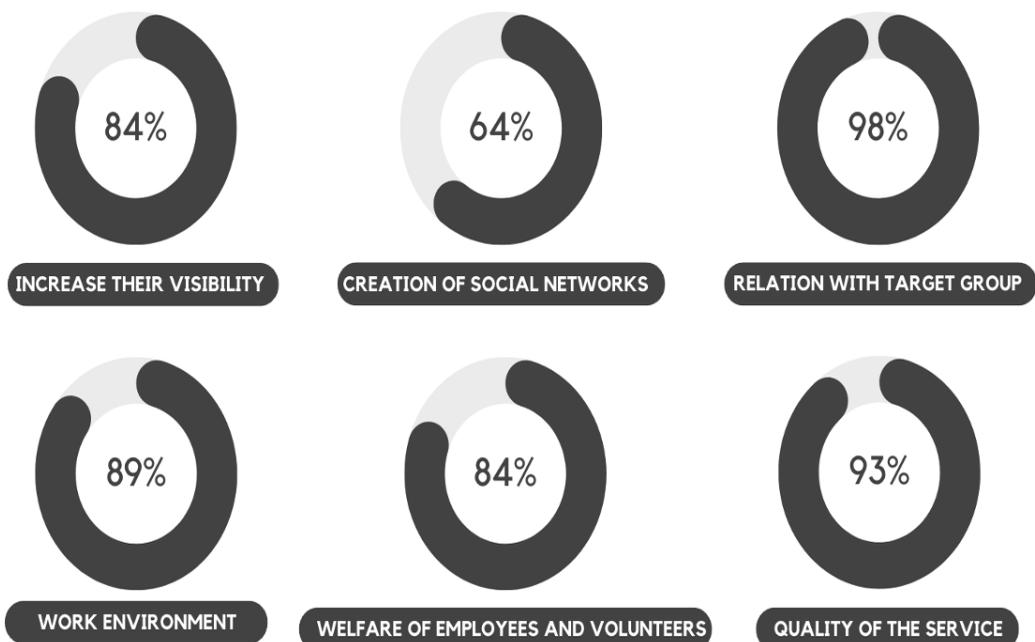
Impact on Community Partners

We have analyzed 45 evaluations by the community partners in the past three editions (2021–2023) of the FLY program. The community partners that participated in the evaluation process are from Bolivia (1), Bosnia (1), Brazil (1), Ecuador (1), Italy (4), Kenya (1), Malta (1), Serbia (1), Slovakia (3), and Spain (17). Most local partners are non-

governmental and nonprofit organizations that work in the social field, both religious and civil institutions; there is also a university among them. We have selected six of these questions as early impact indicators.

First, when asked to list the most positive aspects of their participation in the program (Figure 3), a high percentage of the community partners responded that the presence of the students in their projects has contributed positively to increasing their visibility (84%), the creation of social networks (64%), the relationship with the target groups (98%), the quality of the service offered by the organization (93%), the work environment of the organization (89%), and the welfare of the organization’s employees and volunteers (84%). Increased visibility was among the most valued aspects mentioned by different community partners. The FLY program helped them to make their work visible, in many cases improving their marketing on social networks, as well as increasing the visibility of the groups they work with and the causes they defend. Another highly valued point is networking, the friendships and links between people. Community partners emphasized the richness of diversity, cultural exchange, and international perspectives brought about by the encounter between the students, their staff, and the beneficiaries.

Figure 3. Perceived Impact of Student Involvement on Community Partners



Some community partners mentioned further positive contributions: learning gained through interaction with the students, the freshness and creativity they brought, and their joy and willingness. Finally, they stated that the link with the university is getting stronger and wider.

Second, regarding the social impact, the community organizations assessed whether the community’s needs/problems were adequately/successfully addressed. As shown in Figure 4, the majority of them are satisfied. This result is critical as it was one of the program’s expected results: to address the community’s needs through collaboration with stakeholders in different areas of social intervention.

