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International Community-Engaged Learning (ICEL)

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Volume 29, Number 2, 2025

TABLE of CONTENTS

Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement

TABLE of CONTENTS *(cont'd)*

Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement

© Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Volume 29, Number 2, p. 1, (2025)
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Introduction to the Special Issue on International Community-Engaged Learning

Hana van Ooijen, Paul Schöpfer, and Melissa Pellis

Throughout the years, international community-engaged learning (ICEL) has established its presence in higher education worldwide (Hartman et al., 2023). ICEL has evolved from incidental initiatives aimed at delivering service to communities to experiential education that involves collaborative efforts among students, educators, and community partners to address global challenges. This development is timely, given the urgent call for educating people equipped to address today's complex problems (UNESCO, n.d.). ICEL goes hand in hand with community-engaged research (CER). That said, there is still very little academic research on ICEL—a point addressed in a contribution to this special issue, highlighting the absence of viewpoints from the Global South (Singh et al., 2025, p. 10).

This special issue responds to this gap. It results from the collaboration between the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (*JHEOE*) and the ICEL team of Utrecht University's Centre for Global Challenges (UGlobe). This team promotes global engagement for societal issues, focusing on ICEL (https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/centre-for-global-challenges/education/meet-the-icel-team). It advances this cause by developing hands-on tools for ICEL and promoting ICEL among university teachers and students, nonuniversity students (including working students), and societal partners. The team also works on the development and coordination of ICEL courses, facilitating matchmaking between educators and societal partners or communities interested in participating in or joining an ICEL course. The focus of the ICEL group is also well-aligned with the mission of the JHEOE, which is dedicated to advancing theory and practice related to outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and communities on a global scale (JHEOE, n.d.).

In line with the team's focus and the journal's mission, this special issue seeks to gather insights on how ICEL can be shaped to benefit students, teachers, and communities across cultures equally and equitably. This aim presupposes that ICEL is an inherently valuable form of education. In pursuing this aim, the special issue has broken down this big, complex question into four subthemes (further described in the Appendix), which were central to the call:

i. Conceptualizing ICEL;

ii. Navigating cross-cultural challenges;

iii. Promoting equality and reciprocity in transnational ICEL partnerships;

iv. Unveiling the benefits of ICEL.

In a way, these subthemes embody the task of creating a deeper understanding of the what (i), how (ii and iii), and why (iv) of ICEL. By addressing these topics, the special issue contributes to broadening the understanding and awareness of ICEL by examining its various definitions, practices, and purposes in different regional and societal contexts. The subthemes also serve to categorize the contributions substantively. As to form, the contributions are research articles, reflective essays, or projects with promise. Although most contributions touch on multiple subthemes, they have been categorized within the subtheme they discuss most prominently. In the next section, we highlight the main findings for each contribution, organized by subtheme.

Conceptualizing ICEL

Despite its increased recognition and implementation, a clear definition, description, and implementation guidelines for ICEL are lacking. Rather, ICEL can encompass a continuum of many shapes and forms. To begin with, the sheer duration of ICEL projects can range from a one-time 10-week tutorial

involving collaborative learning and a field trip to a course-based ICEL collaborative process between academia and four Indigenous communities that has evolved over more than 12 years. Furthermore, the size of an ICEL project can vary immensely. For instance, the number of students can vary from a small group of six to a cohort of up to 132 students. Finally, the interdisciplinary character of ICEL is equally diverse, with projects spanning fields as varied as artificial intelligence and planetary health education.

So, the various projects highlighted in this special issue alone show a remarkable diversity, but they also include common components that were part of the call for proposals' broad working definition of ICEL: (i) [a form of] experiential education, encompassing (ii) collaborative efforts among students, educators, and community partners, working with (iii) global challenges.

The first contribution presented in this special issue is a research article by Singh et al. (2025), which includes interesting results on the first two components. These results were obtained from a qualitative inquiry at eight Indian higher education institutions (HEIs), which involved interviews with 50 academics. These HEIs collaborate with broader communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. One of the findings highlights that across different contexts, community-engaged learning (CEL) fosters (i) enhanced knowledge by combining theory and practice, alongside (ii) the development of social awareness and consciousness and (iii) the acquisition of critical 21st-century skills like reflection, communication, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary thinking. In their framework, the authors emphasize that CEL is tied to applying theoretical knowledge to address community needs, fostering deep engagement between learners and their learning. This approach differs from traditional scholarship in that it is participatory, reflexive, and socially accountable. Essentially, in this case, CEL is the educational outcome of intentionally incorporating community engagement (CE) into the core activities of higher education (Singh et al., 2025, p. 11).

Another dimension of CEL, as demonstrated in the article, is the potential for fruitful interaction between research and education. CE is embedded in diverse ways within the functions of the HEIs, transforming these functions into engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship can also result in various CEL opportunities, including introducing socially relevant courses, immersive pedagogies, the cocreation of new knowledge for community welfare, and social outreach interventions. In other words, in the context of the contribution, and based on Furco's (2010) description of an engaged campus, CEL emerges from embedding CE within the academic functions of teaching, research, and service.

Other contributions demonstrate how the global nature of the challenges can be shaped in different ways. As also mentioned in the call for proposals, it can be shaped by cross-border collaboration (e.g., De Santis et al., 2025) and the global nature of the challenges addressed (e.g., McGonigle Leyh & Christiaanse, 2025).

Navigating Cross-Cultural Challenges

Moving beyond the conceptualization of ICEL, the subsequent contributions delve into the practical realities of its implementation, highlighting the inherent cross-cultural challenges that demand careful consideration and innovative strategies. Two contributions have been positioned in this subtheme.

The reflective essay by Addison et al. (2025) directly addresses the challenges of implementing ICEL projects, particularly in the context of planetary health education. The authors detail their experiences in developing and delivering a course that integrated challenge-based learning, community-engaged learning, and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) between universities in the Netherlands and the Philippines. A central theme is the necessity of flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness from both educators and students in ICEL projects. The authors emphasize that effective stakeholder engagement and transdisciplinary collaboration require educators to equip students with essential competencies, including collaboration skills, problem-definition abilities, and research ethics. They note that navigating the inherent complexities of ICEL often involves flattening traditional classroom hierarchies in order to foster a continuous exchange of learning and expertise between students and educators (p. 40).

The article also identifies strategic, structural, and administrative challenges in

building cross-university collaborations. These challenges include aligning academic schedules, addressing curriculum variations, and the need for new mechanisms to financially support resource-intensive, interuniversity, interdisciplinary collaborations. The authors suggest that although there is general support for innovative courses and seed grants, sustainable financial models are crucial for these collaborations to thrive (p. 43).

Furthermore, the authors stress the importance of equitable partnerships in ethical COIL courses. They emphasize the importance of educators continually and critically reflecting on equity in course design and their collaborative work. The authors also note that the bidirectional exchange of knowledge and skills extends to the institutional level, where educators from diverse backgrounds collaborate and learn from one another (p. 37).

Another contribution to the subtheme on navigating cultural challenges is the ICEL project Making Bonairean Heritage Together by Smit and Plets (2025). This contribution illustrates the benefits of ICEL that emerge from navigating cross-cultural challenges. Their project with promise, "Teaching Decolonial Heritage in Bonaire: Cultural Reflexive Learning in Practice," describes how students, faculty, museum staff, and local community members engaged in a collaborative effort to develop intercultural competencies and promote an inclusive approach to heritage preservation. In the project, students experienced their positionality and, for instance, encountered confusion due to differences in local working cultures. Throughout the project, the students kept logs, which enhanced their reflexive learning. Smit and Plets (2025) describe the students' development as follows:

> Our exploration of student engagement revealed professional and personal transformations across four areas: learning through misunderstandings and confusion, acquiring intercultural competencies, personal and social development through reflexivity on interculturality, and awareness of professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners. On all four fronts, students experienced both professional and personal transformations. Across these modes of learning, two overall skills were acquired. First, through hands-on work, students became aware of the positionality of their profession and the inescapable Eurocentrism in many elements of existing heritage practices. Second, through active engagement and conversation, they learned to understand the context of the client better and gained insights into ongoing colonialism in the Netherlands. (p. 62)

Promoting Equality and Reciprocity in Transnational ICEL Partnerships

A critical dimension of effective ICEL lies in fostering genuine equality and reciprocity among all partners involved. This section examines various strategies and approaches used to foster balanced and mutually beneficial transnational collaborations. This subtheme includes three contributions. In the reflective essay "*Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*: 'United We are Stronger': Reflections on a Decade of Transformative Community-Engaged Learning and Research With Indigenous Shuar Communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon," Brenton et al. (2025) recount a decade-long partnership between U.S.-based Saint John's University and four Shuar Indigenous communities. As part of the 4-year Ozanam Scholars program, students can participate in an ICEL project that includes a 2-week trip to an Indigenous community in Ecuador.

This project aims to create a more inclusive and equitable narrative of ICEL, one that resonates with the core values of the communities. Through years of experience, the authors have observed that the key to such a narrative lies in understanding that the relationship between community members and students is about mutual benefits and building collaborations rather than focusing on labor and resources. Moreover, the authors describe how integrating Indigenous epistemologies and participatory action research contributes to fostering trust, accountability, and shared responsibility in ICEL partnerships. In this way, the different partners involved in the ICEL partnership can navigate the complexities of maintaining equitable and mutually beneficial relationships. The necessity to promote equality and reciprocity in their partnership became all the more pressing during the COVID pandemic. At the same time, because the existing bonds were already so solid, the partners managed to maintain their collaboration during

the pandemic through virtual engagement. Moreover, when the project resumed in-person engagement, the partners decided to integrate the digital tools and platforms into the project as a whole. As a result of the combination of in-person and virtual engagement, the partnership has become even more resilient and dynamic. Accordingly, the authors would recommend such a blended approach. For this particular project, the Indigenous principles of "strength in unity" and "solidarity" reinforced the positive impact of combining virtual and in-person engagement.

In the second contribution to the theme, "Community-Engaged Learning in a European University Alliance: Reflections on Equality and Reciprocity Across Europe and Africa," Vijge et al. (2025) examine the complexities of balancing power dynamics in community-engaged learning (CEL) projects involving partners from Europe and the Global South. Their reflective essay describes the transdisciplinary Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability program, a joint endeavor of nine European universities. They offer their students a capstone project for which students work on a challenge submitted by diverse stakeholders from Europe and beyond. The article builds on the autoethnographic logs of the authors, who have all been involved in the capstone project. By using Gibbs's reflective cycle, the reflections highlight the need for gradual institutional change to achieve true reciprocity and equality in these collaborations. One of the key findings is that although achieving full equality in ICEL across the Global North and Global South may be highly challenging, if not impossible, generativity (or reciprocal institutional and collaborative transformations) is crucial in fostering equality and reciprocity in ICEL. Moreover, adding reflective activities to ICEL exercises holds promise as an avenue toward such transformation.

The third contribution, "Building Bridges Through International Community-Engaged Learning: Intersections of Education, Collaboration, and Social Change," by De Santis et al. (2025), presents a project with promise. It explores the characteristics of the authors' BEA Project, an initiative promoting interaction and exchange between Italy and Brazil. The project with promise explores best practices for promoting equality and reciprocity in the international exchange between these nations. The stark intercultural differences between the regions, further influenced by factors such as economic inequality, racial tensions, and the complexities of engaging with diverse cultural norms, make the BEA Project an interesting case study for exploring building and ensuring reciprocity (p. 66). These characteristics highlight the importance of developing intercultural skills when interacting with local communities, particularly in cross-cultural international collaborations.

The BEA Project has achieved its goals by, inter alia, establishing partnerships with local actors through a "glocal" perspective (p. 66) and following a bottom-up approach (p. 72). Further best practices for sustainable international collaborations, with notable takeaways for ensuring reciprocal exchanges between participants, are also presented. The examples of best practices also highlight the importance of reflective practices in fostering cultural competencies.

Unveiling the Benefits of ICEL

Ultimately, the value of ICEL is evidenced by its multifaceted benefits for all stakeholders. The contributions in this final thematic section illuminate the diverse impacts of ICEL experiences on students, educators, and the communities they engage with across different international landscapes.

To begin with, in the qualitative study "The Impact of International Service-Learning on Students' Development in Intercultural Sensitivity," Lee et al. (2025) have thoroughly examined the intercultural sensitivity of Hong Kong undergraduate students participating in service projects for an international service-learning (ISL) course in five locations: two in Africa (South Africa and Tanzania), two in Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Vietnam), and in Mainland China. It is worth noting that the authors consider service-learning closely related to community-engaged learning and define it as an experiential pedagogy widely adopted in higher education for its potential to nurture civic responsibility as well as academic, personal, and social outcomes. The partners were NGOs, universities, and primary or secondary schools in the host countries. The ICEL project included several components, including a 10-day trip. Before and after this trip, students executed an open-ended writing task in which they described their view of the people and country in their ISL project.

The research article reveals significant postexperience improvements in students'

intercultural sensitivity, particularly among those who engaged with Africa and Southeast Asia, highlighting the role of ISL in cultivating global competencies and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Accordingly, the authors point out that location is a critical factor for reaping the benefits of this improvement; furthermore, the number and quality of interactions in the host communities also significantly affect improvements in intercultural sensitivity.

In another project with promise, "New Forms of ICEL: Unveiling the Benefits and Limitations of a Digital Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab," McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse (2025) explore and reflect on the experiences and reflections of students and societal partners that took place in the first iteration of their Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab. As McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse (2025) highlight, CEL is a special form of education that requires "special attention to learning objectives, activities, assessments, and outcomes, with an emphasis on learning through experience" (p. 112). The contribution offers a qualitative analysis of existing scholarship and empirical data collected throughout the course in the form of student surveys and reflections. McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse (2025) demonstrate the added value of student reflections, not only in student learning development, but also for the analysis of educational impact and the greater development of (I)CEL education at large. Among the conclusions drawn from the collected data, the authors note that students experience a greater awareness of their positionality within complex environments through reflection and that reflection moderately deepens their understanding and interest in the topic of global justice (p. 112).

Overall, the contribution concludes that the Global Justice Investigations Lab demonstrated significant learning outcomes through the structural and curricular integration of reflexivity, positionality, and reciprocity. These benefits are, however, limited by the perceived need for mutual communication and coordination in fostering reciprocal relationships between students and partners, highlighting yet again the value of reciprocity in (I)CEL (pp. 121–122). McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse's (2025) analysis of the benefits and limitations of (I)CEL, through the case study of the innovative Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab, offers plenty of food for thought on best practices, the implementation of frequent reflections, possibilities for course impact analyses, and future lines of research.

Another initiative focusing on reciprocity, diversity, and social justice is the FLY program, analyzed for its benefits and limitations by Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2025) in their contribution "Unlocking Global Perspectives: International Service-Learning, Volunteering Networks, and Social Justice Through the European Interuniversity FLY Program." This project with promise analyzes evaluation and reflection results collected over three iterations of the project between 2021 and 2023. As in the Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab, student reflections were conducted at various stages throughout the project, encouraging self-reflection and reflection on the program itself. The preexperience reflection and reflections during the program were mostly group-based, whereas the joint final evaluation required a structured self-reflection. Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2025) also analyzed the community partners' evaluation of the program. From the data, it is concluded that students revealed broadened perspectives, increased cultural intelligence, and a heightened sense of empathy and social responsibility (p. 142).

Reflections also provided insights into the limitations of and possible future improvements to the program, for instance, the strong desire on the part of students for increased preexperience orientation and training in the form of detailed information, logistical support, and language preparation (p. 142). Additionally, a clear desire for improved monitoring and support throughout the program was documented, with students also expressing the desire for posttravel reflection and continued engagement with the local community.

Beyond the research carried out thus far, future lines of research for the FLY program are also identified throughout the contribution. Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2025) conclude by emphasizing the strong value of impact assessment, not only for the development of the FLY program itself, but also for the development of further initiatives like FLY across universities, highlighting, yet again, the importance of reflecting in and on (international) community-engaged learning.

Conclusion

As is the case for many research areas, a majority of the existing contributions to the ICEL literature are shaped by perspectives from the Global North (Habashy et al., 2024). This special issue seeks to promote the development of ICEL into a more inclusive and globally relevant practice by including contributions from diverse global perspectives.

Across the different contributions, several recurring themes emerge: the centrality of reflexivity and reciprocity, the ongoing negotiation of cross-cultural challenges, and the need to foster equitable collaborations that move beyond extractive or one-directional models of engagement. Together, the articles highlight how ICEL, in its many forms, can support students in developing intercultural competencies, positional awareness, and a deeper understanding of global justice. They also demonstrate that embedding community engagement meaningfully within the structures of higher education requires institutional adaptability and commitment at both the curricular and administrative levels. Additionally, reflection as a (pedagogical) tool and a means of evaluating impact emerges as a critical practice throughout these initiatives.

In a world increasingly shaped by transnational crises and cultural interdependence, ICEL stands as a vital educational frontier, capable of reimagining global learning as inclusive, transformative, and justice-driven. The insights in this issue are not only contributions to academia but also invitations for sustained, reciprocal engagement across borders.

Despite this promising trajectory, the issue also reveals areas that demand further scholarly attention. The need remains for more rigorous impact assessments, strategies to better support long-term partnerships, and further conceptual clarity around the diverse practices encompassed by ICEL. More contributions from underrepresented contexts, especially from the Global South, remain crucial to deepening the field's understanding of what equitable international community engagement can and should entail.

We are grateful to the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* for the opportunity to curate this special issue and for providing a platform to share these important perspectives.

About the Guest Editors

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Appendix

Subthemes Addressing International Community-Engaged Learning:

I. **Conceptualizing ICEL:** How is ICEL defined, and what motivates its existence across different countries and contexts? Definitions of ICEL are welcomed as they are sparse in academic literature. Focus on the "international" element of ICEL is particularly lacking. Contributions may encompass both case studies and regional/national perspectives.

II. **Navigating Cross-Cultural Challenges:** What are the practical challenges when implementing ICEL projects, and how do these depend on the specific context? Contributions should emphasize the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions and their impact on project success and may include suggestions for possible solutions to ongoing challenges.

III. **Promoting Equality and Reciprocity in Transnational ICEL Partnerships:** What are strategies and approaches employed to foster equality and reciprocity within (global) ICEL partnerships (e.g., capacity building, resource sharing, joint decision-making, etc.)?

IV. **Unveiling the Benefits of ICEL:** What are the benefits of participating in ICEL, and how do they impact communities, teachers, and students differently across countries and contexts? We welcome contributions exploring the broader impact, also on a meta-level, for example, by focusing on institutional or environmental impacts.

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Embedding Community Engagement Within Indian Higher Education Institutions' Functions: Insights on Community-Engaged Learning

Wafa Singh, Raisuyah Bhagwan, and Manju Singh

Abstract

Despite the growing volume of global research on community engagement and its outcomes, studies emerging from the Global South, particularly India, are sparse. This article makes a valuable contribution toward enhancing a scholarly understanding of engagement in India by highlighting the findings made through a qualitative study at eight Indian higher education institutions (HEIs). This inquiry explored the diverse modalities of the embedment of community engagement (CE) within HEI functions (teaching, research, and service), transforming these functions into engaged scholarship and thus creating community-engaged learning (CEL) opportunities through the introduction of socially relevant courses, immersive pedagogies, coconstruction of new knowledge for community welfare, and social outreach interventions. The article draws on these insights to propose a conceptual model to guide global HEIs toward transforming conventional scholarship into engaged scholarship, thereby yielding key CEL outcomes and thus contributing to a simple but pragmatic understanding of international CEL.

Keywords: Community engagement, engaged scholarship, community-engaged learning, experiential learning, teaching-learning

The worldwide increasing popularity of community engagement (CE) in higher education institutions (HEIs) reflects a growing appreciation of CE as a new approach to teaching-learning (T-L), research, innovation, and the cocreation of new knowledge for addressing societal challenges (Davies, 2023; Tandon et al., 2016). Positioned as a transformative approach to academic scholarship, CE mobilizes community–university partnerships and dismantles the barriers between theory and practice, making the former more relevant and the latter more informed (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019; Mittal, 2021). While addressing complex social problems, CE also trains and prepares students for effective service to society (Chang et al., 2020; Dickens et al., 2023). Such curricular engagement involves faculty, students, and communities for addressing community-identified needs and deepens students' civic and academic learning, thereby enriching the teaching and research functions at HEIs (Benneworth et al., 2018).

Education emerging from such democratic engagement leads to multidimensional and holistic learning outcomes, resulting in socially conscious civic action (Dobson & Kirkpatrick, 2017; Sabharwal & Malish, 2016). This form of community-engaged learning (CEL), emerging from the embedment of CE within the academic functions of teaching, research, and service, collectively represents the "scholarship of engagement or engaged scholarship (ES)" (Boyer, 1996; Hart et al., 2023; Welch, 2016). In this framework, ES is not a separate activity but is infused within the core academic functions (Denny, 2018; September-Brown et al., 2023). It enables the application of theoretical knowledge by connecting classroom and course material with the immediate communities and their context, thus creating rich and multidimensional CEL

experiences (Benz et al., 2020; Molosi-France & Dipholo, 2022). This process facilitates the engagement of learners with what they are learning, resulting in internalization and transformation, which reflects the true premise of CEL (Molosi-France & Dipholo, 2022).

However, within this promising direction in the global engagement literature that embraces efforts to conceptualize CE, ES, and CEL, academic viewpoints from the Global South are conspicuous in their scantness. Further, the Indian context is sparsely represented in the literature, given the absence of empirical research studies on these aspects (Panwar, 2020). We view this position as both a challenge and an opportunity. Even as the challenge lies in the difficulty of positioning reference points for scholarly studies, this situation also presents an opportunity to conduct pioneering research on CE and CEL, especially considering the Indian National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which endorses ES practices (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). However, given the vastness of the Indian higher education sector, this policy is still in the process of being embraced countrywide, as it is being slowly rolled out in phases (since 2022–2023). Therefore, although it is too early to see this policy's impact on Indian higher education, its influence in the coming years is expected to be monumental. In this context, this article aims to position our research at this critical juncture, wherein its findings can contribute toward the realization of the vision of NEP with respect to CE practices. Sharing this research can also ensure authentic Indian representation in the global engagement and international CEL literature.

To achieve this objective, the authors designed a qualitative inquiry through an exploratory lens to answer the following research question: What are the different ways in which CE is embedded in HEI functions, and what kind of CEL experiences emerges therefrom? Here, the study first provides a review of the literature on CE and ES practices in global academia and the emergent CEL outcomes. Further, a summary of the methods is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings, which are based on interviews with 50 academics (including university leaders and faculty members) conducted at eight Indian HEIs best known for their engagement practices. The findings, depicted thematically, reveal diverse modalities of CE embedment within academic functions, resulting in a variety of ES practices and the emergence of wide-ranging CEL opportunities. Next is a discussion that outlines the key emergent lessons and includes a conceptual model for guiding global HEIs on embedding CE within their functions (representing an ES approach) and achieving crucial CEL outcomes. The article concludes with a call for more regional, relational, and institutional approaches that provide an in-depth exploration of these engaged practices.

Literature Review

Different scholars and institutions have defined CE in different ways, aligned with their respective contexts (Shawa, 2020). Among the earliest and most popularly accepted definitions of CE was that proposed by the Carnegie Foundation, which defined CE as the "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources, in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6). Also referred to as the "technical definition" of CE, this definition implies an engagement "with a community," rather than done "to and for" a community (Starke et al., 2017; Thakrar, 2018). CE is also viewed as a practice that is embedded into the core academic framework, within the HEI functions of teaching, research, and service (Farnell, 2020; Franz, 2019), and is therefore approached as a pedagogy to enhance and systematically advance T-L (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

Such an embedment of CE in academia has been referred to as the "scholarship of engagement" or "engaged scholarship" (ES), a term attributed to Dr. Ernest Boyer (Boyer, 1996; Welch, 2016). It refers to the scholarship resulting from collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships between HEI members (i.e., faculty, staff, and/or students) and external nonacademic partners or communities (Denny, 2018). Such partnerships are aimed at generating and disseminating new knowledge for addressing public issues and creating CEL opportunities, thereby nurturing civically engaged students and faculty while enhancing the public value of higher education (Denny, 2018; Welch, 2016). Accordingly, ES is created and communicated through teaching (disseminating knowledge and facilitating learning),

research (discovery and development of new knowledge), and service (facilitating sustainable community development), with engaged scholars working within all three functions in teams of scholars and community partners (Denny, 2018; Franz, 2009). Therefore, Hart et al. (2023) described ES as representing the integrative institutionalization of CE, which facilitates scholarship-led transformative societal impact.

Such an approach to scholarship embraces reciprocal sharing of knowledge that emanates from diverse cultural contexts and incorporates this diversity into teaching, learning, and research (September-Brown et al., 2023). It challenges and differs from conventional scholarship (disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-led process) in being driven by mutually beneficial interactions built on core academic functions (Sam et al., 2020; Sandmann, 2008; Sandmann et al., 2008). Therefore, contemporary forms of CE focus on ES as an expression of CE, which represents a participatory, reflexive, and socially accountable knowledge creation and learning process (Kearney, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Furco's (2010) conception of the engaged campus as a theoretical framework to understand the CE, ES, and CEL opportunities within the Indian higher education context. Furco established deep connections between the higher education functions and the community. Further scholarship supports the three components of community-engaged scholarship that Furco proposed: teaching, research, and service.

Community-Engaged Teaching

Furco (2010) viewed community-engaged teaching as being built on the premise that community as a rich landscape provides a great opportunity for strengthening students' education and learning outcomes while giving them a chance to serve the community. Interactions emerging from such activities, which are mutually beneficial and based on respectful collaboration, not only address community needs and enhance community well-being, but also deepen students' academic and civic learning, thereby enriching the whole T-L architecture at HEIs (Benneworth et al., 2018). Engaged teaching (which enables engaged learning) denotes academically based CE courses or variations of curricular or cocurricular T-L strategies, which include service-learning, practice-based learning, experiential learning, and so on (Benneworth et al., 2018; Tandon, 2017).

Such experiences also advance engagement opportunities, paving the way for knowledge transformation rather than a simple transference of information, as happens in traditional teaching practices. These engagement experiences facilitate innovative learning, as they challenge the students to engage in critical reflection on the academic content as well as the real-life situation in the community (Hart et al., 2023). Therefore, engaged teaching denotes a paradigm shift toward a Mode 2 knowledge production approach to curricular T-L for the contextual cocreation of knowledge to solve social challenges, thereby building students' academic competencies as well as enhancing holistic learning, personal values, and a spirit of social responsibility (Hart et al., 2023; Sugawara et al., 2023).

Community-Engaged Research

Engaged research entails transdisciplinary, collaborative research undertaken with the community, who participate as research partners/coresearchers (and not as research subjects) and engage in active knowledge transfer and exchange (Benneworth et al., 2018; Furco, 2010; Sugawara et al., 2023). They also help researchers access hard-to-reach/marginalized populations while securing their trust and buy-in, thereby providing greater legitimacy to research investigations (Furco, 2010). Community-engaged research (CER) is an umbrella term for a wide variety of research-based methods, including community-based research, collaborative research, participatory action research, community-based participatory research (CBPR), and so on (De Santis et al., 2019; Mthembu et al., 2023).

Undertaking such partnership-based research necessitates adopting new pedagogies, learning new competencies, devising new ways of organizing and exploring new knowledge, and recognizing practitioner-based/Indigenous knowledge (FICCI, 2017; Lepore et al., 2021). Accordingly, Bidandi et al. (2021) perceived engaged research as enabling students to become knowledgeable and active citizens in their respective communities, countries, and the world. In this view, engaged research translates into both educational and community development outcomes (Benneworth et al., 2018).

Community-Engaged Service

Community-engaged service includes a range of engagement activities such as community service, community programs, volunteering, and engagement of faculty as expert consultants for providing technical assistance, legal advice, or other discipline-related services for serving community needs (Doberneck et al., 2010, as cited in Benneworth et al., 2018; Furco, 2010). Engaged service involves a collaboration between academic staff and students for providing beneficial services aimed at improving the quality of life of local communities (Cunningham & Smith, 2020; Farnell, 2020). However, such activities may or may not be related to an academic program and are mostly seen as supplementary to core teaching and research activities (Denny, 2018; Farnell, 2020).

Nonetheless, Furco (2010) asserted that despite the extracurricular status of such activities, members of an engaged HEI accord great value to them and take pride in the qualitative contributions that, through engagement, their institution makes in the community. FICCI (2017) viewed the dimension of engaged service as critical to developing in students the attribute of active citizenship, anchored in social learnings and marked by humanistic values of empathy and respect, which help develop the spirit of social consciousness and responsibility. Such "active citizens" seek solutions to contemporary challenges, with the objective of fostering social welfare, thereby emerging as social changemakers (FICCI, 2017).

Methodology

Study Context

Considering the vast Indian higher education sector, comprising 1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges, and 12,002 standalone institutions (Ministry of Education, 2023), the scope of this study was limited to universities and university-level institutions (HEIs). The Indian University Grants Commission (UGC) lists three broad categories of Indian HEIs: (1) *public* HEIs (central and state institutions, run and financed by the central and state governments, respectively), (2) *private* HEIs (funded by private bodies), and (3) *deemed to be* HEIs (accorded the status of universities by the UGC, in recognition of their long-standing academic tradition; UGC, 2024).

We applied three criteria for the selection of HEIs: (1) History: Given the nature of the study, only HEIs with a fair history, experience, and understanding of CE were considered for selection; (2) Category: At least one HEI was selected from each of the three university categories; and (3) Geography: At least one HEI was selected from each of the five geographical zones (north, south, east, west, and center). Finally, eight HEIs (two public, three private, and three deemed-to-be), representing eight different Indian states across five geographical zones, were selected.

Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

The study adopted a nonprobability sampling design, as this methodology would facilitate the discovery of new information to better comprehend the research problem (Johnson et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich, quality perspectives on the study topic (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Accordingly, two samples were selected: (1) Sample 1: academics belonging to the executive leadership (EL) at HEIs and (2) Sample 2: faculty members (FM) from different departments/schools. Using this strategy, participants from Sample 1 could provide a holistic view of the overall vision/mission of the HEI with respect to fostering ES and facilitating CEL, and participants from Sample 2 could provide practical insights on the embedment of CE within the academic functions and the emergent CEL outcomes.

Furthermore, since sample composition is more important than sample size in qualitative research (which focuses on information richness rather than representative opinions), small sample sizes are usually suited in such cases (Guetterman, 2015). Accordingly, the sizes selected for the corresponding study samples are detailed in Table 1.

Although the initial planned number of participant recruitments for Samples 1 and 2 were 16 and 24 respectively, the principle of data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) was applied to determine the final sample size. Accordingly, recruitments continued until no new or additional issues/insights were identified and the repetition of data was observed. Finally, the sample sizes across all eight HEIs were fixed at 21 for Sample 1 and 29 for Sample 2.

Table 1. Samples and Sample Sizes for a Study of Community Engagement Embedment in Higher Education Institution Functions

Sample number	Participants	HEIs covered	Minimum number of participants recruited per HEI	Initially planned recruitments	Final recruitments
1	Executive leadership	8	*n* = 2	*n* = 16	*n* = 21
2	Faculty members	8	*n* = 3	*n* = 24	*n* = 29
Total			*n* = 5	*n* = 40	*n* = 50

Data Collection

The data was collected through semistructured, in-depth interviews for obtaining rich, descriptive information, and learning/understanding about the participant's experiences on the research topic (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide that was designed in alignment with the research questions and provided a structure for the interview, along with the flexibility to pursue probing questions (Durdella, 2019). Some of the questions that guided the interviews were (1) How is CE embedded within the academic functions at your institution? (2) Are there any specific modalities for fostering ES? (3) What kind of CEL opportunities emerges from such embedment, and what is its nature? (4) Are there any facilitative arrangements or practices at the university which support such practices? The data obtained was recorded on an audio-recording device, after obtaining participant consent.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the emergent data was an inductive, iterative, and systematic process, involving a series of steps that included processing and transcribing data, deidentifying and storing data files, segmenting and coding transcribed data, identifying thematized patterns, and developing theorized storylines (Creswell, 2014; Durdella, 2019). The first step consisted of transcribing the interviews verbatim, by converting the data from audio-recorded spoken words) into detailed written transcripts (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Stuckey, 2014). Further, Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was used for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the data for emergent patterns. This method included multiple steps: (1) getting fully familiarized with the data by reading and rereading all the transcripts to get a sense of the entirety of the data, the general emergent ideas, and their tone; (2) generating initial data codes by building on the emergent data impressions, rearranging them into categories, and labeling them "codes"; (3) searching for themes by sorting the narrow codes into broader themes, representing a patterned meaning within the data set; (4) reviewing themes by revisiting the extracted codes to ensure coherence and consistency; (5) defining and naming themes by summarizing the scope and content within each theme, and drawing fair, credible, and accurate analytical conclusions on the final data representation; and (6) weaving the narrative into an objective discussion.

Trustworthiness of Findings

Being a qualitative study, its rigor or trustworthiness was established in the ways in which the study was designed and conducted, thereby conforming to the four-dimensions criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Forero et al., 2018). The credibility of results was ensured through sustained and quality engagement with the participants, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling; transferability of the data was ascertained through detailed narration of the research study and its event and design. Maintenance of a dedicated audit trail, including detailed description of the research methodology, ensured dependability of the study. To ensure the confirmability of the study and reduce researcher bias, all the information/data obtained from the participants was confirmed and corroborated with them. Further, the selection of two data samples and multiple data sources

(audiotapes, transcripts, field notes, and reflective journals) ensured that the findings were triangulated and mutually supported, adding to the confirmability of the study and its findings. Additionally, data excerpts from the interviews have been included in the Results section to support the themes, to facilitate the reader's assessment of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), after ensuring that all ethical protocols were put in place. To obtain the ethical approval, gatekeeper letters issued by the appropriate leadership authority were sought from all selected HEIs, allowing the conduct of the study at their respective institutions. Further, due permission and help was obtained by the authorities for recruitment of participants under Samples 1 and 2. Finally, all the selected participants were briefed on the study's objectives and methodology in writing, including the clauses of anonymity and confidentiality, through detailed letters of information; this information was also communicated in person. Any related questions/clarifications with respect to the processing of information and use of emergent data were addressed to the participant's full satisfaction. Participants were also required to fill out an informed consent form before the commencement of interviews.

Results

Thematic analysis of the findings resulted in the emergence of three themes. They are discussed as follows and supported by excerpts from interviews across Sample 1 (ELs numbered 1 to 21) and Sample 2 (FMs numbered 1 to 29) across all eight HEIs (numbered 1 to 8).

Theme 1: Deriving CEL Opportunities by Embedding CE Within the Teaching Function

Interviews with academics revealed three distinctive modalities through which HEIs are embedding CE within the teaching function, thereby fostering ES and CEL. The first modality involves specialized courses; in the second, CE elements are incorporated in traditionally taught courses; the third requires engaged and immersive T-L pedagogies. We examine these modalities in turn.

Specialized Courses

The first modality was the incorporation of specialized courses/programs on CE within the curriculum. Although these courses differed with respect to their nature and design, three commonalities emerged: (a) embedment within the T-L structure, in being credited and contributing to curricular learning objectives; (b) immersion in real-life, experiential learning, thereby broadening students' learning horizons beyond the theoretical domain; and (c) balance between theory and practice, while ensuring active engagement with the communities, where the students applied their theoretical knowledge in practical settings to explore community problems and devise solutions.

The term "communities," as understood by most interviewees, comprised a diverse, heterogeneous group, which differed primarily on four parameters: (1) geography (rural, urban, slum, semirural/urban), (2) gender (men, women), (3) age (elders, middle-aged, youth), and (4) sociocultural characteristics (ethnicity, linguistics, etc.). Spanning these divisions, the focus was primarily on marginalized and deprived communities facing social inequities, who also assumed the core of the community-engaged courses taught at HEIs. Speaking on one such course on "Community Action Learning" (CAL), an interviewee shared,

> This 2-credit course integrates academics with social issues, where the student identifies a pressing social problem and devises a solution, by using their knowledge and working with communities, and in the bargain, they learn technical skills, communication skills and also life lessons and values. (FM3, HEI1)

Sharing similar views regarding a different program at a different HEI, another interviewee commented,

> Live-in-Labs is a credit based, multidisciplinary experiential learning program, which is conducted in 6 phases. The program alternates between campus and village communities, where students explore rural challenges in diverse areas of water, education, health, etc. and co-design potential solutions along with the communities. (FM14, HEI5)

It was found that reflection and learning from the field experiences formed an important component of such courses, where academic learning and social development were found to be mutually reinforcing. Academic knowledge facilitated progress toward social development objectives, which in turn enriched academic learning through real-life, engaged experiences. Corroborating these ideas, an interviewee shared about the design of a multidisciplinary service-learning course: "The students apply the principles of service-learning to serve community needs in real-time, and here, they learn from the community through active and critical reflection and develop skills to work with diverse community groups" (FM7, HEI2). Community-engaged courses also included part-time/add-on courses, such as one on folk medicine, about which an interviewee elucidated: "Built on CE principles, this course focuses on Indigenous knowledge systems and co-construction of theoretical and Indigenous knowledge for enriching student learning" (FM18, HEI6). Such an engagement with communities enhanced the students' understanding of social issues, appreciation for multiple epistemologies, and grasp of the contextual value of curricular content.

Integrating CE in Traditional Courses

The second modality was the integration of CE elements in the curriculum of traditionally taught courses, for further advancing ES and enriching CEL outcomes for students. Sharing about an institution-wide program, which involved a uniform academic intervention adopted across all disciplines, an interviewee shared,

> Concept to Practice (C2P) is integrated in all disciplines, right from the first to the final semester. Here, the skills of the students are slowly built in the first two semesters, such as observation with empathy, identifying the problems, and then in the third and fourth semester, they go on to propose a solution. The objective of C2P is to enhance the problem-solving skills of the students. (EL9, HEI6)

This focus on advancing the competencies and learning outcomes of the students emerged as the driving factor and natural outcome of making the courses community engaged. This connection became evident while interviewing another academic, who mentioned,

> Our founders felt that the current curricula lacked real-world relevance. So, our syllabus is designed in a way which focuses on action learning in and with the community. So, all courses have a theory, practice, and project component. The core idea is to develop critical competencies for serving the society. (EL3, HEI1)

Hence, such embedment of CE not only utilized academic learning to further social development agendas, but also provided a contemporary/real-world relevance to the existing curriculum, through CEL. Students thereby gained competencies like working collaboratively with the community, engaging in systematic need assessments, carrying out community-focused interventions, and developing leadership and communication skills.

Further, the rationale and modality for embedding CE varied depending on the institutional contexts and/or the respective academic disciplines. With respect to the former, an interviewee remarked,

> Considering the vast tribal context of surrounding population in and around the university, most academic disciplines are adding a bit of tribal context in their syllabus. This is through varied forms of engagement with the tribal communities, for addressing their concerns and working for their welfare. (FM23, HEI7)

Discipline-related variation in CE embedment modalities was elaborated by another interviewee, who recounted,

> Working in the communities is integrated into the departmental curriculum in one way or the other. It may be a social responsibility project in Business Administration; or teaching in slums, government schools/college students in English; service-learning projects in Engineering; Architecture also has some rural interventions. (EL5, HEI2)

These aspects significantly enriched the traditional curriculum and advanced the students' understanding of community and real-time social issues. The core idea was to ensure the best possible use of academic disciplines to effect engagement in a way

that was mutually beneficial and resulted in continued and impactful CEL.

Using Engaged and Immersive Pedagogies

The third modality was the adoption of engaged and immersive pedagogies in the T-L processes, for diversifying and advancing CEL opportunities. Adoption of these pedagogies was premised on the concept of experiential learning, based on action and reflection, for effecting improved student learning outcomes. While action facilitated community development, reflection aided academic learning. Accordingly, an interviewee remarked, "We believe that learning needs to be experienced and transformed into knowledge, wisdom, and action. This includes critical thinking, reflective learning" (EL14, HEI5). Another interviewee emphasized the criticality of engaged pedagogies in connecting the abstractness of academic theory with real-world relevance, as he noted,

> Our teaching methodology incorporates an innovative pedagogy called Labs on Land. It focuses on working in collaboration with community owned real-life systems, and co-learning with communities. This collaboration makes the university a part of communities and its social development process through the application of academic theories for social advancement. This methodology is being used in the areas of renewable energy, dairy technology, creation of smart villages, etc. (EL20, HEI8)

Interviewees also provided an account of other specialized and creative pedagogical tools employed in the T-L processes for working with communities, which aided CEL in meaningful ways. Here, an interviewee shared, "In the Agricultural discipline, instead of Participatory Rural Appraisal, we are now using Participatory Learning & Action, as it is more holistic and involves deeper community-based learning" (FM2, HEI1). Further, art-based techniques also contributed to advancing CEL opportunities, as elucidated below:

> In our teaching-learning processes, we focus a lot on art-integration, which results in more organic and natural learning. So, music, painting, storytelling, theatre, are some of the methodologies we employ when working with the communities or during the community-based internships that our students do. (FM28, HEI8)

Aligned with the contemporary advancements in CEL, another novel pedagogy adopted was human-centered design methodologies, built on the tenets of design thinking, which aided CEL while facilitating unlearning and relearning when working with the community. Reflecting on the same, an interviewee shared, "Getting trained in and using participatory methodologies like human centred designs, students are able to better understand and reflect on the community context, its resources, opportunities, challenges, etc." (FM14, HEI5). These insights provide fair evidence that engaged pedagogies facilitate deeper connections with communities, ease the process of rapport development, and advance the understanding of communities and their contexts. This process includes unlearning of prior conceptions or misconceptions about the community and their issues and approaching them from an open-minded perspective. While aiding colearning from, in, and with the communities, such exercises also help develop an empathetic approach in the students.

Another set of interviewees emphasized that evaluation of such engaged courses needs to be based on innovative techniques (rather than traditional academic assessments) to truly gauge CEL outcomes. Accordingly, an interviewee shared,

> The evaluation rubrics under the service-learning course involves multiple things, like it can be done on the basis of a project; or a video that students prepare, based on their field learnings; or it may also be by way of self-reflections. Academic assessments happen in a very rigid manner. We wanted to change this, so our evaluation is purely innovation and creativity based. (FM7, HEI2)

Therefore, evaluation in engaged courses involved appreciating the individuality and creativity of learners and giving them the flexibility to present their learnings in a multitude of ways. Another creative approach to evaluation involved including the community themselves as assessors of the students' performance, as one

interviewee elucidated: "In our Community Action Learning program, one part of the assessment is done by the community itself, and the next part is the academic assessment, which we do" (FM3, HEI1). Similarly, another interviewee shared, "In service-learning projects in the engineering department, we take evaluation from the community partners also. So, 30% evaluation comes from the community partners and 70% evaluation is done by faculty members" (FM5, HEI2). With communities and community partnerships forming the core of the CE processes, providing community evaluation of engaged courses made the CEL process more authentic, while also being true to the CE spirit.

An overview of some such CEL courses is presented in the Appendix.

Theme 2: Harnessing CEL Opportunities by Embedding CE Within the Research Function

Interviewees viewed the research function as providing valuable opportunities for CEL when CE was embedded in it, thereby fostering community-engaged research (CER) approaches. We found the most popular manifestation of CER to be community-based participatory research (CBPR), which is coordinated by specialized CBPR hubs established at half of the HEIs sampled and embedded in the curriculum as short-term courses and projects. The difference between traditional research and CER/CBPR is reflected in their values, design, and emergent outcomes. Traditional research is chiefly centered on a researcher-led agenda, whereas CER/CBPR stems from local community needs, emphasizes collaboration and participation, and is driven by the overarching objective of social action and social change (Hall & Tandon, 2017). Corroborating these ideas, an interviewee remarked,

> Our research problem is defined by the community, so this sets our pathway. This is also kind of obligatory for us that each research question which is outlined, must be useful for the society. So, all our research practices are guided by the values of service and social welfare. (EL13, HEI5)

Another interviewee elaborated on this approach:

> Our community partnership research model is carried out in collaboration with the community. It is completely based on their needs, which we identify through a systematic need assessment. So whatever project we design, it considers the social impact and community benefits, and these social outcomes are outlined in the research proposal stage itself. (EL21, HEI8)

In terms of such CER approaches and the discussions under Theme 1, two relational parallels can be drawn, regarding the emergent CEL opportunities. Essentially, in CER, researchers apply knowledge *for* the community, and they find solutions *with* the community.

Researchers Apply Their Knowledge for the Community

First, similar to engaged teaching and experiential learning approaches, HEIs are using CER as a medium through which researchers can apply their knowledge, skills, and expertise for deriving positive and socially beneficial outcomes for the community. This process of addressing social challenges and devising solutions provides crucial opportunities for CEL, as it involves practical, real-time learning in the communities. Commenting on these aspects, an interviewee noted,

> The university's focus is on projects which benefits the communities and addresses its most pertinent and immediate needs and problems, through the application of its expertise, technology, and infrastructure in real time. The methodology of CBPR is being specially used for this purpose. (FM13, HEI4)

Further, in such research approaches too, classroom theory is coupled with field-based action and complemented with critical reflection to further consolidate, enrich, and advance CEL. Or, as an interviewee shared,

> Our research plan is always an interplay between theoretical knowledge and field engagement. So, the implementation is very much supported with lectures. This is to ensure that the researchers in the field are in a better position to deal with real-life situations and derive valuable learnings from the process, as part of reflective exercises in the classroom. (EL14, HEI5)

Researchers Find Solutions With the Community

Second, similar to the participatory pedagogies discussed in the preceding theme, the basic design of CBPR also involves devising solutions in collaboration with the community, through arranging impactful and mutually beneficial community partnerships. This practice enables colearning with the communities, resulting in meaningful cocreation of knowledge. Accordingly, an interviewee elucidated,

> The main purpose of CBPR is understanding the community's problem, and solving them together, along with the communities, who are coresearchers in the process. They participate in the entire process, including data collection, so the learning happens together. Based on that, local solutions are devised which are suited to the community's needs and are also useful for them. (EL19, HEI7)

Recounting an experience involving such coconstruction of knowledge, an interviewee shared:

> Co-construction of knowledge between universities and communities is based on areas of shared social concern. For example, the university neighbourhoods have farms, where there was a huge problem of crop destruction by birds, which troubled the farmers. On the other hand, the university faculty housing was grappling with the problem of dust storms. This issue was then taken up in one of the studio exercises of the architecture students studying landscape, in collaboration with the communities. It was mutually decided to develop a local food garden, where the students shared their knowledge in landscape design, and the farmers shared their experiences in age-old farming systems and crop selection. Therefore, through colearning, the problem was mutually resolved. (EL11, HEI4)

Community collaboration was thus viewed as valuable for harnessing local knowledge. This form of colearning facilitated devising solutions from the community's standpoint and utility, thereby guaranteeing its usefulness and sustainability, while also enhancing the students' cognitive capacities, practical skills, and social attributes. Further, considering that participation of communities as coresearchers in the process lies at the heart of CER approaches, the interviews revealed that the data collection processes adopted were also creative and innovative. In particular, these processes facilitated mutual learning by appreciating and incorporating the diverse and multiple epistemologies of community knowledge(s).