The third indicator relates to collaboration with the students. Community partners were asked to rate the support offered by their organization to the university students. As shown in Figure 5, most of them considered this support adequate. Furthermore, in the open question, most organizations emphasized that they have received volunteers for a long time already, so the reception and mentoring mechanisms are well established and part of their regular work activity. They also mentioned that they offer the participating students a variety of activities that can be interesting for them. Among the areas they feel they could have supported more, they mentioned the timetable for the slated activities, which made it difficult to engage more with the students, and insufficient

communication with students before their on-site participation.

Several social partners stressed that without the students’ participation, they would have been unable to continue their service to the community during those months, often the holiday season, or that thanks to the students’ presence, they can offer additional activities or activities outside their formal program. Finally, the entities highlighted the participants’ learning and awareness and how the workers and users learned from this exchange.

As a fourth indicator, the community partners indicated that, despite the many positive aspects of the program, a need to continue the collaboration and improve it persisted. As shown in Figure 6, more than a third (37%) of the community partners stated that they do not need additional support to continue collaborating in university volunteering or service-learning projects. Of those that state that they need or could use support to continue collaborating, 37% refer to financial support, especially for accommodation and maintenance of the students, and 18.5% need training on service-learning, with one of them highlighting the need for a joint reflection on SL with social entities. Other exciting answers refer to the work before the arrival of the students and the communication with the program organization. In addition, various community partners have indicated that the program would be improved if the participants

Figure 4. Community Partners’ Assessment on Addressed Needs

ASSESS WHETHER THE NEEDS/PROBLEMS OF THE COMMUNITY WERE ADDRESSED

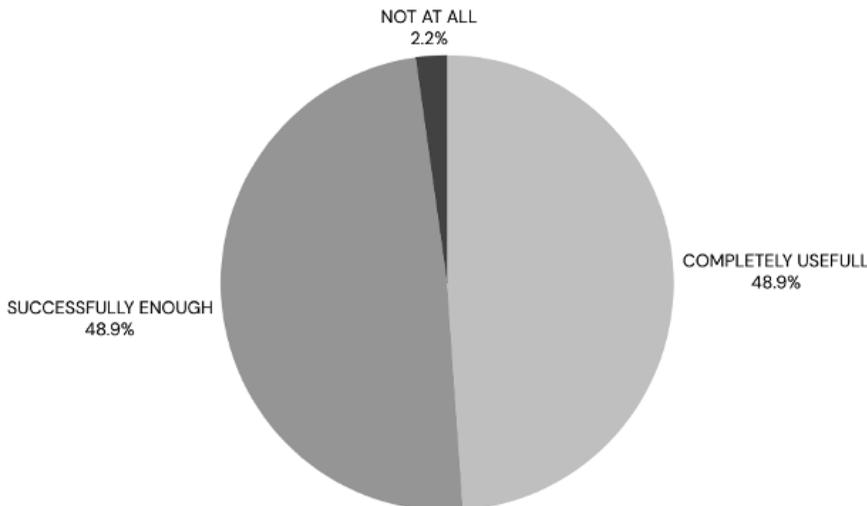


Figure 5. Community Partners' Assessment of Their Support for the University Students