Accordingly, art-based methods found much popularity in such research approaches, which not only contributed to rapport development, but also helped communities share their viewpoints and knowledge more expressively, thereby facilitating smoother knowledge exchange and CEL. Elaborating on this result, an interviewee shared,

> In one of our projects on domestic waste management, we adopted arts-based methods, because it was the best means to communicate with communities. The people responded and gelled in well. We used pictures, drawings, visual representations. Students learn a lot from such unconventional processes. (FM13, HEI4)

Another interviewee added, "In CBPR projects, we use storytelling, *nukkad nataks* or street plays, in various aspects like education, sustainable livelihoods, etc." (FM24, HEI7).

Another variation of a CER approach providing CEL opportunities has been the various applied research interventions carried out by different academic departments or institutional research centers. These approaches (while being different from "ideal" CER/CBPR approaches) emerged as important institutional mechanisms for effecting socially relevant research, having both academic and social implications. These approaches are used to carry out research projects of diverse nature, aimed at social benefit, and situate HEIs as valuable knowledge partners, effecting socially relevant knowledge exchange and transfer. Narrating an example of this, an interviewee shared,

> Every department has their own area of expertise, and they do some form of applied research, which has a community or a social relevance. They identify a set of social challenges which has implications for

> the community, the institution and for the government and then come up with solutions and recommendations. (FM29, HEI8)

A more detailed example was shared by another interviewee, as below:

> Under the student start up and innovation policy, a funded initiative of the state government; students (undergraduate, post-graduate) are called on to draft research proposals on socially important issues. The policy ensures that innovation processes link academia with society and small & medium enterprises. Here, the students and faculty solve social challenges and create entrepreneurial opportunities. This gives students a valuable learning opportunity, where they can apply their knowledge in practice, by way of research projects. (FM10, HEI3)

Consequently, while the faculty members and students get an opportunity to acquire real-time and research-based learnings on social issues, the communities benefit through the development of solutions/models for addressing challenges in their daily lives. Depending on the nature of projects, the governments and local institutions also emerge as stakeholders who benefit from the process. In some cases, these applied research projects also involve an active interplay of different disciplines, with multiple individuals applying their knowledge, skills, and expertise to achieve the desired CEL and social development outcomes. Here, while sharing an example of an institutional research center, an interviewee posited,

> We have a Centre for Integrated Tribal Studies, which works for improving the quality of lives of tribals in the areas of education, health, and economic development through action-oriented research activities. Different departments are involved here, and this connects university and socially relevant issues, and learning on the ground happens. (FM23, HEI7)

However, when viewed from the CE dimension, considerable differences were evident, as most of such applied research initiatives were HEI driven, so researchers led and coordinated the entire process, with limited participation by the communities. Therefore, although such projects were mostly community-placed, rather than community-based, the emergent learning opportunities were evident. Transforming these efforts into truly engaged ones would ensure complementarity/mutuality of benefits and authentic learning for all stakeholders.

Theme 3: Drawing CEL Opportunities by Embedding CE Within the Service Function

Exploration of the ways in which CE is embedded within the service function of HEIs—particularly those that offer opportunities for CEL—resulted in the emergence of three exclusive mechanisms: delivering specific, targeted interventions; acting through diverse avenues of institutional outreach; and collaborating with external partners.

Specific, Targeted Interventions for Communities

The first mechanism included designing and delivering specific, targeted interventions for bringing positive, tangible, and qualitative changes in the lives of the communities. These activities were aimed at addressing the immediate community needs/concerns in a way that eased their lives on a day-to-day basis. Similar to the experiential learning opportunities within the teaching and research functions, these service-based activities also gave the students a platform for new, real-time, and social learnings. Accordingly, an interviewee shared,

> We carry out different tasks in our adopted villages. Like in one of the villages, the civil engineering students came across various ground water related problems, because of severe water scarcity, especially in summers. Here, they conducted activities such as recharging of water pits, basic surveys to know more about the landscape, and took remedial actions accordingly. (FM10, HEI3)

Recounting a similar experience in the discipline of paramedical and allied health sciences, another interviewee shared,

> The department provides health related services to the local community, like blood tests, through the community diagnostics

> centre. These services are offered at a subsidized rate at their doorstep and forms a part of the curriculum. If anyone is not able to come, the collection of blood samples is organized at their homes. (EL2, HEI1)

The reflections from these excerpts point to three aspects of this mechanism. First, these activities also entail judicious application of the university's expertise and resources for providing effective solutions and serving the community. Here, the students get another opportunity to derive practical learnings, anchored in theoretical knowledge. Second, the actions described by interviewees illustrate the growing instances of CEL in diverse disciplines, particularly natural/pure sciences, which have traditionally been viewed as nonengaged. Curricular inclusion of such activities further enhanced the validity and authenticity of such practices. And third, these activities encourage the development of civic and social responsibility in students, which is crucial, given that these are the core values that drive the spirit of any ES intervention.

Diverse Institutional Outreach Structures

The second mechanism for advancing CEL by making the service function more engaged was the diverse institutional community outreach structures, driven by the overarching mandate of securing community welfare. Narrating about one such structure, an interviewee shared:

> We have a Culture, Sports & Responsibility (CSR) forum. It is an integral part of our academic structure, where students have to spend 124 hours per year. It is a cosmopolitan group, where several schools work together in collaboration. Like, if agriculture or management students while working in the community, find that the farmers need some technical assistance in farming, then the engineering department can chip in and demonstrate the use of drones for spraying of fertilizers. So, it is a very integrated model of community engagement, and involves lot of useful learnings for students. (FM2, HEI1)

Experience of another institutional community outreach structure at a different HEI was shared by an interviewee as follows:

> Our Centre for Social Action (CSA) links community partners and academics and undertakes development projects in and with 4 urban communities and 122 rural communities spread across the 5 states of Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Telangana, Maharashtra and Kerala. Every department has a representative in CSA, and we are also planning to make it a credited program soon. (EL7, HEI2)

Another EL from the same HEI also reflected on the CSA, as he added,

> Here, the students apply their classroom knowledge (of various disciplines) towards solving socially relevant problems. These problems are taken up as projects with an ideal tenure of a semester and can also be in the form of research of a social nature. Through these projects, students learn about social issues and work towards a better tomorrow. (EL5, HEI2)

In addition to real-time application of disciplinary learning, these structures offered advantages by way of having student representation from different disciplines across the institution. This wide representation, combined with their curricular inclusion, demonstrates immense potential for advancing and diversifying CEL options and opportunities. In being institutionally recognized establishments, these structures enjoyed great visibility and popularity institution-wide, which could be leveraged to further advance CEL uniformly across the institution and its departments.

Collaboration With External Partners

The first two mechanisms for embedding CE within the service function, thereby contributing toward the creation of CEL opportunities, focused on in-house efforts; the third mechanism involves the collaborative efforts undertaken by HEIs with external partners. Commenting on one such partnership with a governmental institution, an interviewee shared,

> In collaboration with the Rajkot Municipal Corporation, we have undertaken a project to make Rajkot a Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aware city. Here, we work on local SDG issues, where the students

> go to different wards of municipal corporation and create awareness. We are also preparing a policy document on SDGs in action, in the local language. (EL8, HEI3)

Another interviewee reflected on a similar partnership with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as she shared,

> A lot of our CE activities, projects are undertaken in partnership with NGOs. They already have projects running in the community, so the people know them, which makes our access to communities easy. There is a lot to learn from them as well, as they have immense grassroot [*sic*] knowledge of communities and their local context. (EL11, HEI4)

These excerpts reinforce the importance of fostering diverse external partnerships and considering the range of opportunities, expertise, resources, and skills that the partners bring, which not only aids CE implementation, but also contributes toward facilitating CEL for the students. Within this mechanism, government partnerships enable CEL on policy issues and their implementation; NGO partnerships facilitate CEL in communities, supported by their vast network in the communities and their in-depth knowledge of the latter's context. Participation in such partnerships is important, considering that the first step toward ensuring CEL is entering the communities, which is not easy, especially for HEIs, because they are often viewed as "outsiders" and regarded with fear and apprehension. NGO partnerships play an important role in dispelling this notion, thus providing access and opportunities for CEL, resulting in the achievement of both academic and social development outcomes.

Further, most such activities represented the core ethos of the HEIs' ideologies and beliefs in terms of achieving community empowerment and sustainable social change, which they deeply valued. Advancement of real-time CEL opportunities for students emerged as a positive and natural outcome of external partnerships.

Discussion

The findings from this study answer the research question by highlighting the different ways in which CE is embedded within the academic functions at HEIs, fostering ES and resulting in diverse CEL opportunities. In doing so, the findings position ES as an important mechanism for fostering rich CEL experiences, thereby providing a unique conceptualization of CEL. In particular, the interviews explored the nature, design, and depth of such CEL opportunities, which contributed to (1) enhanced knowledge through the combination of theory and practice; (2) development of social awareness and consciousness; and (3) acquiring of competencies such as active reflection, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking. In balancing classroom and immersive field experiences, CEL experiences also resulted in the development of cognitive capabilities (head), affective values (heart), and psychomotor skills (hand).

These findings reinforce the existing literature that emphasizes the importance of engaging the intellect, emotion, and application/action in engaged T-L processes, which are at the center of community building (Watt, 2013). This synthesis can help students engage in strong relationships not only with the communities, but also with themselves (Pasquesi, 2020; Rendon, 2009). Learning along these experiential dimensions results in the development of professional, personal, and civic competencies, creative and design thinking capabilities, and collaborative skills (Lake et al., 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2022; Peng & Kueh, 2022). Such an orientation shapes learning in a way that helps students address community problems that are messy and require application of multiple viewpoints across various disciplines, through adoption of myriad techniques (Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Houston & Lange, 2018).

The analysis also expands our understanding of related issues by detailing the conditions for fostering ES-aided CEL and its associated implications. The study therefore highlights three key lessons emerging from the preceding discussion: the importance of adopting a transformative and socially relevant approach; the centrality of cocreating knowledge through dialogic, collaborative engagement; and the utility of offering whole-institution support via existing infrastructure.

Transformative and Socially Relevant Approach

First, the study underscores the importance of adopting a dynamic and innovative ap-

proach to scholarship (Dickens et al., 2023; Hart et al., 2023; Quillinan et al., 2018). This process entails devising a transformative and socially relevant curriculum, built on creative and innovative approaches to T-L and evaluation (Groulx et al., 2020; Nkonki-Mandleni, 2023). Such approaches link the curriculum with local/contextual realities, thereby creating opportunities for CEL and resulting in the achievement of academic and social development outcomes. This connection with real-life scenarios enhances the relevance of the curriculum, which in turn enables more effective CEL outcomes in students, compared to outcomes emerging from traditional classroom-based approaches (Bhagwan et al., 2022; Molosi-France & Dipholo, 2022). Therefore, to foster meaningful CEL, T-L processes need to be conceived, designed, and executed unconventionally, and from a community-engaged perspective.

Cocreation of Knowledge Through Dialogic Engagement

Second, as CE builds on the cocreation of knowledge(s) between academia and community, the emergent CEL challenges the dominant paradigms of knowledge production and focuses on colearning from, in, and with the communities (Bidandi et al., 2021; Saidi, 2023). CEL thus emerges from dialogic and collaborative engagement between academic stakeholders and communities/community partners, indicating that the learning is interactive (rather than linear) and the resulting knowledge is coconstructed (rather than delivered; Kelly & Given, 2023; Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001). These results also evidence the importance of strong and sustainable community partnerships for achieving CEL, given the diverse knowledge(s), expertise, and experience of the communities/community partners (Osborne et al., 2021; Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). Amalgamation of community knowledge with theoretical expertise enriches the latter, making CEL more holistic, contextually pertinent, and socially relevant.

Offering Institution-wide Support Through Existing Infrastructure

Third, in revealing specific institutional mechanisms for fostering CE, ES, and CEL, the study also discloses two significant implications for institutional policy.

First, ensuring holistic CEL experiences requires a whole-institution approach, which calls for the institutionalization of ES practices. It emerged that HEIs that were able to successfully adopt such approaches had the requisite support at all levels within the institution, including enabling policies, facilitative practices, and supportive personnel (Kelly & Given, 2023; McGeough et al., 2022). To further bolster the adoption of such engaged practices, there is also a need for strong and continued commitment from institutional leadership (September-Brown et al., 2023). This support is necessary because, as some of our interviewees mentioned in their reflections on these aspects, challenges remain in adopting such approaches, given that the dominant educational paradigm in India continues to prioritize traditional approaches to education. The support of institutional leadership therefore is critical to facilitating ES.

The second policy implication relates to leveraging the existing institutional infrastructure to create opportunities for ES and CEL. Such infrastructure may include research centers, CBPR hubs, community outreach centers, and so on. Enjoying the advantages of good institutional visibility and recognition, human resources, and a vast social network and community connections, these structures can emerge as strong aids for HEIs looking to strengthen the engagement dimension of scholarship for creating CEL opportunities (Jose & Sahu, 2023; Venugopal et al., 2023). HEIs can equip themselves to realize the true spirit of CE by creating an inventory of such platforms and exploring the different ways in which they can enable CEL.

Emerging within the Indian context, these insights have valuable implications for HEIs (in both the Global North and Global South) who are interested in deepening ES and creating CEL opportunities. In leveraging the Indian experiences and learning in this context, the authors propose a conceptual model (Figure 1) as a practical tool to help such HEIs implement CE initiatives, create ES opportunities, and derive CEL outcomes. This model provides a detailed and interlinked three-step process, while also demonstrating a hierarchical representation of the embedment of CE in the three HEI functions.

1. Service. Service is transformed to engaged service through diverse community-based interventions, departmental projects, initiatives undertaken by institutional outreach centers, and channeling external partnerships

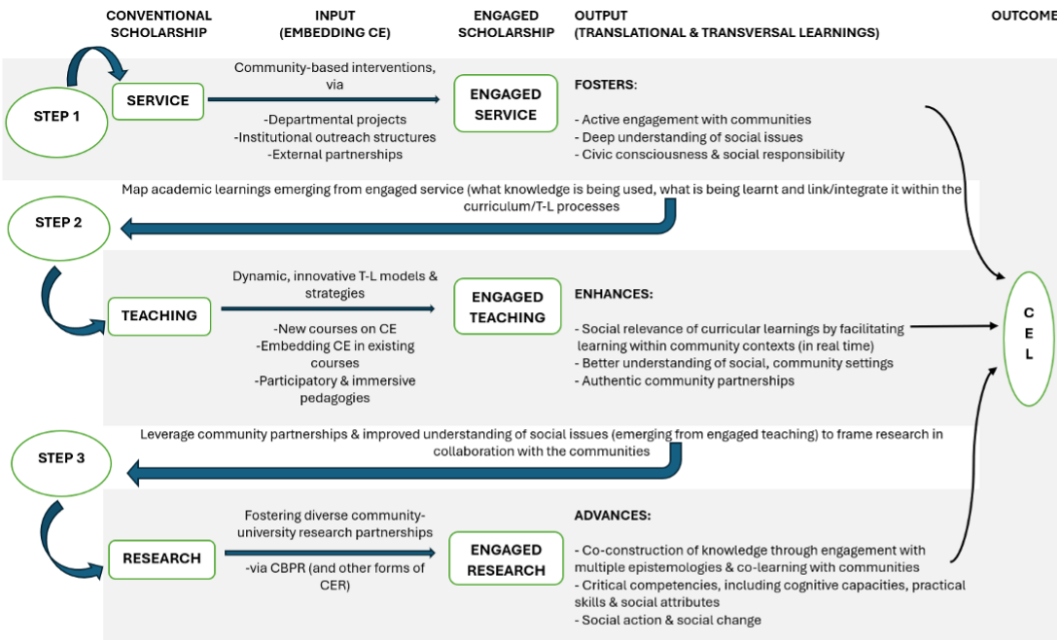
(governmental organizations/NGOs). In addition to providing opportunities for learning and serving simultaneously, engaged service also fosters active engagement with communities, while inculcating social and civic sensibilities.

2. Teaching. The learnings emerging from engaged service are mapped and integrated into T-L functions to implement dynamic T-L models via new courses in CE, embedment of CE in existing courses/curriculum, and incorporating participatory, immersive pedagogies into T-L practice. These efforts facilitate engaged T-L opportunities, thereby enabling both academic learning outcomes and an improved understanding of the social contexts/issues. These efforts not only foster, but also strengthen, community–university partnerships.
3. Research. Community–university partnerships are leveraged to jointly explore/research social challenges and their potential solutions, which are locally usable, feasible, and can be coowned and managed by communities. Adopting such an approach to research transforms traditional research initiatives into CER/CBPR interventions. The emergent benefits include the coconstruction of knowledge for developing sustainable solutions to social challenges and building 21st-century competencies in the researchers. Developing such an aptitude is also critical for the development of a self-directed learner, capable of taking responsible, judicious, and collective actions toward safe and sustainable future(s).

This model demonstrates how the embedment of CE in the HEI functions (of teaching, research, and service) transforms them into ES practices, resulting in the creation of CEL opportunities. In order to make this conceptualization more explicit, the authors draw on the study's insights to present operational definitions for CE, ES, and CEL, to make this representation and the relations between these terms more precise and pragmatic.

In this context, CE can be defined as an umbrella term, which envisages transformative approaches to diverse and reciprocal community–university partnerships, where both stakeholders undertake joint activities as equal allies. This engagement channels the specialized knowledge and expertise of academia and the practical wisdom of communities to address multiple societal needs and challenges. This collaborative approach to the coconstruction of knowledge is built on a mutually beneficial premise, resulting in enhanced student learning outcomes while driving social change and sustainable development.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Embedment of CE in HEI Functions



The intersection of CE with academic scholarship forms the basic premise of ES, which can be defined as the set of diverse approaches to engaged teaching (contextually relevant courses and curricula, encompassing pedagogies like service-learning, project/practice-based learning, experiential learning, etc.), engaged research (CBPR and other forms of CER), and engaged service (community service, social outreach, etc.) that combine CE with conventional scholarship. Adopting these approaches creates transformative and contextual learning opportunities for students by connecting theory/classroom with practice/real-world scenarios.

Such impactful learning opportunities emerging from ES constitutes the core of CEL, which can be defined as translational and transversal learnings that emerge when a team of students, teachers, faculty mentors, and communities/community partners work together to explore and address situated, contextual social problems, while also delivering an educational intervention and building student competencies (on critical thinking, reflection, collaborative problem solving, etc.). Consequently, CEL emerges out of a mutually beneficial, collaborative learning ecosystem, and results in the achievement of academic objectives and social development outcomes.

This connection between CE, ES, and CEL provides practical and apposite insights, which serve as a valuable conceptual guidance framework for HEIs seeking to leverage CE and ES to create diverse and effective CEL opportunities within their academic framework. Such efforts by HEIs represent their commitment toward transformative ES practices, aimed at nurturing knowledgeable, informed, and socially responsible citizens, capable of responding to and successfully addressing multiple social challenges.

Conclusion

This study on the exploration of CE, ES, and CEL opportunities at Indian HEIs addresses a significant gap in the literature, particularly with respect to the conspicuous absence of voices and perspectives on CEL from the Global South, and India in particular. Based on the data from 50 interviews, this study sought to develop a nuanced understanding of the different modalities of CE embedment within the academic functions, the diverse manifestations of ES, and the emergent CEL outcomes. CE embedment is manifested through designing engaged, socially relevant courses and the adoption of engaged and immersive pedagogies therein, which facilitates colearning, indicating engaged teaching practices. Further, while engaged research sought coconstruction of knowledge for community welfare through approaches like CBPR, engaged service interventions anchored in field-based practical learnings were directed toward achieving holistic and sustainable social development.

The study also contributes to the literature on conceptualizing international CEL by offering an analytical frame (conceptual model) for global scholars to conceptualize CE, ES, and CEL within their respective institutional context, along with presenting operational definitions of these concepts. Additionally, it provides a practical blueprint for identifying existing institutional opportunities to aid ES and leverage external support (partnerships) for it. Further, the study's findings bolster arguments for multiple and multilevel approaches for fostering CE, ES, and CEL. These approaches include efforts at the institutional level (policy), at the faculty level (designing an engaged curriculum), and at the level of community/community partners (external partnerships). Such multilevel approaches are essential given the need for the stakeholders to interact and function in unison and coherence, to ensure that the ensuing CE, ES, and CEL outcomes are effective, impactful, and transformational.

However, since CE is still an emerging trend in Indian higher education and not many HEIs have adopted it, the study remained limited to eight HEIs. Although these institutions represented all major geographical zones of India, HEIs from northeastern India could not be represented. Therefore, future researchers can address these gaps by exploring and analyzing CEL practices at more HEIs, as increasing numbers of institutions begin to align with the engagement framework, backed by a supportive NEP 2020. Here, they may also choose to undertake dedicated regional studies for exploring the diverse nature and dimensions of CE and CEL practices, and how they vary from one region to another. Further, at an institutional level, research studies in India and globally can use tools like the TEFCE (Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement of Higher Education) toolbox or some of its underlying

features to prepare an institutional CE heat-map, to better understand the application of CE within the higher education functions and the emergent CEL outcomes (O'Brien et al., 2022). This analysis can provide an authentic and empirical evidence base of institutional CE and CEL practices, while also evidencing their impact and sustainability potential.

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Declaration of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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Appendix. An Overview of the CEL Courses Referred to for This Study

Course/program name & positioning	Purpose	CEL activities	Pedagogies (P) used & Communities (C) engaged
1. Community Action Learning (HEI1) Included in the curriculum in the School of Vocational Education & Training (compulsory).	Integrating academics with societal issues, where students draw on the principle of "learning by doing" to identify community problems, explore solutions in collaboration, take community feedback on the same, and propose a feasible solution.	• Projects: involves the triple components of *community engagement* (for identifying problems), *collaborative action* (for exploring and devising solutions), and *situated learnings* (relating to academic theory & beyond) • Skill drill: focused on real-life problem-solving in areas of technical concern faced by the communities, while learning to apply theory in practice and developing interpersonal competencies. • Champions of Change: focused on devising a socially relevant innovation for addressing pressing community issues in diverse areas such as waste management & environment conservation.	P: Experiential/ applied learning, project-based learning. C: Rural, tribal (Indigenous), semirural communities (men, women).
2. Live in Labs (HEI5) Included in the curriculum of faculties of Engineering, Management, Science, Arts & Science, & Medicine (compulsory).	Using academic knowledge and resources to address pressing rural challenges in diverse areas of development and design sustainable solutions.	• In-campus training on immersive, engaged pedagogies. • Village immersion (leveraging engaged pedagogies to understand the social context/ challenges and identify the problem in collaboration with the communities). • Developing theoretically sound and socially relevant base propositions, for the problems identified during village immersion (on campus). • Fieldwork involving codesign of solutions, in collaboration with the communities. • Developing prototype of codesigned solutions (on campus). • Testing and implementation of prototype/solutions in the field and training the communities in the case of technical solutions.	P: Human-centered development, design thinking, participatory rural appraisal, experiential learning. C: Rural communities (men, women, elders, youth).