RATE THE SUPPORT OFFERED BY YOUR ORGANISATION TO THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

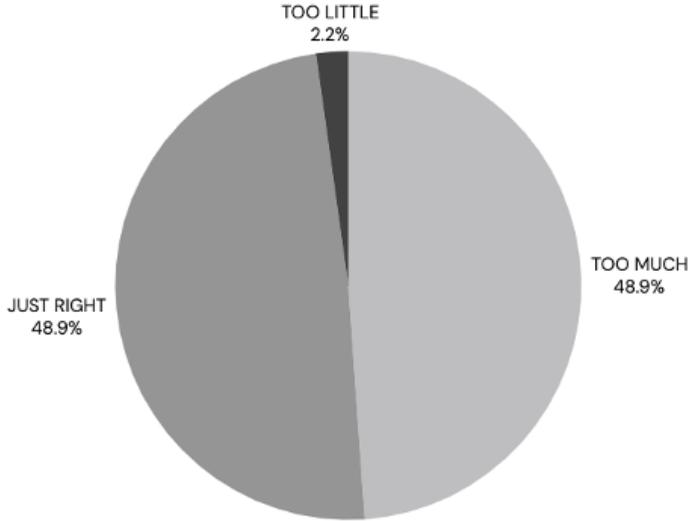
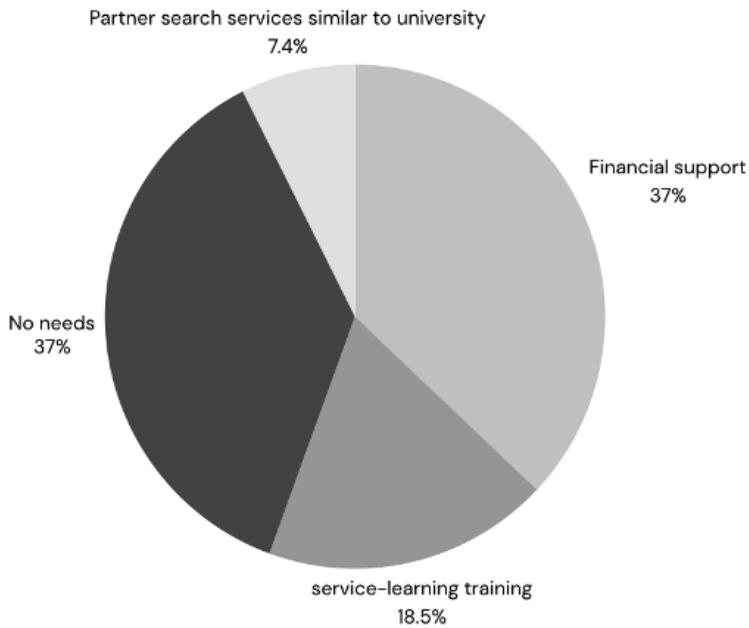


Figure 6. Additional Support for the Community Partners

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDED TO CONTINUE PARTICIPATING IN THE FLY PROGRAM



in the field had a more extended stay, if the program supported more detailed organizational policies, and if partner search services similar to those of the universities were provided to community partners.

As the fifth and sixth indicators, we asked community partners about their willingness to continue in the program and their recommendations to other organizations. Most community partners (95%) affirmed that they are interested in continuing to participate in similar projects related to their service area, and 93% said they would recommend service-learning or university volunteering projects to other community organizations. In the surveys, the social partners are invited to name other local or national organizations interested in participating in the FLY program. We identify soliciting such suggestions as good practice for the host community and country, who can benefit from the positive impact mentioned above, and for the FLY program organizers, as it helps them map new social partners.

Discussion

In this article, we have tried to unveil the benefits of service-learning as a form of international community-engaged learning, and specifically as practiced in the FLY program, on the educational journey of European university students and on the international community partners that host them. In our experience, this type of higher education project is a promise of hope for social development.

The early stage evaluation of the FLY program has shown positive feedback from the university students and the community partners. Students' experiences demonstrate the profound impact of cultural immersion and social engagement. The documented outcomes reveal a broadened perspective, increased cultural intelligence, and a heightened sense of empathy and social responsibility. It is evident that the project has not only provided valuable insights and practical skills but has also influenced the students' career aspirations and personal values. The participating students' recommendation further emphasizes the FLY program's transformative nature, highlighting its potential to influence and inspire future participants. The documented testimonials reflect a collective sense of fulfillment and personal growth, underscoring the significance of such immersive experiences in shaping compassionate and socially conscious individuals.