Course/program name & positioning	Purpose	CEL activities	Pedagogies (P) used & Communities (C) engaged
3. Service-learning (HEI2) Included in the curriculum of departments of Sociology and Social Work, Psychology, Media Studies, Mathematics, Economics, Commerce, Business and Management, English and Cultural Studies, Computer Science, Education, Law & Engineering (compulsory).	Learning about the significance and fundamental characteristics of service-learning while applying these concepts to community needs in real time. The course nurtures students as social change agents, capable of working with and learning from the community while engaging in action and critical reflection.	• Community need assessment (while aligning needs with curricular learning goals). • Project plan development (embedding the tenets of community engagement and mutuality of benefits). • Effective resource utilization (while engaging in meaningful community-based activities for drawing maximum impact). • Critical and structured reflection (for deepening learning across cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains).	P: Inquiry-based learning, project-based learning. C: Urban, rural, semiurban communities in villages, towns, cities (men, women, youth).
4. Folk medicine (HEI6) Part time/add-on course offered by an institutional center for excellence, aimed at bridging the disconnection between HEIs and society (optional).	Engaging with rural women in real-life settings, where the students learn from them various nuances of rural life. The students also derive learnings on ancient, traditional, and extremely effective health-care techniques, which remain inaccessible for want of documentation.	• Learning with the community: Indian women in general and rural women in particular are recognized as an unparalleled source of knowledge in areas such as energy management, herbal medicines, and home remedies. Students imbibe such learnings when they engage with them in real-life situations. Conversely, through this engagement, the women become acquainted with modern ideas on simple, effective, and sustainable livelihoods. • Creation of new knowledge with the community: Students also conduct community-based research projects for exploring, analyzing, and documenting the traditional medicinal knowledge available from rural women, which is then produced as academic literature.	P: Project-based learning, participatory learning, & action. C: Predominantly rural women.

Course/program name & positioning	Purpose	CEL activities	Pedagogies (P) used & Communities (C) engaged
5. Concept 2 Practice (HEI3) Introduced as a systematic academic intervention in all disciplines (compulsory).	Centered on a transformative and interdisciplinary education model, the program's objective is to enhance creativity, innovation, problem-solving, & critical thinking skills in students.	• Empathetic observation (understanding the problem from the perspective of the people facing the problem through active engagement with them). • Identification of problem (in partnership with the community), for which potential, feasible solutions can be developed within a reasonable period of time. • Development of a list of potential solutions and selecting the one which fares best, given the available resources, easy usability, and uptake. • Prototype preparation (converting the solution into a mini model, which can be replicated and scaled).	P: Design thinking, andragogy (emphasizing self-directed learning), heutagogy (encouraging the learner to go beyond problem solving and draw on reflections, experiences. and interactions to take appropriate action). C: Rural, urban, semiurban communities (men, women, youth).

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Advancing Societally Engaged and International Planetary Health Education: Innovations, Lessons, and Recommendations for Educators

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Abstract

The delivery of planetary health education continues to grow across many disciplines, institutions, and geographical regions. To equip students with the transformative competencies needed to become agents of change in the planetary health field, educators must adopt innovative educational approaches. The course Planetary Health and Climate Resilient Health Systems aimed to pioneer this effort by integrating challenge-based learning, community-engaged learning, and Collaborative Online International Learning within a collaboration between multiple universities in the Netherlands and one in the Philippines. The challenges encountered during its development revealed a significant gap between the recommendations and practices conceptualized and promoted in higher education, and the supportive structures available for implementing these innovations. This commentary outlines three key lessons learned from developing and delivering the course. It offers practical insights for educators worldwide to design and provide innovative, international, and societally engaged education to meet current and future planetary health challenges.

Keywords: planetary health education, challenge-based learning, cross-university, collaborative online international learning, equitable partnerships

Since the 2015 launch of the Rockefeller Foundation Lancet Commission on planetary health, an enormous groundswell of interest in planetary health education has emerged across many disciplines, institutions, and geographical regions. To provide a shared foundation for this growing interest, the Planetary Health Alliance created a set of 12 cross-cutting principles for planetary health education (Guzmán et al., 2021). This framework moves beyond a prescriptive list of competencies and promotes praxis; participatory teaching methods; transdisciplinary (including epistemological) diversity; and solution-oriented and action-based approaches to tackling challenges related to environmental and social contexts, local priorities, technology, and resources available in each learning setting.

To become agents of change in the planetary health field, students must be supported in developing transformative competencies, such as creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility (Centre for Global Challenges, 2023; OECD, 2018). Educators can fulfill this need by adopting innovative educational approaches (Centre for Global Challenges, 2023; Redvers et al., 2023) and a reorientation away from more traditional teaching to support learning that includes navigating complexity and uncertainty and development of competencies to effectively combine different disciplinary insights to develop solutions for real-life challenges.

Project Description

During 2021–2022, educators from across the strategic alliance (EWUU) between Technical University Eindhoven (TU/e), Wageningen University and Research (WUR), Utrecht University (UU), and University Medical Center Utrecht (UMCU) came together to build an interdisciplinary and international course at the intersection of three topics: global and planetary health, climate change, and health systems transformation. The course built on the five foundational domains of the planetary health education framework (Table 1). To address these topics, we integrated a variety of innovative educational approaches, including societal engagement through the combination of challenge-based learning (CBL) and community-engaged learning (CEL), wherein the students worked alongside the UMCU Green Office as a societal partner to tackle planetary health challenges within the hospital. The university Green Office was selected as the societal partner due to their specific work at the intersection of both planetary health and health systems. The Green Office already being connected to one of the involved universities also meant that a certain level of trust was present to help facilitate engagement with both the educators and students as well as a sustainable partnership. In-class group activities helped to guide students through the process of engaging with the Green Office actors and prepare for their group assignments.

Alongside the investigation into their challenge, EWUU students took part in an additional Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project with students from St. Luke's Medical Center in the Philippines. This project provided all students with an essential opportunity to develop skills in not only interdisciplinary, but international and intercultural collaboration, which are essential to addressing complex and persistent planetary health challenges. International student groups from both countries took part in selected joint workshops and collaborated to develop an infographic aimed to analyze an issue at the intersection of planetary health and climate-resilient health systems. Students used their diverse perspectives to research the issues and tailored their analysis to a specific context and target group. The 6-week course took place between February and March, the first edition in 2023 and the second in 2024.

Table 1. Overview of the Five Planetary Health Framework Components and Didactic Approaches to Integrating Them in the Course

Planetary health framework components	Didactic approaches to course integration
Health equity and justice	• Cocreation of curriculum and content with educators, students, and educational policymakers, with bidirectional learning • Online module and class teaching equity and justice as a "big idea" for CBL. Therefore, students needed to include this lens in this investigation and solution. • Equitable partnership for COIL
Movement building and systems change	• CBL approach • Multiple university collaboration • International collaboration for collective knowledge-building and solution development • Workshop on student activism and active hope
Interconnectedness with nature	• Online module content delivery • Point of focus in discussion sessions with meditation and nature walks
Anthropocene and health	• Online module content delivery • Climate Fresk, a serious game for students (Spyckerelle, 2022)
Systems thinking and complexity	• Online module content delivery • CBL approach

This article details the successes and challenges we encountered by incorporating societal engagement within an international and cross-university collaboration (CUC) to support students with developing transformative competencies to tackle global planetary health challenges. These lessons were generated from insights gained throughout the entire process, including preparation, cocreation, implementation, evaluation, and adaptation across the first two editions of this course, Planetary Health and Climate Resilient Health Systems. This process included biweekly multiuniversity team meetings, an analysis of the available literature, curriculum mapping of available courses across relevant themes at the participating institutions, and examining two online international symposia for content and didactic expertise (*Challenge Based and Community Engaged Learning* and *Sustainability and Healthcare*), as well as meetings and open conversations with international partners, university staff, course coaches, societal stakeholders who provided real-world challenges for the students to work on, and the students themselves. The insights gained are consolidated into three key lessons. The first lesson is that societally engaged learning requires flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness from both educators and students. Second, building CUCs demands strategic structural and administrative reforms to unlock the full potential of movement building and systems change. Third, for ethical COIL courses, equitable partnerships are necessary. These lessons primarily reflect educators' perspectives. Future research should focus on exploring the perspectives of students and community partners.

International Community-Engaged Learning: Conceptualization and Integration

The working definition of international community-engaged learning (ICEL) proposed within the call for this special issue is "an experiential education process involving collaborative efforts among students, teachers, and societal partners to tackle global challenges" (*ICEL Special Issue*, 2023). Through ICEL, wicked problems are not only recognized in how they cross national and disciplinary boundaries, but in how these global issues require collaboration outside the academic world with those experiencing and working to tackle these issues on a local level, therefore requiring tailored solutions. In our course, three essential elements of this definition were incorporated, which are also further explored throughout this essay: societal engagement, a global challenge, and collaboration. The term "societal engagement" is used to showcase that this element of ICEL, aiming to connect students' education to the real world, can be captured through various didactic approaches including CBL, CEL, or problem-based learning (Hou, 2014; van Lin, 2024). Figure 1 shows a visual conceptualization of the similarities and differences between the different approaches to societal engagement used to design this course (pink circle). It also captures how these societal engagement elements conceptually relate to other components of a global challenge (blue circle) and CUC (green circle). Figure 2 summarizes how these different approaches were integrated within the course. In the first editions of this course these components were integrated independently of each other. Collaboration was achieved not only internationally between students and teachers, but also through the CUC between multiple Dutch universities. The global challenge consisted of the nature of the topic the students analyzed, and in the opportunity for students from the Netherlands and Philippines to examine these global issues together, allowing them to learn from each other's diverse contextual knowledge and experiences. Societal engagement was captured through students from the Netherlands working with the UMCU Green Office to tackle planetary health challenges on a local level. Moreover, the topics of the COIL projects also addressed these challenges.

Key Lessons and Recommendations

Our experiences in the course Planetary Health and Climate Resilient Health Systems have yielded key lessons about three topics: (1) overcoming common issues and maximizing potential benefits, (2) recognizing the need for specific structural and administrative changes, and (3) facilitating more equitable partnerships. In response to each of these topics, we offer practical recommendations to facilitate the adoption of collaborative teaching and learning strategies in higher education.

Figure 1. Conceptualization of How Societal Engagement, Global Challenges, and Collaboration Feature in the International Community-Engaged Learning Approach in Course Design

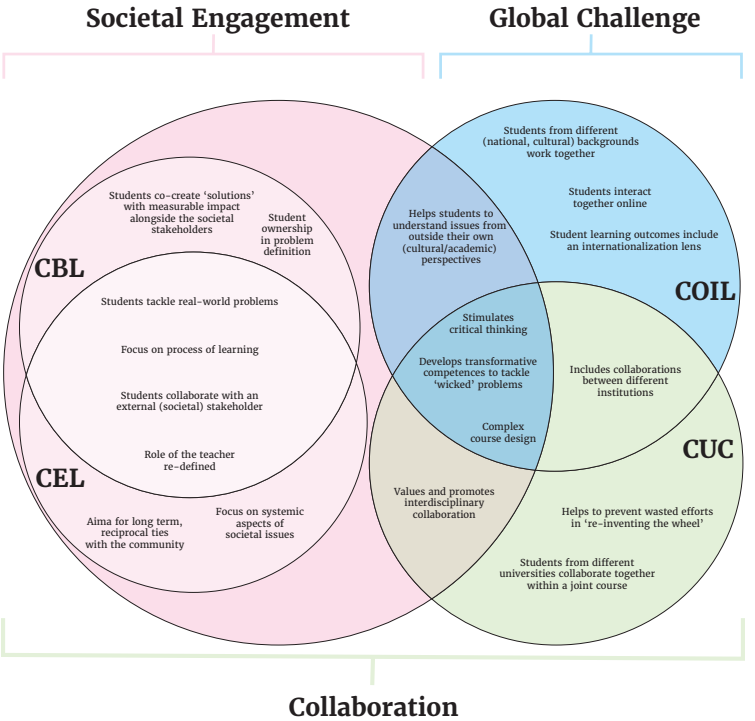
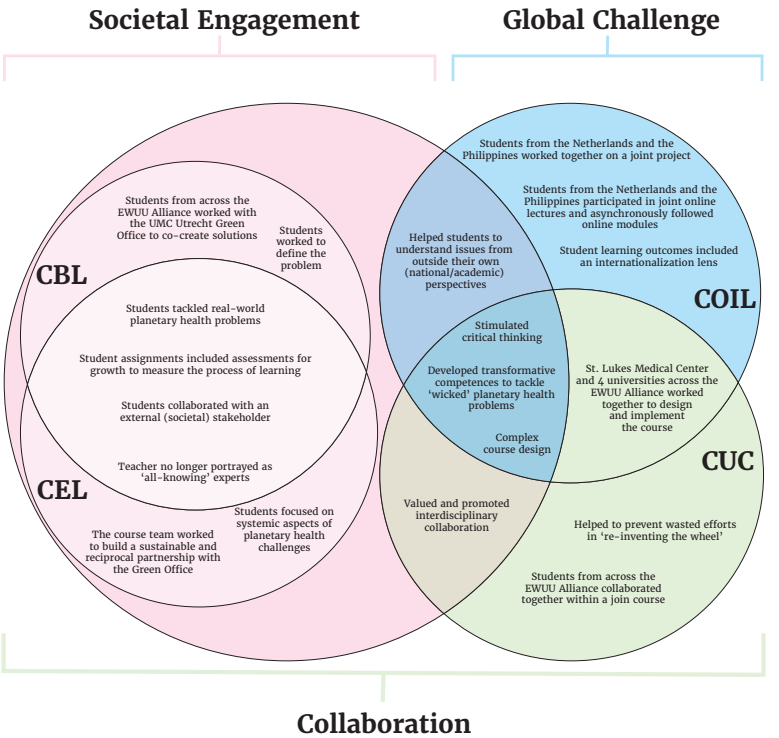


Figure 2. Conceptualization of International Community-Engaged Learning Components Within the Course Planetary Health and Climate Resilient Health Systems



Common Issues, Potential Benefits

Key Lesson 1: Challenge-based learning and community-engaged learning require flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness from both educators and students, fostering innovation and critical thinking.

Based on the lessons outlined in this essay, the course team are better prepared to efficiently and equitably combine these components in future editions of the course. For example, the societal partner in this course was already connected to one of the high-income country institutions involved in this collaboration, which facilitated trust early on and supported the sustainability of the partnership throughout multiple course editions. Through the COIL project, and further collaborations outside this course, an established partnership also exists between the low- and middle-income country institution, St. Luke's Medical Center, and high-income country institutions involved in this international collaboration. Through this foundational partnership, the course team can explore similar opportunities in engaging with societal partners in the Philippines. In this way, local partnerships can be established with actors who know the context and community, rather than international academic institutions facilitating a partnership with an unfamiliar community across the world (Sours & Greene, 2022).

CBL is an educational approach in which students with various disciplinary backgrounds work collaboratively on real-world challenges (Gallagher & Savage, 2023; Nichols, 2016). In addition to collaboration among students, collaboration often also includes societal stakeholders, such as industry partners, public sector bodies, or community organizations who propose the challenges that will be engaged with. CEL functions similarly to CBL in focusing on interdisciplinary collaboration between students, valuing the process of learning and fostering experiential learning through students collaborating with external stakeholders (van Lin et al., 2024). CBL diverges from CEL by focusing more strongly on cocreating measurable solutions, rather than long-term reciprocal relationships with the societal partners, and can structure the process of experiential learning by guiding students through three distinct stages: engage, investigate, and act (Challenge Institute, n.d.). Through combining these two approaches, the students not only engaged actively with the societal partner within a reciprocal and sustainable partnership, which characterizes CEL, but did so following a structured approach that allowed them ownership of the problem and guided them toward finding a solution to the challenge. CBL and CEL generally require flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness of the students and educators as they learn alongside them, as the solution follows inquiry and there is uncertainty what the "best" solution is to a challenge proposed by the societal partner (or "challenge agent").

Recommendation 1.1. Educators should prepare students with the necessary skills and competencies to both effectively and ethically complete their investigations.

Tackling complex real-world problems and interacting with societal stakeholders, such as the challenge agent, requires educators to equip students with the competencies necessary to do so successfully. These competencies include interdisciplinary (i.e., with other academic disciplines) and transdisciplinary (i.e., with different academic disciplines and societal actors) collaboration (Choi & Pak, 2006), international teamwork, problem-definition skills, knowledge of research methods and ethics, and a good understanding of the scope and limitations of research activities they should engage in. Our experience showed that it is essential that sufficient time and attention is paid to prepare students to navigate stakeholder engagement and transdisciplinary collaborations before meeting with their challenge agent for the first time. To avoid disappointments, student teams should be encouraged to set clear expectations for time management, communication channels, and realistic deliverables with the challenge agent. In our course, both students and the challenge agent were prepared by the course coordinator in advance of their first meeting about the basics of what was expected from them and what they could expect from the other party. Otherwise, they had the freedom to set up their interaction and communication in the way that made the most sense to both sides of the collaboration. Given the interaction with societal stakeholders—often including (vulnerable) communities—specific ethical considerations also need to be addressed to protect their autonomy; to ensure informed consent, respectful engagement, and transparency; and to reduce risks of any potential physical or psychological harm to all participants

(Felzmann, n.d.; Parker & O'Reilly, 2013). In our course, students took part in tailored workshops to prepare them for an ethical investigation, including research methods, positionality mapping, and research ethics and equity. Students were also required to complete informed consent; reflect on elements of equity, ethics, and safety when selecting investigation methods; and specifically refer to these considerations within their assignments.

Recommendation 1.2. Course coordinators should promote transparent and open conversations between the different actor groups involved to help navigate the various hierarchies, responsibilities, and expectations within a CBL course.

Interaction with societal partners also places different demands on course coordination, as stakeholder engagement before, during, and after a course does generally not occur in typical courses. These demands include ensuring sufficient understanding of roles, responsibilities, and expectations (e.g., through preparatory meetings and written documents); facilitating or advising on the interactions between students and challenge agents to facilitate mutual understanding; and supporting the navigation of misunderstandings or communication gaps if these arise between student and challenge agent. An additional potential complexity in the dynamic inherent to CEL/CBL should be anticipated: the leveling of a traditional hierarchy in the classroom, meaning that learning and expertise are continuously exchanged between the students and those "teaching" or "supervising" them. Whereas traditional courses often position educators as "all-knowing" experts whom students are learning from, within CEL/CBL courses students become the experts themselves as they investigate their challenge alongside the challenge agent. For example, one of the challenges the student groups investigated required the students to dive into the physical designs of working environments, an area outside the expertise of the course team. They were also required to take the lead in mapping out their investigation plan and develop their solution without strict guidelines. This format promotes student independence, critical thinking, initiative, and problem solving; however, educators and students may need time to adjust to this dynamic, and some students may lose motivation as they are pushed too far out of their comfort zone (Cheung et al., 2011).

Recommendation 1.3. Course coordinators should leave some flexibility within the curriculum to allow student coaches to be responsive to emerging student needs.

CEL/CBL can also introduce learning needs not anticipated in the course design and planning, which can arise because of emerging understandings of the challenge, or the identification of additional competencies required to address the challenge or transdisciplinary collaboration (Challenge Institute, n.d.). The likelihood that new elements will appear requires a course design with a degree of flexibility that allows for responsiveness and adapting to students' needs. In our course, this flexibility was often provided by student coaches. Student coaches guided the students during small group work throughout the process, addressed any issues, and integrated the principles of planetary health education. These student coaches had been recruited not only based on their affinity with the topic of planetary health, but also for their interpersonal skills, didactic improvisation skills, and flexibility. For instance, one coach incorporated meditation and nature walks into the first edition of the course in response to observations about ecoanxiety among students confronting climate change. In the second edition of the course, one coach adapted a discussion session to focus on defining group roles and expectations when this need arose from their group.

Structural and Administrative Changes

Key Lesson 2: Building cross-university collaborations demands strategic structural and administrative reforms to unlock the full potential of movement building and systems change.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is one of the elements essential to tackling "wicked" planetary health problems (Centre for Global Challenges, 2023). Collaboration across often discipline-oriented departments or education programs may be only the first step. Obtaining the required expertise for a particular endeavor may involve collaboration between different institutions of higher education. Encouraged by the strategic EWUU alliance of three Dutch universities and an academic teaching hospital (which includes the Faculty of Medicine), the complementary expertise these institutions represented, and a shared vision to avoid wasted efforts in "re-inventing the wheel" (e.g., if each institution were to separately develop planetary health education), this

course was designed for the participation of students from all four institutions. The course would foster interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration, coordinating of resources, sharing information, building on each other's strengths (Lloyd, 2016), and would be a "leading by example" illustration of what movement building—one of the five planetary health framework components—could look like in practice.

Recommendation 2.1. Higher education institutions participating in cross-university collaborations should make efforts to align academic schedules and credit loads of their courses.

We identified practical, strategic, and financial issues that needed to be addressed when working across multiple universities to deliver a shared course. On a practical level, course schedule and curriculum planning variations resulted in large differences in the number of weeks that teaching blocks lasted, the starting dates for these blocks, the number of courses students could take per block, and the number of credits normally offered per course. To illustrate this complexity, Figure 3 provides the educational calendars of three of the alliance partners (with UMCU as the UU Faculty of Medicine represented here). To overcome this issue, the course was designed as three different "packages," each tailored to a specific student group with different credits, course load (full time/part time), duration, and assignments. Coordinating this multifaceted endeavor required extensive efforts beyond regular course curriculum design from the course team, university administrations, and alliance partners. These setups require an institutional commitment and need to be strategically embedded within a wider educational vision that supports cross-institutional collaboration. A second practical challenge in the implementation of this course was student recruitment. The course aimed to have representation from each of the alliance universities as well as disciplinary diversity, requiring recruitment efforts across a wide range of student populations. However, each student group required targeted approaches, not only in the method of communication (posters, Instagram, website announcement, LinkedIn posts) but, as we discovered, also via different communication styles tailored to the specific student groups. Different aspects of the course (e.g., language) would appeal to different student populations, meaning a singular poster or message across all channels likely limited the recruitment efforts.

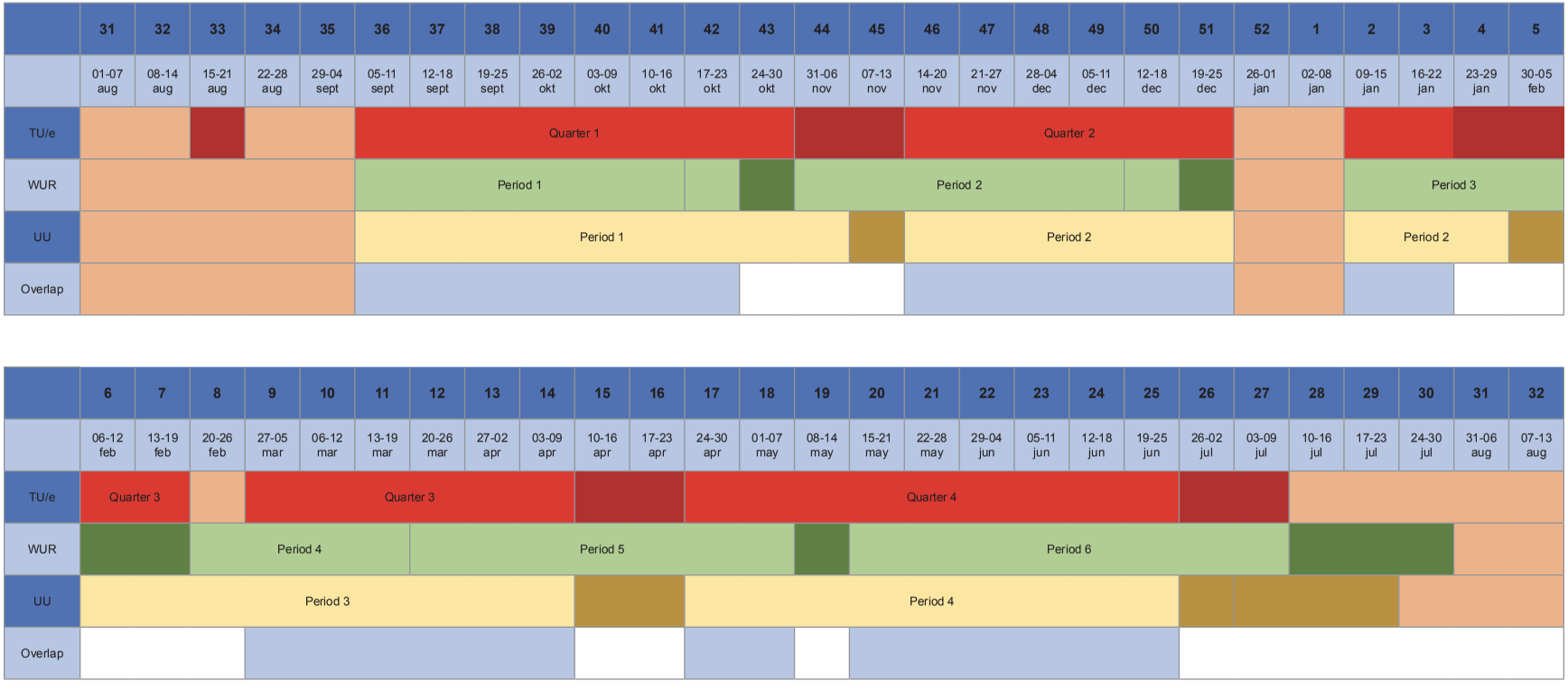
Recommendation 2.2. Higher education institutions participating in cross-university collaborations should work toward clear and centralized communication channels and recruitment strategies, transparent hierarchical structures, and easily accessible information systems between the participating institutions.

This course was one of the first within this alliance that aimed for cross-university course design that was not extracurricular but instead anchored and integrated in the curricula of the participating institutions. The development of this course thus also implied developing the structures necessary to support such courses, rather than simply "reinforcing people [or courses, for that matter] staying in their boxes" (Kezar, 2005, p. 54). Structural issues primarily resolved around the significant silos in which teaching or education decision-making is organized, not only between universities but also within individual university programs and divisions. This compartmentalization hindered effective collaboration, communication, and streamlined decision-making. These structural barriers should therefore be anticipated and can be mitigated through early (1) identification of the correct communication channels and (2) engagement of administrative and education policy representatives, who often are not part of standard course design processes but are essential because of the specific networks or knowledge necessary to navigate organizational divisions between and within the different institutions (Lloyd, 2016). For example, our course team included a policy officer from the UMCU whose perspective, skills, and network were crucial in predicting and finding creative solutions to potential barriers, navigating university structures, and acting as an advocate for sustainably embedding the course within the university.

Recommendation 2.3. Supportive institutional administrative and policy structures can incentivize other innovative educational approaches, through sustainable funding strategies that recognize the additional time and effort required for these endeavors, and practical engagement to help navigate practical, structural, and financial barriers.

The practical and structural challenges also have financial implications. Institutions need to be willing to provide additional support given the increased course development and implementation time required from educators and institutions. Similarly, we observed that additional support is necessary for the delivery of CBL/CEL and interdisciplinary education,

Figure 3. EWUU Alliance University Calendars



for example because of the need to provide coteaching by multiple teachers with complementary knowledge, and additional support such as student coaches or guest lecturers (Van den Beemt et al., 2020). In our course, most guest speakers who were involved for their specialized knowledge or skills volunteered their time due to their personal interest, but this practice has limited sustainability. The development of this course was funded by the EWUU alliance through a seed fund. However, actual delivery of the course needed to be covered through regular course reimbursement mechanisms—which meant reimbursement was available only for students from the hosting faculty of the UU (the UMCU, or Faculty of Medicine). Therefore, although widespread support exists for the development of innovative courses, and seed grants are often available, new financial mechanisms are needed to sustainably support resource-intensive interuniversity, interdisciplinary course collaborations (Van den Beemt et al., 2020). The first step is to ensure that seed funds allow for not only the time necessary to design the course, but the additional time required to ensure the course is sustainably implemented.

Although many issues were experienced, we want to acknowledge the supportive structures and efforts that were in place as good practices that facilitate the development of these types of multiuniversity courses. First, EduXchange, a platform specifically built to register students to courses outside their own institutions, makes these kinds of courses more accessible to students and lowers the threshold for them to register. Second, the EWUU alliance itself acted as a boundary-crossing network that helped navigate some complexities, with personnel providing useful information (such as Figure 3), expert advice, and specialized CBL guest lectures within the course (Lloyd, 2016). Last, the positive attitude of the leadership, administrative actors, and teaching staff across the alliance institutions helped in creatively and pragmatically overcoming issues when identified. For example, these actors were crucial in developing a single course code that encompassed separate course "packages" with different credit loads. The collaboration that made this innovation possible shows the importance of not only a dedicated interdisciplinary teacher, but also of education administrative or policy actors as a part of the course team to guide efforts and achieve course implementation.

Facilitating More Equitable Partnerships

Key Lesson 3: Equitable partnerships are necessary for ethical Collaborative Online International Learning courses.

Recommendation 3.1. Educators can make a deliberate effort to integrate equity and justice considerations into didactic choices, such as using free online platforms that integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning to expand access to planetary health education and break financial and geographical barriers.

Equity and justice are foundational principles of planetary health, and these values must be mirrored by the institutions offering education in this field (Wabnitz et al., 2020). In addition, the global-level interconnectedness of the causes and consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation make this field inherently international in outlook and approach. COIL is a powerful didactic approach characterized by students from different (national, cultural) backgrounds collaborating in an online environment to reach internationalization-focused learning objectives (Centre for Academic Teaching and Learning, n.d.). COIL courses enable international students from diverse backgrounds to collectively learn and address complex challenges (Adefila et al., 2021). Inclusivity should not be simply assumed in these collaborations, both between the students and within the teaching team; instead, it requires specific and critical reflection in the process of developing and implementing the course (Wimpenny et al., 2024). Equity was a central theme not only in what students learned within the course, but what the educators themselves continuously and critically reflected on in its design and their own work together. Transparent discussions around reciprocal benefits, roles, responsibilities, and expectations were central to these efforts. Mutual trust and respect further facilitated the process, as this was not the first collaborative project between the international colleagues involved, but rather the result of, and ongoing work toward, a sustainable partnership between the involved institutions. Regarding planetary health challenges, the risk of continued inequity and injustice needs to be anticipated and, where possible, mitigated. Facilitating equity should include deliberate efforts to remove epistemic injustice (i.e., moral wrongs in how we produce, use, and circulate knowledge) in the field, evident by the undervaluation of knowledge and expertise from historically marginalized communities and countries in discussions on

planetary health (Bhakuni & Abimbola, 2021).

Recommendation 3.2. Institutions should prioritize reciprocal bidirectional knowledge exchange, ensuring that both parties from different cultural backgrounds contribute and learn equally.

Therefore, this course was designed both to include education about climate, health, and epistemic injustices related to planetary health challenges, and to integrate an international partnership to deliver this education with St. Luke's Medical Center in the Philippines. The incorporation of a COIL component enabled students from the Netherlands and the Philippines to jointly learn from each other's unique perspectives on global planetary health challenges and cocreate locally tailored solutions. Importantly, this bidirectional exchange of knowledge and skills extended to the institutional level, where educators from institutions of both nations collaborated and learned from their respective backgrounds to offer this innovative course. For example, the international colleague from the Philippines had extensive experience and knowledge in the planetary health field to help shape the content focus of the course. On the other hand, colleagues from the Netherlands had experience and skills in offering CEL and CBL courses. The wide range of skill sets and additional contextual perspectives not only served to enrich this course but also supported each educator's broadened perspectives in the field of international and societally engaged learning.

Students participated in joint synchronous skills development workshops as well as asynchronous online modules for content delivery, representing knowledge from both institutions. Ultimately, student groups developed and presented infographics with tailored messaging to specific subpopulations on a planetary health challenge. Although the primary issues encountered were administrative and structural, such as managing time zones and coordinating schedules, the course team maintained close contact with students to address team difficulties as they arose. The intercultural environment did not seem to create significantly larger problems than those typically observed in standard group work, underscoring the effectiveness of the program's design. Intercultural competence development is one of the key objectives of COIL courses, though their implementation has yielded mixed results in this regard (Hackett et al., 2023). In this course, specific attention was paid to the group collaboration, with students taking part in a joint introductory workshop targeting intercultural and international collaboration skills and facilitated group connection. Although the development of intercultural competencies was not formally evaluated during the course, the students were generally positive about working with students with diverse backgrounds in the course evaluation.

Recommendation 3.3. Funders and higher education institutions must ensure funding conditions to support fair compensation and eliminate systemic inequities in international collaborations.

By offering the course free of charge, equitable access to international planetary health education was enhanced, addressing a common barrier: Such opportunities are often limited to those who can afford to travel abroad. However, a significant obstacle to achieving equitable collaboration arose from the financial compensation mechanisms tied to grant funding. Funders often fail to promote fair international partnerships, leaving collaborators to either engage in inequitable arrangements or devise creative ways to uphold fairness within an inequitable system (Plamondon et al., 2017). Within our own project, the virtual component of the course was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Welfare and Sports, meaning the funding was intended for the Dutch institution. However, the Dutch course team was able to make funds available internally to compensate the Filipino partner.

Conclusion

This article highlights three key lessons learned through a multiuniversity collaboration for developing and implementing the course Planetary Health and Climate Resilient Health Systems, which integrated CBL, CEL, and COIL. Table 2 highlights these key lessons and summarizes the practical recommendations from both bottom-up and top-down approaches based on these lessons learned. The challenges experienced highlight a very real gap between didactic innovation aspirations and recommendations, and existing structures within established institutions. We hope with the sharing of our experiences, the challenges, and our recommendations to overcome these challenges and support many educators' palpable enthusiasm for integrating these concepts to create education that can respond to the need to tackle the complex challenges that current and future generations of professionals will face in the field of planetary health.

Table 2. Concrete Recommendations Outlined per Key Lessons

1	**Key Lesson 1: Challenge-based learning and community-engaged learning require flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness from both educators and students, fostering innovation and critical thinking.**
	Recommendations to overcome common issues and maximize potential benefits: 1.1. Educators should prepare students with the necessary skills and competencies to both effectively and *ethically* complete their investigations. 1.2. Course coordinators should promote transparent and open conversations between the different actor groups involved to help navigate the various hierarchies, responsibilities, and expectations within a CBL course. 1.3. Course coordinators should leave some flexibility within the curriculum to allow student coaches to be responsive to emerging student needs.
2	**Key Lesson 2: Building interuniversity collaborations demands strategic structural and administrative reforms to unlock the full potential of movement building and systems change.**
	Recommendations for specific structural and administrative changes: 2.1. Higher education institutions participating in cross-university collaborations should make efforts to align academic schedules and credit loads of their courses. 2.2. Higher education institutions participating in cross-university collaborations should work toward clear and centralized communication channels and recruitment strategies, transparent hierarchical structures, and easily accessible information systems between the participating institutions. 2.3. Supportive institutional administrative and policy structures can incentivize other innovative educational approaches, through sustainable funding strategies that recognize the additional time and effort required for these endeavors, and practical engagement to help navigate practical, structural, and financial barriers.
3	**Key Lesson 3: Equitable partnerships are necessary for ethical Collaborative Online International Learning courses.**
	Recommendations to facilitate more equitable partnerships: 3.1. Educators can make a deliberate effort to integrate equity and justice considerations into didactic choices, such as using free online platforms that integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning to expand access to planetary health education and break financial and geographical barriers. 3.2. Institutions should prioritize reciprocal bidirectional knowledge exchange, ensuring that both parties from different cultural backgrounds contribute and learn equally. 3.3. Funders and higher education institutions must ensure funding conditions to support fair compensation and eliminate systemic inequities in international collaborations.

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Heritage in Practice: Cultivating Critical Reflection and Intercultural Communication in Bonaire

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Abstract

A critical turn in heritage studies that integrates nonexpert (including colonial) voices presents significant didactic and educational challenges. How do we teach heritage practices in an intercultural, and previously colonial, context? The project Making Bonairean Heritage Together was designed as a showcase to equip students with essential skills for engaging in collaborative, intercultural heritage practices, particularly through cocreation and collaboration with external partners and communities in an international context. These skills are crucial in an increasingly decolonizing field of practice. This article outlines the students' intercultural experiences and the project's structure, objectives, and lessons learned. By analyzing students' voices in developing intercultural competencies, cultural reflexivity, and awareness of intercultural heritage practices, we seek to contribute to research on heritage education in an intercultural and decolonial context.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, heritage in a colonial context, Bonaire, community-engaged learning, museology

In an increasingly complex and globalizing society, numerous professional fields must address complex, "wicked," and even contested issues. Collaboration, or at least the integration of other (non-Western) voices, is central to this endeavor. Consequently, academic training for future professionals necessitates a paradigm shift to adequately prepare them to confront contemporary challenges within their respective disciplines and to function as "critical global citizens" within varied collaborative environments (Biesta, 2022; Kummeling et al., 2023).

For heritage and museum studies programs preparing students for a career in heritage management and curation, this challenge is especially salient. Museums and heritage organizations must be increasingly equipped to manage difficult or contested heritage within transdisciplinary, national, and international contexts (Meskell, 2015). This is especially the case in the so-called Global North in the context of decolonization and addressing the "darker side of Western modernity" (Mignolo, 2011), such as slavery and exploitation. Furthermore, the heritage sector as a whole is increasingly coming to terms with a "critical turn" where reflexivity, justice, and political awareness have become cornerstones of the new practices. However, teaching decolonial awareness and training students to position themselves in the political arena that is heritage curation, is notoriously challenging.

In this article we showcase how community-engaged learning as a method can be a tool for empowering future professionals to collaboratively address contested heritage and decolonial challenges with cultural sensitivity, reciprocal collaboration, and engagement with non-Western voices. This article explores the practical implementation of the essential knowledge and skills that are needed in answering cross-cultural challenges through the Making Bonairean Heritage Together project.

The Making Bonairean Heritage Together project was established as a community-engaged learning (CEL) initiative, involving students and faculty from Utrecht University, staff from the Terramar

Museum on Bonaire, and members of the local Bonairean community. Within this community-engaged didactic framework, students learned to work collaboratively on societal issues, integrating their theoretical knowledge with practical questions. In this case, students were invited by the Bonairean museum to develop an exhibit concept that bridges international state-of-the-art museological practices around slavery with local narratives and needs.

In this experimental course, we provided students with academic knowledge of Bonairean history, critical heritage studies, and postcolonial museum studies, as well as skills related to positionality, project collaboration, intercultural communication, self-reflection, and mutual knowledge sharing. This article addresses whether the participating students developed intercultural competencies, whether the students' personal and social formation in cultural reflexivity was fostered, and whether their awareness of intercultural heritage practices in international collaborations was enhanced.

By examining students' reflections during a 10-week tutorial in collaboration with a cultural heritage partner on Bonaire and drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Deardorff (2006) and Agar (1994a, 1994b) on intercultural learning, as well as Onosu (2020) on transformative learning, we explore how intercultural learning in heritage education contributes to the development of intercultural competencies, cultural reflexivity, and awareness of decolonial and intercultural heritage practices among students. This approach aligns with Deardorff's view of intercultural learning experiences as highly meaningful, Agar's identification of *rich* moments in this learning journey, and Onosu's argument that such experiences lead to a positive transformation in students.

Community-engaged learning in an international context proves to promote not only local commitment, but also a deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of communities and societies across the world (Biagi & Bracci, 2020, p. 9). All partners—students, teachers, and community members—were regarded as both teachers and learners. Given that cocreative collaborations with diverse practitioners and the public will often be integral to the professional lives of cultural heritage students, this educational format is highly relevant. For the partners involved—in this case, the museum, several other Bonairean cultural and heritage organizations, and the Bonairean community—this collaboration provided a theoretical and historical foundation for the exhibition concept, new ideas as well as an external perspective through suggestions from students, recognition of the importance of local cultural institutions and identity, and strengthening of both local and national networks.

Teaching Critical Heritage Studies

The project was organized within the framework of the Cultural History and Heritage program at Utrecht University, a master's program bridging the gap between cultural history and critical heritage studies. Until the 2000s, heritage education predominantly focused on institutional knowledge and technological skills needed to preserve objects, sites, and buildings. Similarly, within history, the subfield of public history largely focused on skills needed to communicate history effectively to the public.

Over the past two decades, the academic approach to cultural heritage has evolved. Seminal contributions by scholars from decolonizing settler societies have compelled cultural heritage scholars to acknowledge the cultural beliefs and competing political discourses encoded in heritage (Harrison, 2012; Smith, 2006). Collaborative approaches have shifted from doing history for society (top-down) toward a grassroots approach where history is written or preserved with and through society. A guiding approach here is "sharing authority" across different stakeholders (Frish, 2011). In the development of heritage experiences this approach means ensuring the inclusion of local insights and valuations so that exhibitions transcend the often Global North expert point of view. This shift in perspective required heritage practitioners to develop an intersubjective understanding of those key relevant heritage communities.

Such an emancipatory approach to history and heritage has expanded with the decolonization of the heritage sector. Increasingly, heritage practitioners must operate as community facilitators, ensuring an inclusive cocuration of the past with stakeholders from former colonial settings (Fahlberg, 2023). We cannot decolonize heritage or address contested museum holdings in isolation in the Global North, even if we put introspection and critical reflection at

the center of our action. Each decolonizing setting is unique and asks for a tailored collaboration where authority is shared (Clifford, 1997, p. 210). Unfortunately, too many projects intended to set up decolonial conversations around heritage and museums end up reproducing neocolonial power relationships with descendant communities (Boast, 2011).

Although the academic debate might have undergone a critical turn, little research has addressed the urgent educational challenge at the core of heritage studies today. A rich theoretical literature describes the sociopolitics of heritage and public history. In contrast, a suite of ethnographies showcase how carelessly planned heritage projects can exacerbate already fraught intercultural relations. Discussing theories and examples in a classroom setting might trigger reflection, but practicing decolonial heritage requires skills and experience. So, how do we train students to listen, speak, and collaborate in cocreation with former colonized stakeholders and thoroughly understand their political connections to heritage?

The scant research published about critical heritage pedagogy firmly underlines that hands-on courses "doing critical heritage" hold great educational potential (Taylor, 2018). Pioneering pedagogical research from Canada shows that encouraging students to engage with decolonization and the multitude of actors involved goes beyond providing them with a deeper understanding of remembrance practices and institutions (Murray, 2018). Critical heritage education can play a wider role in higher education to teach about decolonization, intercultural conversation, and the enduring Eurocentrism/coloniality in society.

We contribute to this literature that values "doing critical heritage" by presenting a demonstrator to teach students intercultural decolonial heritage practices in connection with local communities. This article shows a reciprocal CEL-based approach to teaching cultural heritage in the decolonizing 21st century, exploring how to teach heritage and decolonial history in collaboration with societal partners. In the next sections, we describe the context of our project, and we analyze how students learned intercultural competencies, cultural reflexivity, and awareness of heritage practices in an intercultural setting.

The Project: Outline, Objectives, Participants

The master's program in Cultural History and Heritage at Utrecht University is a one-year curriculum designed to train future cultural historians and heritage experts by studying "the culture of the past and the use of history in the present" (Utrecht University, n.d.). The program is structured into four 10-week teaching blocks. In the first block, students engage in a theoretical course, a course on participatory public history, and a sources and methods course. During the second block, students select three tutorials, which are small-scale seminars where they conduct research within the lecturer's area of expertise. The third and fourth blocks are dedicated to a guided internship and the completion of an MA thesis. Key elements of the program include the handling of heritage, such as addressing the legacy of slavery and colonialism, and considering the role of local communities in heritage.

In the academic year 2023–2024, one of the tutorials was developed in collaboration with the Terramar Museum in Kralendijk, Bonaire. Bonaire is a small Caribbean island of around 25,000 inhabitants off the coast of Venezuela. As a former dependency of the Colony of Curacao, the island has been under Dutch control since 1634. When the island was largely operated as a protoindustrial salt production hub (Antoin & Luckhardt, 2023) with a minor plantation economy focusing on extensively cultivated crops (Bakker, 2024), slavery defined life on Bonaire. Until 1953, Bonaire—together with five other Caribbean islands—was formally a colonial holding, after which Bonaire became part of the Dutch Antilles, an independent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Although independent, the relationship with the former metropole always remained fraught with contention and characterized by neocolonial power relations (Oostindie, 2022).

The museum's mission is to display and promote Bonaire's history and archaeology, facilitate related research, and raise awareness about the island's heritage (Terramar Museum, n.d.). In 2022, the museum initiated a project to engage local communities more deeply with Bonaire's heritage and integrate them into the museum's permanent collection and activities. Seeking academic support, the museum reached out to the

master's program to assist in development of an exhibition concept integrating best practices in participatory museology and decolonial heritage practice. They wanted this state-of-the-art methodology integrated in a blueprint for an exhibit, selection of objects, and integration of community voices. This request overlapped with the goals of the program to bridge practice and theory and train students in public history. The relationship between the museum and university mirrored the client-content designer dynamic typical for the museum and heritage sector.

Six students participated in this experiential learning project. In addition to these students, the collaborative team included Jude Finies (director of Terramar Museum), Maya Narvaes (project manager of Terramar Museum), and Gertjan Plets and Christianne Smit (Utrecht University).

The first 6 weeks of the tutorial (November–December) were two-sided: Once a week, the six enrolled students discussed literature on Bonaire and the Caribbean's history, the island's colonial past, and theories on museum studies and heritage, guided by both instructors. This process developed a historical and theoretical understanding of the project's context. The second weekly session focused on learning through dialogue by discussing Bonaire's colonial past and cultural heritage with museum practitioners and community members. During these meetings, which were partly in person and partly online, students, teachers, and partners spent time getting to know each other and working to build a bond of trust and understanding. This dialogue led to the cocreation of a foundational concept: the "Who/for Whom—Where—Why—What" of the museum collection's renewal, which was designed in close collaboration with the museum director and project manager. During the meetings at the home university, substantive issues regarding the theory and practice of heritage, decolonization, and museum studies were discussed. Additionally, significant attention was given to personal positionality and the intercultural context in which activities were conducted. All students had been born and raised in the Netherlands, but they had intercultural experiences to share, as not all of their parents had grown up in the Netherlands, and a few students had lived, studied, or traveled outside Europe. In preparation for the week of fieldwork, methods of observation and interviewing were also addressed.

These learning trajectories set the stage for a week of fieldwork (January), where students, museum workers, and lecturers traveled to Bonaire to address heritage-related challenges in situ, conduct interviews, and immerse themselves in the local community. To gain deeper insights into the backgrounds of the exhibition concept, the students engaged with direct stakeholders; relevant heritage organizations and institutions; leaders of community groups, secondary schools, and churches; as well as musicians, artists, and their networks. During this visit students gained firsthand experience with building relationships with heritage communities and mapping local needs. More importantly, students were confronted with their own positionality as Dutch-based students interacting with descendants of enslaved communities. This fieldwork culminated in four museum object proposals, each combining academic research with local knowledge. Terramar Museum decided to utilize these proposals for renewing their permanent exhibition.