Although the students recommend participation in the project to others, several critical areas for improvement have been identified. These areas include optimizing the selection phase to align projects with the candidates' characteristics and interests. Additionally, there is a strong call for enhanced preexperience orientation and training, emphasizing providing detailed information, logistical support, and language preparation. Financial coverage for projects is also highlighted as a concern, with students expressing the need for increased funding to align with the costs incurred. Furthermore, there is a clear desire for improved monitoring and support throughout the experience, including posttravel reflection and continued engagement with the local community. In line with this desire and to complement it, we think it would be interesting to develop a collection of evidence on the role of the organizing universities' tutors who accompany students in the project field. They know the organizing university and are familiar with the community partner, the project on the ground, and the students. Therefore, they possess precious information to improve the students' training, their accompaniment in a specific project, and the project itself.

The program's impact on community partners is evident in various ways. FLY-related improvements include increased visibility, expansion of social networks, improved service quality, and enhanced relationships with target groups. Partners have expressed satisfaction with how effectively the program addresses community needs, fulfilling one of its key objectives. Many partners have indicated their willingness to continue participating in similar projects despite identifying program shortcomings, such as the need for additional financial support and training.

We will use these results to study financing options and schedule training sessions for the community partners in the FLY program, trying to promote networking among them as well. Indeed, we believe that an increased exchange between partner organizations can benefit the project by enabling all participants to learn from best practices and realize the effectiveness of the stakeholders' fieldwork.

The evidence clearly shows that beyond providing valuable experiences for university students, the FLY program has fostered mutually beneficial relationships between

universities and communities. Addressing these areas of improvement will enhance the overall experience for students participating in the program and contribute to its sustained success and impact. Based on the implementation of the summative evaluation, the evaluation in 2024 will be redesigned again and will also focus more on intercultural aspects of learning. However, receptivity to improvements is reflected in the open-ended questions included in the evaluation questionnaires.

Further research should be conducted to evaluate the long-term effects of the FLY program on both the university students and the community partners. This research should assess whether the positive outcomes and benefits experienced during the program are sustainable and have lasting effects beyond the immediate project duration. Expanding on the current evaluation, conducting in-depth interviews or focus groups with students and community partners would offer a more nuanced understanding of how the FLY program has influenced their development. These qualitative methods can uncover personal anecdotes, untold success stories, and potential areas for further growth or enhancement.

Moreover, exploring the FLY program's long-term effects on the students and communities it serves could offer valuable data. Tracking metrics related to sustained community engagement and civic-mindedness of students, ongoing improvements in service quality in involved community partners, and the lasting impact on the target groups would provide a comprehensive view of the program's influence. Additionally, exploring the potential for scaling up and replicating the FLY program in other communities or countries would be valuable. Expanding the program to different communities and countries would allow us to assess the generalizability of the positive

impacts observed in this evaluation.

By unpacking the future implications and considering these potential enhancements, the FLY program can continue to thrive and make a lasting, positive impact on universities, students, communities, and the organizations it serves. Indeed, for universities, the FLY program is part of higher education's third mission, which is to contribute to solving current societal challenges alongside community partners and to promote solidarity and social commitment among students. It is crucial to assess the program's impact. More studies on the effectiveness of initiatives like FLY can spread and inspire other universities to promote service-learning in the third mission within European and international university collaboration. Impact documentation is also essential to recognize the commitment of individual faculty members and staff participating in the program. The program was implemented solely due to the individual enthusiasm and contribution of each of the program partners and the efforts of the individuals involved in its implementation. The present evaluation does not analyze the perspectives of these individuals, who are essential actors in the program, because it works thanks to their commitment and mutual understanding, communication, and respect for diversity and different contexts and realities. In the future, it will be appropriate to include these actors in the evaluation, as the program can have an essential impact on them and, thus, the universities involved in its implementation.

In conclusion, the FLY program consortium would like to express deep gratitude to all the university staff and community partners. Their dedication and efforts in creating impactful learning experiences are opening the way to a more promising future where education is the beacon of change.



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