This experiential course was divided into learning objectives related to academic discipline, general academic skills, and personal and social development. The first category included gaining knowledge of Bonaire's history, critical heritage studies, and postcolonial museum studies, as well as conducting historical research, disseminating disciplinary knowledge, and project collaboration. These objectives were assessed through pitches and written proposals for museum objects. The second category focused on initiative, self-efficacy, openness, democratization of knowledge, and societal relevance. Positionality, understood as one's relation to various social identities such as gender, race, and class, was a third part of the formational learning objectives to train students to engage with themselves and others in an intercultural context. This aspect aimed for the development of intercultural competencies and cultural reflexivity. Students were encouraged to document their experiences and reflections in an optional logbook with semistructured questions.

All six participating students chose to document their experiences. They actively maintained their journals and wrote weekly reports, using broadly formulated questions as a starting point while also including observations beyond the scope of these

questions. During the lecture weeks, four reports were written (400–800 words), and two longer observation reports (each approximately 1,000 words) were produced: one during the fieldwork week, and one after the course ended.

Participation in writing logs was voluntary and had no academic consequences. By integrating a community-engaged learning approach in an international context; collaborating with a heritage partner, local stakeholders, and the community; and encouraging students to reflect on the collaboration, intercultural aspects, their own positionality, and their professionalism as heritage experts, this project piloted a transdisciplinary, experiential learning approach.

Research Questions

This research is embedded in several foundational questions: How can we effectively teach decolonial heritage practices within the framework of critical heritage studies? Which models, collaborations, and feedback mechanisms are most effective in preparing students to serve as intercultural mediators in a globalized world? And how can we collaborate with cultural heritage practitioners and communities in a reciprocal way and offer students a transformative learning experience in cultural heritage studies? Although these questions are of vital relevance, they cannot be fully addressed through the experiences garnered from the Bonaire project alone. We do raise these questions, as they can be seen as both the larger societal and didactic background of this project, and as suggestions for further research.

This article specifically explores the learning trajectory in intercultural competencies and heritage practices within this project. Given the broader educational significance of imparting intercultural competencies and engaging with external partners on societal issues in higher education, especially for future heritage practitioners, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how students develop intercultural competencies through real-world engagement, and how such development can inform pedagogical strategies for decolonial heritage education. Based on literature research in the fields of heritage and intercultural learning (Agar 1994a, 1994b; Deardorff, 2006; Onosu, 2020; Taylor, 2018), we defined four elements for analysis in the students' logbook texts:

- Misunderstanding and confusion caused by intercultural contact
- Rich and meaningful learning experiences resulting from intercultural meetings, leading to "rich points"
- Awareness of one's own frames, fostering personal and social transformation regarding bridging the gap between "you" and "them"
- Awareness of decolonial and intercultural heritage practices

Based on the results of these questions, we will suggest recommendations for teaching decolonial heritage practices in an international collaboration.

Data

The data for this research were collected through the analysis of voluntary logbook entries submitted by the enrolled students over a 6-week teaching period, during a week of fieldwork, and upon the completion of the fieldwork. These reflections were not compulsory, in order to ensure that it remained an individual and personal activity (Tight, 2024). Students were encouraged to reflect on the disciplinary knowledge acquired through literature review, class discussions, and knowledge transfer from practitioner guest lecturers, with particular emphasis on colonial history and heritage practice. Additionally, the students were asked to reflect on aspects of personal and social formation in relation to their positionality within the decolonial and intercultural framework of heritage studies that characterized the project.

Guiding questions were provided to structure reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 28); however, students were given the autonomy to either adhere to these questions or to compose their own reflective narratives, thereby promoting differentiation and freedom in their logbook entries. At the start of the course, students were informed about the potential use of their logbook entries for research purposes, as well as their right to grant or withdraw consent at the end of the course without any repercussions regarding course completion. No feedback or grading of the entries was administered during or after the course. During the final meeting, students were given the option to retain their logbook entries for personal use; however, all students opted to share their entries with the research team (Smit

and Plets). This process was reviewed and approved by the Utrecht University Humanities Ethics Assessment Committee.

In this study, two research methods were used. First was close reading, a methodology rooted in the humanities. Close reading involves a careful analysis of the language, content, structure, and patterns in the logbook texts, to analyze the meaning, implications, and connections to broader contexts. The narrative analysis of the logbooks focused on identifying key elements related to experiencing intercultural differences, acquiring intercultural competencies, and developing intercultural reflexivity, alongside an awareness of intercultural heritage practices. This approach allowed for a deep engagement with the texts, enabling recognition of not only the explicit content but also the nuanced reflections and insights conveyed by the students. Second, a content analysis was used, to systematically organize the analysis. For that, the logbook entries were coded based on our four research questions and categorized in four categories:

- Misunderstanding and confusion
- Rich learning moments and intercultural competencies
- Personal and social development through reflexivity on interculturality
- Awareness of professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners

The following paragraphs present the findings derived from the close reading and content analysis of the texts.

Findings

Misunderstanding and Confusion

Drawing upon Michael Agar's concept of "language shock," it is evident that learning in an intercultural environment can lead to "misunderstanding and confusion." Intercultural mistakes, wherein communication errors occur, precipitate awareness of existing cultural frames. These mistakes bring these frames to consciousness, prompting the building of new frames, until the communication gap is bridged (Agar, 1994b, p. 242). Throughout the project, students did encounter misunderstanding and confusion in several areas. Based on their logbook entries, students feared that they lacked sufficient expertise, skills, and theoretical background, particularly concerning the history and culture of Bonaire, and to a lesser extent, concerning the inadequate appreciation of Bonaire as a distinct island within the Dutch Caribbean. As one student remarked, "It is difficult to comment on someone else's cultural heritage, and I repeatedly wondered if I would completely miss the mark."

Regarding the fieldwork experience, stepping out of their comfort zones and taking initiative rather than adopting a passive stance proved challenging, as stated by one of the students: "I have always been someone who prefers to observe first, but on Bonaire, the intention was to initiate contact first. This definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone." Collaborating with people from different cultures brought anxiety about general misunderstandings and potential disagreements. As academics, students worried about being overly theoretical and using excessively academic language and approaches: "When I see some of us conducting interviews or asking questions, I get the impression that our way of speaking is too academic. In some conversations, I felt that this might have intimidated our interlocutors a bit."

They were also concerned that their Dutch values and norms, characterized by directness and efficiency, might disturb the collaboration or even lead to conflicts, as illustrated by one student: "What I repeatedly discussed with [the] other students is that we were immensely confronted with how Dutch we are—and how comfortable or uncomfortable we sometimes feel about that. By Dutch, I mean our way of communicating and our efficiency."

Above all, most of the students' positions as "former colonizers" raised discomfort regarding their relationship with the local community and the colonial past, and fear for "the imperialist in themselves." Additionally, students noted that on Bonaire, there existed differing perspectives on the colonial past, and that many Bonaireans engaged with this history in ways that diverged from the Dutch decolonization debate, as illustrated by this entry:

> I also thought that slavery and the contemporary debate about it were more or less the same everywhere, and that we, as Dutch people, were always seen as conquerors. However, on Bonaire, they mostly spoke about the conquest that a certain group of Dutch people are currently carrying out on the island.

Another important cause of confusion was the working methods of Terramar Museum, with broadly defined goals and assignments, a lack of strict directives, and diffuse collaboration with other heritage institutions on the island. Their Dutch perspective caused the students to frame this way of operating as difficult to deal with and unprofessional. This perception made the students feel insecure: "The collaboration and meetings . . . in recent weeks were, to be honest, often more confusing than enlightening at first."

In short, discomfort about the relationship to the Bonaireans was a recurring theme for the students: They regularly felt "uncomfortable" and "uneasy" participating in a project that would impact the Bonairean heritage sector, "without having the right or deserving it." This uneasiness prompted significant self-reflection, stressing the importance of intercultural experiences as a way to question existing cultural frames and to develop new intercultural frames.

Rich Learning Moments and Intercultural Competencies

Michael Agar's and Darla Deardorff's frameworks on intercultural learning emphasize the significance of "rich" moments and highly meaningful intercultural competencies. Moments when language and culture intersect and when students become puzzled, as they do not understand the meaning or context within an intercultural setting, are considered to be rich points. These points become "rich" in association and connotation, prompting students to reflect on the cultural confusion or differences they encounter, thereby examining their own perspectives. These reflections stimulate the creation of new frames of interpretation and understanding (Agar, 1994a, 1994b), which forms the basis for developing intercultural competencies: the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2006).

According to their logbook entries, students did encounter several key learning moments that align with these frameworks during the project. On a personal level, they reassessed their own talents, knowledge, and roles; learned to handle setbacks and build resilience; and became more aware of the importance of soft skills. In general, according to one of the students, "We learn a great deal about ourselves as individuals, as academics, and as students. We learn to recognize our pitfalls but also where we can contribute effectively in a collaboration." But they also learned in relation to their academic discipline. One student realized how important "soft skills" are and that the experience changed future expectations: "I had long thought that in history, I would mostly be stuck in books and might miss the human aspect. I did not expect to be so involved in analysing and sensing situations and people while creating an exhibition."

Interculturally, they adapted their communication styles to suit different situations, despite the difficulties, as one student shared: "I found it quite challenging to let go of my own communication style." They also became more aware of Bonaire's diverse culture, including local perceptions of the Netherlands and the behavior of newly arrived Dutch individuals on the island. They questioned their own views on the island, as well as the roles of decolonization and the history of slavery, as one student acknowledged: "By talking to people in Bonaire, you get to hear how they think about the Netherlands, how they view their own culture, and how they perceive the legacy of slavery."

In terms of collaboration, they aimed to listen and communicate respectfully without making assumptions, striving to overcome shyness and reservations. They navigated boundaries in working with fellow students, instructors, and external partners, as one student noticed:

> I feel that in this project I was treated more as a (junior) partner than a student, and I am very happy about this. It really feels like I am already working within an organization and participating on an equal footing. This has been incredibly motivating and inspiring throughout the entire project because, for once, I feel like I am truly contributing to the world rather than just engaging in theoretical work.

Finally, the fieldwork activities enabled them to link theory to practice; develop skills in networking, interviewing, and processing oral information; and integrate local experiences into their academic work. As one student noted:

> In this course, I have learned more about myself and my abilities than

> in any other course in my academic career. In Bonaire, for instance, I discovered that I could use my theoretical background knowledge to delve deeper into conversations rather than sticking to a superficial explanation. Additionally, I realized that experiential knowledge and academic knowledge can be well combined, which I will definitely take with me in my further career.

In general, the students adopted a more open attitude, enhancing their cultural knowledge and receptiveness to criticism, and began to focus on commonalities rather than differences, as noted by one of them: "Due to the accessibility and mutual trust in the collaboration, I stopped focusing on the major differences between our positions and instead sought out the similarities."

In conclusion, the students' encounters with "rich" intercultural moments underscored the essential role of intercultural competencies in academic and professional development. These experiences not only enhanced their self-awareness and resilience but also demonstrated the value of integrating theoretical knowledge with practical, culturally responsive approaches in their future careers.

Personal and Social Development Through Reflexivity on Interculturality

Cultural immersion, as emphasized by Onosu (2020), can facilitate personal and social formation, as well as intercultural reflexivity and transformation. Particularly when students thoroughly prepare for intercultural encounters, immerse themselves intensively, and engage in reflective practice, effective transformation can occur. In our pursuit of teaching decolonial cultural heritage practices and fostering personal and social development within an intercultural context, cultural reflexivity emerges as the most effective outcome.

According to the logbook entries by the students, personal development involved realizing and contextualizing one's culturally determined norms and values through intercultural collaboration, which allowed for the reevaluation of Eurocentric perspectives and provided new flexibility and insights (cf. Byram & Porto, 2017, p. 157). Students were aware of these differences, as one remarked: "[There is] always a difference in cultural values in a collaboration like this, because everyone has their own background with their own values, views, or expectations." They were searching for strategies to overcome gaps in the collaboration: "In my opinion, it is important not to present oneself as the 'all-knowing' one. The intention is still to treat the culture and the community with respect, and through the collaboration, hopefully, enrich each other in knowledge."

Students learned to overcome the fear associated with their perceived superiority and White Dutch identity, as well as associated guilt, through dialogue that exposed Dutch blind spots. One of them realized:

> I have learned a great deal about sensing people's feelings and being aware of my own assumptions and position. Additionally, it was an eye-opener to realize how difficult it is to bridge some differences. Initially, I thought this would be a piece of cake for an empathetic (left-wing) history student, but I have realized that was quite naive of me.

They realized that intercultural communication demanded a critical view of their own position and behaviors, fostering a humble and respectful attitude. Generally, they gained a deeper understanding of their talents by learning in a different environment and manner, which necessitated vulnerability, an open attitude, and consideration for and adaptation to others.

Engaging in dialogue enhanced their awareness of their own cultural frameworks, as one of the students noted: "I became increasingly aware of my Dutch way of acting and thinking each day on Bonaire." This awareness led to deeper realizations:

> We got the idea that engaging in dialogue is essentially a healing practice for everyone, a practice that helps us better understand the relationship between the Bonaireans and the Dutch and gives the Bonaireans a louder voice than they are usually given.

This conclusion emphasized the importance of listening and dialogue, and of allowing Bonaireans to voice their perspectives within the museum project, thus preventing any suggestion of academic omniscience.

Besides personal development, social development appeared to be equally significant in this project. Practical learning on Bonaire underlined the island's uniqueness and the "complex dynamics" of its diverse perspectives, showcasing alternative ways of working, such as "trying to remain as neutral as possible." Another student noticed the transformations: "Even while we were already in Bonaire, that perspective [of Bonairean culture] changed several times."

The local stance on the colonial past made students aware of the Eurocentric nature of current debates on colonial and slave history in the Netherlands. All students observed that on Bonaire, these discussions focused on acknowledging historical inequalities while emphasizing present-day improvements and the discovery of a distinct identity, aiming to move beyond the past. One student remarked, "This course has heightened my awareness of how we address these themes in the Netherlands and how we sometimes unjustly expect other parts of the world to engage with them in the same way." For one of the students, a statement during an interview appeared to be crucial: When the interviewee stated, "We share a history together, so we also share a future," the student noted: "This made me realize that I had been reinforcing my positionality regarding academic status, based on how I experienced it in the Netherlands."

Avoiding Eurocentrism involved viewing Bonaire independently rather than as a colonial extension. As one student stated, Eurocentrism could be avoided by "listening carefully to the wishes of the museum and the local population" and "not viewing the island as something 'discovered' by Europeans."

In conclusion, the students' engagement in cultural immersion and reflective practice facilitated significant personal and social development, enhancing their intercultural competencies. They became aware of the necessity of preserving and exhibiting one's culture and heritage and of involving the Bonairean community and enabling them to narrate their own stories to "showcase and celebrate the island and its culture." Finally, they discerned the critical importance of decolonizing cultural heritage practices through the valuation of local perspectives and the cultivation of respectful, dialogue-based collaborations.

Awareness of Professional Growth as Intercultural Heritage Practitioners

Sharing authority is not only a gold standard in the field of public history (Frisch, 1990); within the decolonization of museums, it is often invoked as a key concept to underline the importance of collaboration and coproduction in heritage (Clifford, 1997; Smith, 2006). By the term "sharing authority," we understand the collaborative method wherein professional historians or curators see their role as more than willingness to engage with societal stakeholders relevant to the history or collection of concern. Sharing authority transcends merely listening to nonexpert voices; it necessitates actively integrating the community, even if doing so forces the expert to question deeply seated notions or norms (Golding & Modest, 2013). As Boast (2011) appositely argued, full sharing of authority is never possible, especially in decolonizing contexts, since museums and historical institutions in general are themselves Western products of modernity based on asymmetric power relations and expertise. Although full sharing of authority is unachievable, we should view it as a noble (if elusive) goal on the horizon. Thus, heritage professionals not only need to strive for sharing of authority through actively setting up transdisciplinary, intercultural collaboration, they also need to be aware of uneven and even irreconcilable power relations intrinsic to every heritage project. Only through getting our hands dirty can we achieve an unachievable intercultural sharing of authority.

This hands-on experience has deepened understanding of the sector's intricacies and operational dynamics, significantly enhancing professional knowledge and substantial insights into the cultural heritage sector, as well as enthusiasm for the field. As one student stated:

> One of the most important experiences I gained during this course was a first introduction to the field of heritage work. . . . I was never quite sure what the potential next steps after my studies would involve. This tutorial has truly helped me get a sense of what the heritage world looks like and how the skills learned during my studies can be applied.

The intercultural fieldwork underscored the necessity of first acquiring contextual knowledge. As one of the students stressed:

> A great deal of knowledge is required for this [project], and I believe it is crucial for every project. Learn extensively about local customs, the historical context that can clarify the present, the political situation, people's feelings and opinions, as well as practical conditions on the island such as demographics, climate, location, ecological conditions, and changes. The more knowledge you acquire about the island, the better you can empathize with the local situation and understand it. Combine all this knowledge and then present your findings to others, so you can also learn from them.

The complex conditions on Bonaire revealed distinct methods of working and collaborating, influenced by political factors such as networking, personal interests, and competition. These insights highlighted the need for sensitivity to local contexts and practices. One student remarked:

> This project was an intriguing first introduction to the complexity of the heritage sector; collaboration in this sector, in the case of the Terramar Museum and other local (cultural) institutions, turned out to be a political process of networking, influenced by personal interests and mutual competition.

And another student remarked: "It makes me realize that collaboration is a luxury in some cases."

In addition, the fieldwork experience reinforced recognition of the critical need for involving local communities in heritage projects: Inclusive collaboration emerged as a key factor in this process. Integrating local knowledge not only enriched the project but also helped to diminish hierarchical structures. Academic expertise was contributed upon request, showing the students they were able to add significant value, and letting them realize their potential. It also fostered a sense of both student and colleague roles, as was underlined by one of the students: "Throughout the project, I felt both like a student and a colleague. This made me feel very engaged with the project, and I experienced the responsibilities we were given as enjoyable and educational challenges."

A critical aspect of the project was avoiding the reproduction of neocolonial power dynamics. Initially, students felt an imbalance in relationships, which heightened awareness of their positionality. Halfway through the project, one of them noticed: "It still feels a bit off to me that we get to have a say in an exhibition about the history of Bonaire from the local perspective, while we, as Dutch people, represent the former colonial rulers."

However, the realization that diverse goals and perspectives within the frame of power relations could significantly enhance outcomes emerged as a valuable lesson. Through dialogue and local research, attempts were made to address and potentially rectify unequal power relations, though these endeavors were not always successful, as observed by one student:

> The power dynamic between the Netherlands and Bonaire—and between us and the Bonaireans—remains. We are educated, wealthier, and have come to Bonaire to gather information. However, by attempting to engage in dialogue on equal footing, we found it possible to break the pattern we expected to fall into. On Bonaire, this was mostly the case, although there were a few who found us disrespectful or refused to engage with us due to the shared history of our countries, the Netherlands and Bonaire.

Nevertheless, the project contributed significantly to the awareness of professional growth of, and the notion of shared authority by, the students within the field of intercultural heritage, as one of the students convincingly concluded:

> This [project] has affected how I now view my societal role. Initially, I thought that, given my location in the Netherlands, I could never participate in current societal debates about slavery and its lasting effects. Now, I have hope that, despite my location, I can participate in these debates. For example, in my internship, I will again address the history of slavery and its impact on the present. If I hadn't gone to Bonaire, I would have been less able to explain to stakeholders what I have to offer and why I approach things

> the way I do. Now, I feel that I can do this not just from a researcher's perspective, but from a societal role as well, by demonstrating professional skills.

In conclusion, the Bonaire project profoundly enhanced the students' awareness of their professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners, highlighting the importance of sharing authority and integrating local voices in heritage work. This experience not only deepened their understanding of the complexities within the heritage sector but also reinforced the critical need for reflexivity and collaboration in addressing and navigating power dynamics in intercultural settings.

Discussion

The Making Bonairean Heritage Together project showcases the potential of community-engaged learning (CEL) as a method for equipping students with "heritage wit"—a term coined by the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam) to describe the competencies, skills, and political awareness needed to navigate the often competing narratives embedded in heritage, as well as the emotions encoded in collections, buildings, and practices. This project provided students with a unique decolonial context that facilitated shared authority and genuine collaboration with community voices.

Through hands-on engagement, students developed key intercultural skills necessary for their roles as future heritage practitioners. The data from this project demonstrate that collaboration between former colonizers and descendants of enslaved communities—when grounded in community-engaged decolonial heritage practices—can foster intercultural competencies, reflexivity, and critical awareness of ongoing colonial structures. Furthermore, the experiential nature of international CEL strengthens both academic curricula and community engagement initiatives beyond the classroom, demonstrating that critical heritage studies can serve as a vehicle for decolonization and intercultural learning in the Global North.

More specifically, four lessons learned emerged, aligning with the conclusions drawn from this study. The first lesson was the importance of learning through misunderstandings and discomfort. Engaging in intercultural collaboration inevitably led to discomfort, misunderstandings, and moments of tension. These challenges stimulated students to question their own cultural assumptions, confront Eurocentric perspectives, and recognize the complexities of intercultural communication.

The second lesson was the possibility of acquiring intercultural competencies through reflexivity. Our findings show that reflexivity was essential in reevaluating students' roles within historical and societal contexts. By actively engaging with local communities, students enhanced their ability to navigate cultural differences, develop cultural sensitivity, and foster adaptability. This process encouraged them to critically reflect on their positionality as Dutch students in a postcolonial context, mirroring the broader power dynamics of heritage work.

The third lesson was that bridging theory and practice can be accomplished through hands-on learning. Immersive fieldwork played a crucial role in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical application. Students learned to integrate theoretical insights from critical heritage studies with the lived realities of community stakeholders. By adapting their communication styles and engaging in dialogue with local partners, students enhanced their ability to work respectfully and collaboratively in diverse settings. This process reinforced the importance of cultural responsiveness and showed how theoretical knowledge can lead to meaningful, community-driven outcomes.

Finally, it can be stressed that awareness of professional growth came into being through shared authority. Effective collaboration in heritage projects requires balancing academic expertise with local knowledge to address historical inequalities. Although achieving full shared authority may be unattainable, striving toward this goal fosters inclusive, respectful, and impactful heritage practices. A crucial factor in achieving this awareness was the step-by-step structure of the course, which gradually prepared students for fieldwork and real engagement with heritage communities. The introductory weeks at the home university helped students build the confidence to take on leadership roles, design heritage experiences, and engage stakeholders. Ultimately, this work contributed to a deeper awareness of their positionality and the value of community collaboration, shaping their professional identity as intercultural heritage practitioners.

One significant limitation of this study, which focuses on student intercultural learning within collaborative heritage practices, is that the data collection did not adequately capture the voices of the community. Although the study was situated in a decolonial context, the data primarily reflect the students' perspectives rather than those of the community stakeholders. Future research should prioritize methods that center the community's voice, engaging stakeholders more directly to provide a balanced and comprehensive view of the collaborative decolonial heritage process.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to a growing body of literature emphasizing hands-on pedagogical methods for "doing decolonial heritage" from an intercultural and critical perspective. Central to our approach was the framework of international community-engaged learning, which involved students working on a concrete project for a nonacademic partner to tackle a societal project. In our case, a museum in a former Dutch colony served as the client, and Dutch students from the metropolis the contractors. This unique and layered power relationship fostered students' critical reflection on decolonial power dynamics and their own positionality.

The course structure included 7 weeks of classes, 1 week of fieldwork on site, and 1 week of individual coursework. During the classes, students engaged with theories and concepts from critical heritage studies and applied them through continuous meetings with the client, online and in person. This approach not only facilitated the practical application of theory but also helped students develop intercultural communication skills. A week of fieldwork practice entailed diving into Bonairean culture, heritage practice, and community engagement.

Our exploration of student engagement revealed professional and personal transformations across four areas: learning through misunderstanding and confusion, acquiring intercultural competencies, personal and social development through reflexivity on interculturality, and awareness of professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners. On all four fronts, students experienced both professional and personal transformations. Across these modes of learning, two overall skills were acquired. First, through hands-on work, students became aware of the positionality of their profession and the inescapable Eurocentrism in many elements of existing heritage practices. Second, through active engagement and conversation, they learned to understand the context of the client better and gained insights into ongoing colonialism in the Netherlands.

Even as the Making Bonairean Heritage Together project provided a rich and transformative learning experience, it also presented several challenges related to program administration, long-term impact assessment, and the sustainability of intercultural learning initiatives. The intensive involvement of lecturers, as well as the financial and logistical demands of international travel, highlight the need to explore alternative teaching models for decolonial heritage education. The unique relationship between Bonaire and the Netherlands—allowing Bonairean colleagues to regularly participate in classes—was instrumental in the project's success, but similar initiatives in other postcolonial contexts may require alternative approaches to ensure continuity and accessibility.

One area for future research involves systematically identifying which pedagogical interventions most effectively fostered student engagement, reflexivity, and transformation and therefore would best help strengthen the link between specific learning activities and student outcomes. Additionally, there is an opportunity to conduct a rigorous long-term study of impact. Although students demonstrated significant short-term personal and professional transformation, little is known about the long-term effects of their participation. Future research could explore whether graduates pursue roles advocating for decolonial heritage—either in Bonaire or in similar global contexts—thereby assessing the project's lasting influence on professional trajectories.

Another important direction for future inquiry arises from a key limitation of this study: the underrepresentation of community voices in the data. Although the project was situated in a decolonial context and aimed to foster intercultural collaboration, the findings primarily reflect student perspectives. To ensure a fuller and more balanced understanding of intercultural heritage work, future studies should prioritize participatory approaches that center the experiences and perspectives of local community stakeholders.

Finally, exploring the potential of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a supplement or alternative to international fieldwork could help determine whether digital learning environments can provide a comparable intercultural learning experience. Developing innovative virtual collaboration models could make decolonial heritage education more inclusive, scalable, and sustainable while maintaining the experiential depth that was central to this project.

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The Key Is in the Other: Analyzing Global Interconnection in a Service-Learning Project

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Abstract

This article explores the characteristics of the BEA Project, an international service-learning (ISL) initiative promoting interaction and exchange between Italy and Brazil. Through a descriptive analysis, this article examines multiple dimensions promoted by our proposal within a glocal framework, analyzing participants' involvement in key global partnerships through such partners as universities, affiliated community-based centers, and communities. Best practices examples highlight the importance of reflective practices in fostering cultural competence and bottom-up strategies to approach communities. Finally, the article proposes a monitoring and evaluation strategy to address the project's limitations and enhance its impact, integrating quantitative and qualitative instruments. This research contributes to the ISL literature by offering insights into best practices for sustainable international collaborations.

Keywords: international service-learning, community engagement, intercultural competence, academic and community partnership, glocal approach

The increasing accessibility of international learning programs has heightened universities' commitment to developing curricula aimed at nurturing students into global citizens. Community engagement projects and service-learning (SL) programs have emerged as functional pedagogical approaches to achieve this goal. However, a critical aspect lies in precisely defining these educational approaches, as misconceptions about their significance can lead to some issues; for example, students prioritize the broad development of personal skills over addressing the real needs of local organizations (MacDonald & Tiessen, 2018). Community–Campus Partnerships for Health (2005) has defined community engagement as "all the application of institutional resources to address and solve challenges facing communities through collaboration with these communities" (p. 12). On the other hand, the service-learning methodology delineates an academic approach wherein students accrue credits through participation in structured service activities benefiting the community (Bringle et al., 2023). Service-learning programs are distinguished from other forms of volunteering or community service initiatives primarily by their emphasis on active student engagement in learning about real-world contexts relevant to their educational curriculum, coupled with structured reflections on their roles as citizens (Reynolds, 2009). To facilitate a comprehensive and immersive experience for students, service-learning courses are ideally structured over an extended duration. Within this paradigm, international service-learning (ISL) is understood as an international education experience, encompassing active engagement of the students within community organizations (Bringle et al., 2023).

Service-learning is practiced throughout the world, even though most research on university and community engagement is influenced by paradigms from the Global North, especially in Europe and the United States (Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021). This imbalance of available theoretical frameworks may cause some countries to overlook valuable

knowledge and practices in other cultural contexts. However, original and innovative educational approaches are already available, notably in regions like Latin America. Latin American universities, in particular, have a history of developing unique pedagogical methods through their involvement with local communities (Appe et al., 2017). A similar issue can be found in other global regions, and literature has reported how in some countries, such as the Republic of South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the word "service" has a colonialist connotation, prompting a preference for the expression "community engagement." Within these contexts, a service-learning practice is mostly unavailable or, where present, constitutes mere adaptations of the U.S. model (Thomson et al., 2011).

In order to surpass the hegemonic transmission of knowledge and values from the Global North, some authors have suggested the adoption of a "glocal" vision that can bridge different political systems, ideologies, faiths, and lifestyles, thereby challenging the existing power structures (Mihr, 2022). In a nutshell, the concept of glocal encapsulates the dynamic interplay between global and local perspectives within educational practices. It emphasizes the transmission of universal knowledge and ideas within local communities, while simultaneously recognizing and responding to the unique needs and circumstances of those communities within a global context. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of our world, where local issues are often connected with broader global challenges. By integrating global knowledge with local relevance, glocal education seeks to empower learners to engage critically with both global trends and local realities. This approach can foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of our interconnected world, equipping individuals with the skills and perspectives needed to navigate and contribute meaningfully to a rapidly changing global society (Niemczyk, 2019). With glocalized learning and teaching, Patel and Linch (2013) referred to "the curricular consideration and pedagogical framing of local and global community connectedness in relation to social responsibility, justice and sustainability" (p. 223). This wide-ranging educational approach aims to engage with the global challenges associated with globalization, multiculturalism, migration, the weakening of civic engagement, and the breakup of social ties, among other topics (Sklad et al., 2016). In response to these challenges and to foster the cultivation of global citizenship, students are encouraged to increase their civic engagement and develop their intercultural competencies. This approach aligns with the cultivation of intercultural competencies as defined by UNESCO, which involve knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired through interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2020). ISL programs offer a valuable opportunity to cultivate these intercultural competencies in students and young citizens, enhancing their ability to navigate and contribute meaningfully to a diverse and interconnected global society. By combining glocalized educational practices with ISL programs, local institutions can effectively foster the development of global citizenship and promote social responsibility, justice, and sustainability on a global scale.

Since 2002, the BEA Project has promoted these goals, facilitating the implementation of an ISL program between Italy and Brazil in which public, private, and civil society organizations collaborate at both local and international levels. The project aims to develop prosocial citizenship, peace, and intercultural dialogue by disseminating innovative strategies of internationalization and social responsibility of universities toward the community. To achieve these objectives, the BEA Project facilitates participants' immersion in an innovative glocal service-learning framework (Andrian & Sartori, 2023) while also fostering reciprocity in student exchanges between local universities in Italy and Brazil. In summary, the BEA Project can be considered to fall within ISL programs, as it retains the typical characteristics of service-learning (such as experiential learning in local community members, structured reflections, and recognition of learning credits) within an international framework for student mobility.

In Brazil, the BEA Project operates in the cities of Petrolina and Juazeiro, located between the states of Pernambuco and Bahia, in the Northeast region of the country (Figure 1). According to Oxfam International, Brazil is facing extreme inequality in distribution of economic resources (OXFAM, 2019). This disparity is particularly marked in the Northeast region, which has more than half of the country's extremely poor communities (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2022). Ethnically

speaking, the Northeast population is the result of the mixing of Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans. Pernambuco and Bahia, especially, experience discrimination and racial tensions in everyday life (Leite, 2008). Moreover, the Northeast is also one of the most violent regions in Brazil, with high rates of homicide and organized crime (Cerqueira et al., 2023), a determinant factor probably adding weight to an already precarious community and individual psychosocial well-being (Garcia et al., 2023).

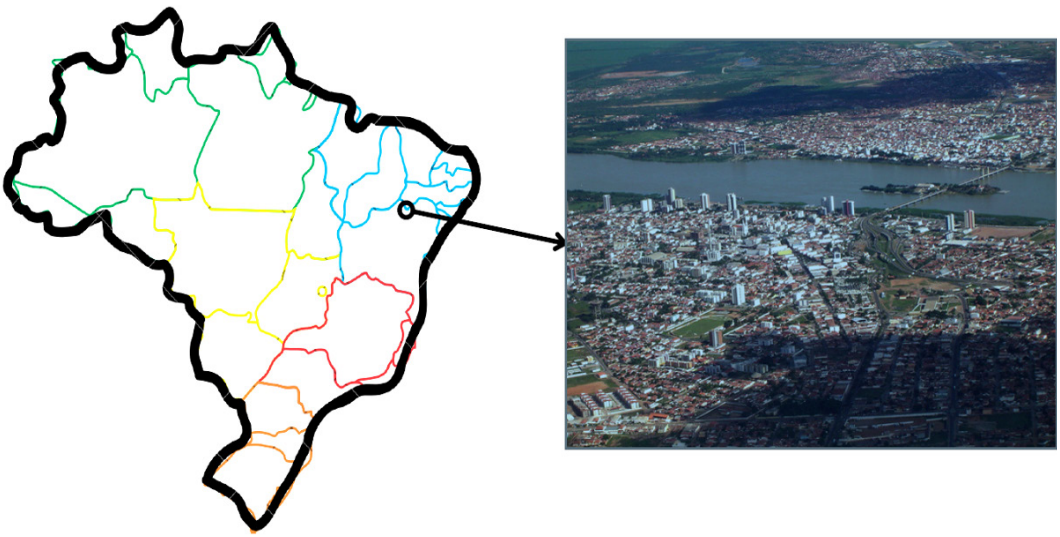
Meanwhile, Brazilian project participants in Italy are based in the cities of Rovigo and Padua, located in the Northeast region of Italy, Veneto (Figure 2). This region is one of the most affluent in terms of per capita income in Italy; only 5.5% of families live in relative poverty. Tourism is a major revenue generator for the region (WHO, 2018). Italy has seen a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in recent years, which is likely to be reflected in Veneto (Dennison & Dražanová, 2019).

Although the BEA Project recognizes the structural imbalance inherent in the exchange between Italy and Brazil, particularly regarding economic disparities and resource availability, these dynamics are uncontrollable. However, factors such as economic inequality, racial tensions, and the complexities of engaging with diverse cultural norms highlight the importance of developing intercultural skills when interacting with local communities. These skills could help participants navigate challenges more effectively, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration (Bennett et al., 2009).

To address these issues, the ISL project BEA has established partnerships with universities, community centers, and local communities, emphasizing a glocal perspective. This approach aims to support the development of intercultural competencies among participants, equipping them to engage constructively with both local and global dynamics.

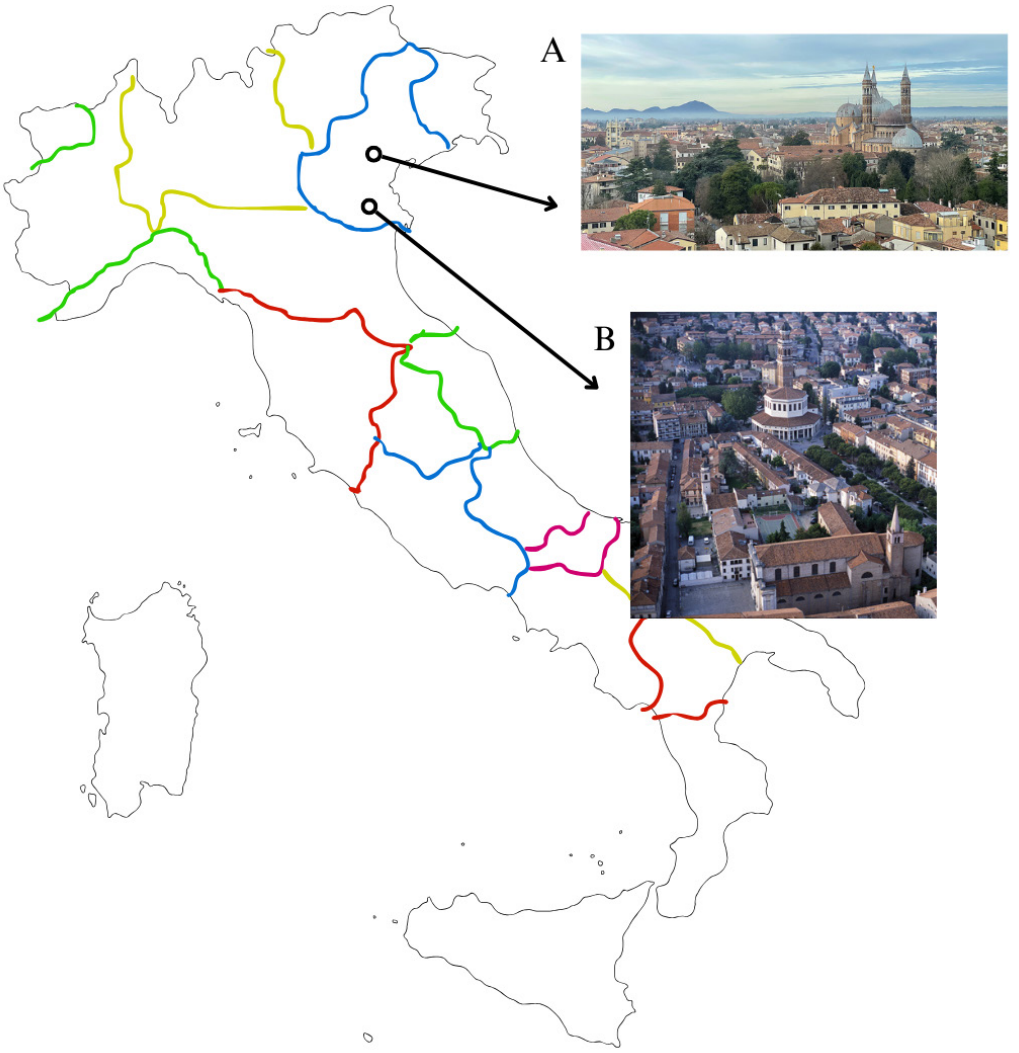
In the following article, the authors will outline the activities conducted by project participants within local project partnerships through a descriptive analysis. Examples of best practices, based on the practical experiences of participants and stakeholders, are provided. Additionally, ongoing efforts to enhance the monitoring and evaluation process to measure the project's impact on participant intercultural competencies and community empowerment are discussed in their strengths and limitations.

Figure 1. The Regions and Provinces of Brazil and the Interconnection Between the City of Petrolina (PE) and Juazeiro (BA)



Note. Adapted from [Rio São Francisco dividindo as cidades de Petrolina-Juazeiro] by G. Carneiro, 2008 (https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ponte_Presidente_Dutra_%28_Petrolina-Juazeiro%29.jpg). Used under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.it).

Figure 2. The Regions of Italy and the View of the City of Padua (A) and Rovigo (B)



Note. Image A: Adapted from *Padova, Veduta aerea sulla Basilica di Sant'Antonio e i Colli euganei sullo sfondo* by R. Maniero, 2024. (https://bur.regione.veneto.it/BurvServices/pubblica/burvGalleryDettaglio.aspx?id=2585). Image B: Adapted from *Rovigo, Veduta aerea* by Archivi fotografici del Veneto, 2011. (https://bur.regione.veneto.it/BurvServices/pubblica/burvGalleryDettaglio.aspx?id=754)

The article focuses on cross-cultural challenges and strategies for fostering equality and reciprocity in global partnerships. Practical obstacles, such as language barriers, differing cultural norms, and structural inequalities, can impact collaborative decision-making and equitable engagement. The BEA Project addresses these challenges through culturally sensitive strategies, emphasizing a flexible approach and practice to promote equality and reciprocity between international partners. A bottom-up approach ensures that community needs drive activities, enhancing participation and empowerment.

Finally, the authors analyze the overall project's limitations, examining their underlying factors within the broader partnership dynamics between the Global North and Global South, following a glocal theoretical framework. This discussion underscores the importance of addressing cross-cultural challenges as a central factor in shaping project outcomes and offers insights into potential solutions to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of future international community-engaged learning initiatives.

The BEA Project

"[Talking about 'decentralization'] being 'foreign' made me think a lot about the ability to leave my world, my way of thinking, the ability to 'move away from myself'" (G.P., final report, BEA Project's 2015 Team).

The BEA Project was born in 2002 as a 3-year cooperative development intervention, approved and cofinanced by the Veneto Region, International Relations Directorate, through the regional project Decentralized Development Cooperation. The first network was made of the former Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Padua (UNIPD), Italy; the Petrolina Faculty of Training of Professors (FFPP) of the State University of Pernambuco (UPE), Petrolina Campus; the Association of Friends of PETRAPE, working with minors in difficult conditions; and by the San Domingo Savio Municipal School of Petrolina, a school attended by children and adolescents hosted by PETRAPE, in Brazil.

A second step for the project was developed from 2005 to 2008 through the creation of the BEA Project PETRAPE, approved and cofinanced for one year by the Veneto Region. In these 3 years, the project aimed to improve the quality of services offered to street children by the PETRAPE Association of Petrolina (PE). During this project, the international mobility of UNIPD students began solely as an educational internship abroad. One of the most important aspects of the network management was the signing of a bilateral agreement between UNIPD and FFPP, UPE, and Pernambuco state, and the signing of a training and orientation agreement between EnARS, the cultural association under which the BEA Project operates, and UNIPD.

From 2009 to today, the BEA Project has taken on a new scope, focusing its activities on the international mobility of students, offering a mixed system of study and internship. This system has seen significant development due to the expansion of local collaborations and the involvement of students in social engagement projects at partner universities. In addition to UPE, FFPP, the Federal University of São Francisco Valley (UNIVASF), and the University of the State of Bahia (UNEB) became project partners. The general aim of the project has been to develop good intercultural, educational, and training practices, through mixed experiences of study and university internship and volunteering abroad, with a focus on children, adolescents, and women in conditions of risk and social vulnerability. Special attention is given to moments of meeting and intercultural exchange of university students and volunteers, to promote active citizenship and social responsibility in the world (ENARS, n.d.).

As the project developed in more directions, gaining new partnerships, new questions emerged. What did an international service-learning experience like the BEA Project signify for students at UNIPD? How relevant was the proposal of the BEA Project from the point of view of internationalization and social responsibility of the university, and from the point of view of education for the students involved?

From 2015 to 2018, these questions were explored in a doctoral research project under joint supervision between UNIPD and UNEB. The aim was to examine the characteristics of the BEA Project and replicate its success while adapting to contextual differences within a bilateral agreement between an Italian and a Brazilian university (Andrian, 2020).

With annual cyclicality, the project includes three different phases: premobility, mobility, and postmobility. The premobility stage focuses on a specific training course to support and prepare students for the international experience and the development of civic, linguistic, and intercultural competencies. The mobility stage is the central part of the experience, involving physical presence in the host country for a period ranging from 3 to 6 months. Most of the activities are carried out during this phase. Finally, in the postmobility phase, participants are supported in closing the activities through an evaluation of the experience and the delivery of the end-of-mobility documentation (possibly a thesis). They are also required to be involved in supporting the next year's participants, through sharing their experiences.

The Project's Participants

The BEA Project has always been open to students from any university in the world and to volunteers of any origin and age. Indeed, although the majority of BEA Project participants are students in training, the group also can include volunteers from outside the higher education sector. For students in training, remuneration is possible only if their universities of origin

or the host facilities provide a scholarship or reimbursement for expenses. The BEA Project itself lacks the capacity to cover work or living costs. However, it consistently works to secure free housing for its participants wherever possible, striving to reduce financial barriers to participation.

The actual mobility of the BEA Project began in 2003, as a one-way from Italy to Brazil, and to date has seen the participation of 55 students from various Italian and foreign universities (undergraduate and postgraduate internship) and 11 volunteers,

The consistent involvement of the coordinator at every stage of the project, along with their active participation in activities within local communities, is an important peculiarity of the BEA Project. The added value of this professional figure lies in their ability to coordinate activities bridging the academic teaching and the practical community involvement, ensuring effective coordination and engagement throughout the project's implementation. This role is especially relevant because local university professors and representatives of various local partners often lack the financial resources and time to manage external activities, as these activities may go beyond the scope of their specific roles. Therefore, having a dedicated professional to oversee these tasks is essential for seamless collaboration and effective engagement among the different project partners.

Starting with the arrival of the project participants in the host country, the coordinator is instrumental in encouraging a process of self-reflection and decentralization. This process aims to foster an awareness of the cultural biases prevailing toward the Global South and the Global North. This transformative journey happens through intercultural and peer-to-peer educational activities, complemented by supervised weekly structured sessions. These initiatives serve to prompt participants to critically examine and deconstruct their prejudices, thereby stimulating the construction of authentic dialogues with local community stakeholders (Andrian & Carvalho Teles, 2021) and fostering a more horizontal relationship (Fong, 2009).

An example of what this project has achieved, in terms of deconstructing inner prejudice, for project participants has been reported below. Participants are asked to reflect on their experience in the final evaluation questionnaire by answering the question "What are the most significant insights or reaffirmations you gained thanks to this experience?" (Responses are translated from Italian.)

> I have certainly learned many things that I would never have imagined while "sitting" at home. Through the acquaintances I made, I learned a lot about the history of Brazil, anticolonialism, economic inequalities, and the consequences these can have on people. All these factors made me deconstruct and reconstruct a series of knowledge and learning from the past that I had to dismantle. I learned a lot of new knowledge and tools related to nonviolent and assertive communication that I tried to implement during my journey. In my experience in particular, I have learned how a juvenile prison works, what the conditions can be that lead to finding oneself in certain situations and/or making certain choices; as well as learning so much about the social, psychological and legal work around this. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023)

Global Interconnection: Our Partnerships

Universities

The service-learning framework integrates participants' involvement in the local community with ongoing training, ensuring continuous intercultural reflection (Bringle et al., 2023). Local universities play a fundamental role as partners for the BEA Project, which collaborates with UNEB and with the Federal University of São Francisco Valley (UNIVASF), especially through their Multidisciplinary Residency in Mental Health (RMSM). Brazilian health residencies are academic institutions created to improve health training at the postgraduate level, with a 2-year duration and a focus on in-service training (UNIVASF, 2013). Thanks to this partnership, Italian volunteers also are able to join lectures and discuss mental health care with interdisciplinary Brazilian students.

Project participants assume a dual role within the university: as students attending courses and as language teachers. The

language course, open also to the local community, plays an important role in the project's self-sustainability and continuity.

In addition to attending and providing lectures, project participants are encouraged to actively engage with the local student community through various activities. In previous years, Italian project participants have helped organize the international scientific conference National and International Workshop on Education for Coexistence in the Brazilian Semiarid Region (Workshop Nacional e Internacional de Educação para a Convivência com o Semiárido Brasileiro), hosted at UNEB, now at its 13th convocation. Other relevant opportunities to learn and test professional and soft skills in an academic context change from year to year. For instance, the 2022 Italian team was involved as organizer and speaker at another conference, the First Full-Immersion Week in GloCal Solidarity Learning (I Semana de Imersão Total em Aprendizagem Solidária GloCal), hosted by UNEB in collaboration with the BEA Project.

The partnerships with universities and participant involvement have been facilitated by the academic involvement of the BEA Project's director at both UNEB and UNIPD. Although this specific example of best practice may not be universally applicable, involving a staff member from a local university in an international service-learning project can be encouraged in similar contexts. Doing so simplifies the integration of project participants into the local student community, which may feel more familiar.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations related to maintaining local universities as partners. Although the BEA Project activities include an exchange program between UNEB and UNIPD, funding is currently sufficient only to support student mobility from Italy to Brazil. Brazilian students have access to limited reimbursement, which restricts participation primarily to individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, resulting in uncertain Brazilian student participation from year to year. This limitation can be analyzed on various levels, including the need to address potential gaps in interest or understanding of community-engaged projects among academic staff and stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of fostering a mutual understanding of available resources. Additionally, the complex and demanding bureaucratic processes, such as securing visas and navigating university administrative procedures for the recognition of foreign students' credits, within both Italian and Brazilian academic systems, pose significant challenges that could hinder student participation in the BEA Project. As a best practice recommendation, project coordinators should collaborate closely with students and professors, where appropriate, to promote the benefits of ISL to academic stakeholders and advocate for streamlined processes that support student participation.

Affiliated Community-Based Centers

The BEA Project can count on several Northeast Brazilian community-based centers as partners, both in the city of Petrolina (PE) and Juazeiro (BA). Since the project's inception in 2002, the network of partner centers has grown significantly, expanding from an initial two community-based centers to 24 active centers in 2024. Currently, project participants can work within public psychosocial care centers, called CAPS (Centro de Atenção Psicossocial), inserted in the broader Brazilian Psychosocial Care Network (Rede de Atenção Psicossocial—RAPS). These public centers aid adults and children experiencing severe mental health disorders, or struggling with substance abuse (Brasil, Ministério da Saúde, 2005). Participants can also be involved as interns in other public facilities, inserted in the public Foundation for Socioeducational Care (Fundação de Atendimento Socioeducativo—FUNASE), which receives minors convicted of various offences. FUNASE divides these minors into separate detention centers (CENIP, CASE, CI, etc.). The placement is determined by a judge based on various factors, including the severity of the offenses. Each facility is specifically equipped to offer the essential support, rehabilitation, education, and care required by the minors under its supervision (Brasil, Câmara dos Deputados, 2014). Participants can also work in private community centers, such as Pastoral da Mulheres, a community center for sex workers, or APAE (Associação de Pais e Amigos dos Excepcionais, Association of Parents and Friends of Exceptional People), which aids individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Brazilian participants in Italy have been employed within the social association Porto Alegre (Porto Alegre Cooperativa Sociale, A. R. L., n.d.), offering socioeducational and housing services for migrants, promoting their inclusion in the territory of Rovigo (RO).

All these community-based centers operate within an interdisciplinary framework. (We use the term "interdisciplinary" to refer to any context that includes professionals of different educational backgrounds, training, and experience working together to provide comprehensive care to a community [Orchard et al., 2005]). Collaborating with other professionals, through both formal and informal sharing processes, is perceived as crucial for the effectiveness of any therapeutic plan (Jafelice et al., 2022; Laverack et al., 2019). Project participants came from different disciplines: psychology, educational sciences, and social services are the most common. They are asked to work in synergy with other professionals, coming not only from different fields but also from other cultures. This experience involves understanding the intersections of various contextual variables, putting emphasis on self-awareness and confronting biases to ensure a culturally competent practice (Fong, 2009). Below, we share the experience of an Italian team member hired as an intern by FUNASE in 2023 (translated from Italian):

> Regarding knowing how to live together, in addition to what has already been said, I have certainly learned, in a more consistent way, the importance of nonjudgment, of actively listening to the other, of trusting the other by modulating one's expectations; as well as the importance of collaboration, teamwork, support, asking for help in times of difficulty and being there on the other side. Especially within the internship institution, these learnings allowed me to establish a relationship with teenagers, to find a key to get in touch with them, with their essence, and build a different perspective together with them. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023)

The partnerships with the community centers have been promoted and cultivated following some necessary rules/steps.

- Participants undergo a structured onboarding process upon arrival at the centers, which includes scheduled tours to introduce them to the objectives and values of the institution. They meet the interdisciplinary team and gain insights into the team's objectives and values in working with vulnerable communities. Participants often arrive with an idea about where they would like to conduct their internship, but they frequently change their preferences after interacting with the interdisciplinary teams.
- Affiliated community-based centers should host only one or two participants. In this way, each participant can count on a deeper cultural and linguistic immersion. This approach also helps the local team adapt more easily to language and cultural differences. Additionally, having fewer participants allows appointed supervisors to dedicate focused time to each intern's professional training within their daily work tasks.
- Project participants must be employed under an internship contract with the selected center. In this way, the responsibility of both the intern and the work supervisor are established by a formal contract. The participants can count this international service-learning experience in their professional journey. Likewise, the interdisciplinary team can legally count on the intern competencies, while feeling more responsible toward their training (Bringle et al., 2023).
- Participants are encouraged to engage in a 2-week "cultural observation" period before proposing a formative project to their center supervisor. This time frame is essential for several reasons. First, it enables participants to identify and address any internalized prejudices or biases toward the culture they are immersed in, with support from peers during weekly team meetings. Second, it allows participants to gain a better understanding of team dynamics, which can be challenging, especially when working with disadvantaged communities and implementing new projects (Jafelice et al., 2022). Finally, this period fosters culturally sensitive attitudes and informs service-learning initiatives based on genuine community needs, following a bottom-up approach (Andrian & Carvalho, 2021).

- Monitoring and evaluation can be considered fundamental stepping stones in community-engaged projects (UNESCO, 2009, pp. 10–14). Informal feedback from participants occurs during the internship through the team's weekly meetings, and the community-based center supervisor has a direct line to the project director for formal evaluation. When the contract comes to an end, both participants and supervisors are invited to provide an assessment of their experiences through qualitative analysis, involving reports and interviews assessed by the project director.

In conclusion, these steps provide an example of best practices adopted by our project to maintain meaningful partnerships with local community-based centers. Through a real work experience, formalized with an internship contract, participants gain valuable insights and skills that not only benefit the communities served but also enrich their professional development in the field of social work. Monitoring and evaluation of the experience are conducted both formally and informally to allow for flexible adjustments in any aspect of the partnership.

Communities

The affiliated centers specialize in working with specific communities, each with unique needs, resources, and power dynamics influenced by different factors, like the center's function (e.g., detention facility, psychosocial support) and overall team values. Participants are encouraged to integrate with the team while also forming their own relationships with individuals and groups within the community. Given that these relationships may differ significantly from those developed with team members, we will address communities as partners, even though participants have access to them only through the affiliated community center. Professional relationships with community members can be personalized to some extent, allowing participants to form meaningful connections. However, these interactions must adhere to specific rules and guidelines, which are sometimes necessary for safety reasons, particularly in sensitive settings such as juvenile and psychosocial care centers.

The project considers two main factors for facilitating the involvement of participants in the local community.

First, the cultural differences between the participant and the community are intensified by an initial language barrier. Engaging with people and immersing oneself in a new culture can be challenging, particularly when the emphasis of learning shifts from language understanding to cultural application (Byram, 2009). This aspect is mostly aided by activities already introduced, such as the language courses, the weekly team meetings, and the intercultural competence university course.

Second, one of the core aspects of the intercultural approach adopted by the BEA Project is to address needs defined by the local communities themselves (Bringle et al., 2023; Mackenzie et al., 2019). In this way, the project tries to avoid the reinforcement of top-down community interventions, and so the risk of lacking meaningful community engagement, which can lead to resistance from community members (WHO, 1986). Therefore, participants are encouraged to engage in a 2-week cultural observation period before proposing community-based activities to their center supervisor. This time frame enables participants to identify and address any internalized prejudices or biases toward the culture they are immersed in, an aspect of the experience that they come to appreciate in time, as one participant explained (translated from Italian):

> One of the greatest learnings in my training institution was to be able to separate the adolescent as a violation of the law [*sic*] and the adolescent as a human being, which allowed me to be able to establish a helping relationship with the kids and create a workshop with them—starting from needs analysis, planning, fund raising, implementation and management of the project, as well as evaluation of the results—without ever forgetting the context of immersion but with the humanity of leaving it aside, in specific moments. Throughout the experience, despite the tiredness and sometimes tight schedules, I learned to be present, to leave anything unnecessary at home and, even though with initial difficulty, not to let the emotional part emerge within the professional context. Furthermore, I learned new tools from the Italian [language] course, learning more of a culture, facilitating the dialogue

> during the exchange. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023)

When ready, participants can propose community-based activities formalized in a formative project. The formative project is an opportunity for participants to apply their formal learning, engage with the community, contribute positively to addressing local challenges or issues, and foster culturally sensitive attitudes (Fong, 2009). Having a formative project, approved by both the center supervisor and project director, can reinforce accountability in the participant and provide reliable material for the monitoring and evaluation of the activity proposed.

Over the years, several formative projects have been developed following this approach. One such project, published as an independent article by D'Attis et al. (2020), serves as a best practice example. In this project, adolescents attended a psychosocial care center, and the impact on the community was documented in a video available on YouTube (D'Attis, 2020). Following evidence of the protective effect of meditation on stress and anxiety (Goyal et al., 2014), a project participant carried out guided meditation sessions. An adolescent who attended the sessions reported the following (translated from Brazilian Portuguese): "Before, I thought it was a stupid thing. I thought it was useless. But when I did it [the meditation] calmed me down, I stopped thinking, in my mind and my body" (D'Attis, 2020, 3:15–3:16).

Finally, addressing the needs of individuals and groups composing the local communities is a structural part of the BEA Project. Through the planning and development of the formative project, the participants can promote relevant actions within vulnerable communities, contributing meaningfully to community empowerment (Sabo et al., 2015).

The BEA Project's Future Direction

So far, the BEA Project has implemented a range of monitoring and evaluation procedures during the service stage to assess its impact and effectiveness. These procedures include participant observation, focus groups conducted through weekly team meetings, final questionnaires, and documents such as final reports, dissertations, articles originating from the experience, and evaluations from community supervisors. Final evaluation is also performed by the project director and EnARS collaborators on all produced materials.

The final evaluation questionnaires collect data beyond personal reflections, including participants' self-assessment of intercultural and professional competencies, feedback on their integration within interdisciplinary teams, and insights into their contributions to the host communities. These evaluations also include specific suggestions for program improvement. For example, collected data highlighted the need for greater participant preparation before engagement with community centers, leading to the 2021 adjustment: community center selection now occurs only after participants complete a group visit, ensuring a more informed and collaborative decision-making process.

The lack of a clear monitoring and evaluation strategy is the main limitation of the BEA Project. Addressing it is crucial for enhancing program efficacy and ensuring a meaningful impact on participants and communities. In the future, we aim to implement a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the development of civic and intercultural competencies, as well as the quality and impact of ISL projects.

To analyze the development of civic and intercultural competencies among participants, we will employ the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (Bennett et al., 2009). This rubric assesses intercultural competencies informed by Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS; Bennett et al., 2017) and Deardorff's intercultural competence model (Deardoff, 2012). Administered to students pre- and postmobility, this rubric will provide insights into the evolution of intercultural competencies throughout the program. Furthermore, we will adopt the Global Citizen Scale (Reysen et al., 2013). This scale evaluates various aspects of global citizenship, including global awareness, intergroup empathy, and valuing diversity, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Administered to students after their return from international mobility, this scale will assess the extent to which participants embody the principles of global citizenship.

To evaluate the quality and impact of our ISL project, we will utilize as a reference the Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (Grönlund et al., 2014). A project

assessment tool has been developed in reference to these six aspects of the service-learning framework: integrated learning, effective collaboration, student voice, promotion of civic responsibility, reflection opportunities, and intentional evaluation. The assessment tool will be administered to stakeholders involved, including students and community members, after each mobility. Although the seven aspects may seem primarily focused on student experiences, they also indirectly assess the effectiveness of collaboration and the alignment of goals between partners and participants. For example, effective collaboration evaluates how well the partners and participants worked together, and promotion of civic responsibility and reflection opportunities can provide insights into how the partnership contributed to community-centered goals. This tool will provide valuable insights into project effectiveness.

Integrating qualitative evidence with quantitative analysis is crucial to better measure the program's impact on participants and communities. However, it is important to account for contextual flexibility in this process. By triangulating insights from reflective practices with quantitative metrics, we can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the BEA Project's impact.

Finally, the BEA Project has seen steady growth in its participant pool over the past two decades, incorporating students and volunteers from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. However, challenges remain in achieving greater socioeconomic diversity, particularly in enabling participants from the Global South to engage fully, further highlighting the need for a more robust and systematic monitoring and evaluation framework to better track progress on participant diversity and program impact.

Overall, by implementing these assessment instruments, we aim to establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework that captures the multifaceted impacts of the BEA Project. Through systematic data collection and analysis, we can track the development of participants' competencies, evaluate the quality and impact of the project, and identify areas for improvement. This iterative process of assessment and reflection will enable us to continuously improve our practices and ultimately contribute to positive social change within local and global communities.

Conclusion

The glocal framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of global and local phenomena, highlighting the importance of contextualized interventions that address local needs while acknowledging global influences (Mihr, 2022). In describing the journey of the BEA Project and its implications for ISL, it becomes evident that the transformative power of experiential learning extends far beyond academic boundaries. By integrating global perspectives with local realities, the project exemplifies the principles of glocalization in action, promoting mutual understanding and collaboration across diverse cultural landscapes.

Furthermore, the project draws upon educational theory to inform its pedagogical approach, emphasizing the importance of experiential learning, reflection, and community engagement in shaping transformative educational experiences. As participants engage in hands-on activities, immerse themselves in local communities, and reflect on their experiences, they not only gain academic knowledge but also develop critical thinking skills, cultural competence, and a sense of social responsibility. This approach to education aligns with the principles of a glocalized education theory (Patel & Lynch, 2013, p. 223), which advocates for learner-centered, experiential approaches that empower individuals to become active agents of change in society.

However, while recognizing the best practice proposed by the BEA Project, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations and contextual challenges it faces. Funding constraints pose a significant barrier to equitable participation, particularly for students from underprivileged backgrounds. Moreover, bureaucratic complications within academic structures undermine program implementation and student engagement. Addressing these limitations requires collaborative efforts to advocate for increased funding and streamlined processes to ensure inclusivity and accessibility.

This descriptive analysis has identified several best practices. As a way of recognizing the need for contextual adaptation, these practices can serve as foundational steps to foster mutual understanding and collaboration between countries of the Global North and South within ISL projects. First, the presence of dedicated coordinators in each country facilitates effective communication and reciprocal relationships between participants

and community partners. Second, creating intercultural competencies is a long-term effort that necessitates time for development and immersion, allowing participants to integrate and comprehend the foreign cultural context fully. Third, designing and incorporating bilateral mobility in ISL experiences is a tool to ensure reciprocal exchanges between Global North and South countries. In our experience, the lack of resources remains a significant challenge, particularly for participants from the Global South seeking ISL opportunities in the Global North. Addressing this challenge requires not only advocating for increased funding but also implementing practical strategies, such as fostering resource-sharing partnerships, leveraging existing institutional infrastructures, and creating cost-effective program components. By adopting these best practices, ISL programs can enhance accessibility, foster meaningful cross-cultural exchanges, promote collaborative partnerships, and ultimately contribute to positive social change.

In conclusion, the BEA Project has been in operation for 20 years, and now it is employing new strategies to improve and adapt to contemporary challenges. As we continue to explore the complexities of global engagement and local community empowerment in ISL projects, it is recommended to adhere to best practices, advocate for greater inclusivity and accessibility, and embrace reflective practices. For the latter especially, we emphasize the importance of a judgment-free structured environment to enable participants' reflection on their own biases. These initial steps toward acknowledging personal and cultural differences can serve participants as resources for growth, both as citizens and as individuals.

> I have certainly learned to put myself out there, not to get involved in anxiety or the fear of failing. I have learned to be more and more patient, not to expect too much from myself because things cannot always be under my personal control, just as I have learned to value myself, to recognize my potential and my successes, to believe in myself more. (BEA Project team member, final evaluation questionnaire response, 2023).

Declaration of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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Community-Engaged Learning in a European Universities Alliance: Reflections on Equality and Reciprocity Across Europe and Africa

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Abstract

Although local community-engaged learning (CEL) is increasingly common in higher education, international CEL (ICEL) remains much less common. Through an autoethnographic study, we reflect on the challenges and prospects of collaborating across Europe and Africa, particularly emphasizing equality and reciprocity. Our focus is the Capstone, an ICEL thesis project in the Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability, a joint degree of the European Universities alliance CHARM-EU. We argue that achieving equality and reciprocity in ICEL requires (gradual) institutional and collaborative transformations that go beyond an individual ICEL exercise. Full equality may not be achievable; however, reciprocity can be fostered through exchanges between incentives, funding and resources, and decision-making. A balance is needed between regulatory freedom to experiment versus transparency and certainty of rules and regulations. We end with recommendations on how to achieve equality and reciprocity in ICEL, particularly within European Universities alliances.

Keywords: community-engaged learning, Global South, equality, reciprocity, European Universities alliances

Community-engaged learning (CEL) is a form of experiential learning wherein students, staff, and societal stakeholders interact around real-world societal challenges. Students engaged in experiential learning participate in concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation to acquire knowledge through transformative experiences (Kolb, 1984). CEL is increasingly used in higher education as a form of learning whereby students gain skills, competencies, and knowledge that they directly apply in collaboration with others (Seider & Novick, 2012). CEL has proven to not only enhance learning but also increase students' civic engagement and openness to diversity, an effect sometimes lasting even years after the exercise (Butin, 2006; Hou, 2014). CEL is most commonly focused on local challenges, in places and communities that students can easily access around their higher education institution (Sugawara et al., 2023).

International community-engaged learning (ICEL), whereby students focus on challenges taking place abroad and/or across borders, is much less commonly reported in the literature (Habashy et al., 2024). This type of CEL is nevertheless increasingly important due to the ever-rising interconnectedness of our world, with societal challenges that can rarely be isolated from what happens across national borders. ICEL has the potential to foster "think global, act local" attitudes and educate critically engaged global citizens to address the increasing number of societal and sustainability challenges around the world.

An important feature of (I)CEL is that not only students, but also societal stakeholders

benefit from the exercise through analyzing or addressing challenges and through joint learning. Reciprocity between students and societal stakeholders is key to this feature, with (a certain degree of) equal sharing of and contributing to knowledge, power, information, and involvement in (I)CEL (Butin, 2006; Davis et al., 2017; Hou, 2014; Mtawa, 2019). Reciprocity and equality in (I)CEL are challenging to achieve, particularly when partners have diverse backgrounds and levels of education, and when inequalities, including systemic inequalities, exist between them. Such diversity is especially common in ICEL. Although diversity can foster joint learning, codesign of education, and mutually beneficial impact, ICEL, compared to CEL, runs higher risks of exploitative relations wherein partners with more resources (knowledge, funds, etc.) have more decision-making power and gain more benefits than those with fewer resources. The higher the levels of inequality across partners, the more challenging it becomes to achieve optimal forms of reciprocity. The challenge is particularly acute in ICEL that involves partners in the Global North and the Global South. In this article, we reflect on the challenges and opportunities for reciprocity and equality in ICEL by studying a concrete case of ICEL that engages partners across Europe and the Global South.

We do so by focusing on a case of ICEL developed by the European Universities alliance CHARM-EU. European Universities alliances are increasingly important players in developing (I)CEL. They are a flagship initiative by the European Commission for alliances between higher education institutions across Europe "for the benefit of their students, staff and society" (European Commission, 2025, About the Initiative section). Although the more than 60 alliances that represent over 550 higher education institutions are very diverse, they all focus on collaborating with societal stakeholders to address societal challenges, including through (I)CEL. Many European Universities alliances strive to achieve equality and reciprocity in (I)CEL by building knowledge-creating teams that develop challenge-based education together with students, staff, and societal stakeholders across Europe (European Commission, 2025). European Universities alliances span across different (higher and middle income) regions in Europe, and some of them also collaborate with Global South partners. This scope of collaboration makes the work of European Universities alliances a novel and contemporaneous case to study reciprocity and equality in ICEL.

In this article, we study reciprocity and equality in the Capstone, an ICEL thesis project that constitutes the final phase of a joint degree program, the Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability (CHARM-EU, n.d.-c). The Master's is run by CHARM-EU, a European Universities alliance of nine partners (University of Barcelona, Utrecht University, Trinity College Dublin, University of Montpellier, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Åbo Akademi University, Julius-Maximilians University Würzburg, Hochschule Ruhr West, and the University of Bergen) across eight countries in Europe. It is simultaneously taught in hybrid classrooms across the campuses of CHARM-EU partners. The program is transdisciplinary in nature, with students and staff from all disciplinary backgrounds collaborating with societal partners in coursework on various sustainability challenges. Historically, it has run for 1.5 years across the five founding partners (University of Barcelona, Utrecht University, Trinity College Dublin, University of Montpellier, and Eötvös Loránd University Budapest), with the Capstone being the third and final phase (September–February). Starting in September 2025, the Master's will run across all nine partners for a period of 2 years, with the Capstone running from February to July. In the Capstone, students from across CHARM-EU partner universities work in teams to analyze and address sustainability challenges that are submitted by societal stakeholders from Europe and beyond, such as businesses, NGOs, UN agencies, and social movements (CHARM-EU, n.d.-b). All sustainability challenges relate to the Sustainable Development Goals, with (so far) fieldwork across five European countries (Spain, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Ireland) and African countries (South Africa and Senegal). A number of criteria are set for Capstone challenges, for example, the need to relate to various dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, and environmental), feasibility for students to analyze and address the challenge, and a link to broader societal issues. Challenges cover a wide range of topics, such as upscaling local food production, managing human–wildlife–livestock interactions, promoting the blue economy, and developing sustainable business strategies. (See CHARM-EU, n.d.-a, for an overview of the latest Capstone

challenges.) Since the Master's inception in September 2021, nearly 200 students from three cohorts have worked on sustainability challenges in 40 teams. During the 6-month Capstone phase, students are guided in their collaborative work in working sessions in hybrid classrooms across the participating university campuses. Students are also supervised individually and in teams by a supervisor from one of the universities, and work with one main societal stakeholder who has defined the challenge. The Capstone is a joint learning process among students, societal stakeholders, and staff, resulting in concrete Capstone products that stakeholders can use in addressing the sustainability challenge that stakeholders submitted. Although these Capstone products are team-based, they draw on students' individual theses that focus on subtopics within the larger Capstone challenge. The Capstone is designed and coordinated by a Capstone team comprising student representatives, educationalists, and academics from all participating universities.

This article zooms in on the Capstone challenge taking place in South Africa, which was submitted by the University of Pretoria. This challenge focuses on human–wildlife–livestock interactions in Kruger National Park, where a local research station from the University of Pretoria works in close collaboration with local communities in analyzing and improving local livestock and wildlife management.

The article is based on the experiences of the authors, who are key actors in the design and coordination of the Capstone. We use autoethnographic reflections on our experiences in developing and executing the Capstone for the first two cohorts. Our research objective is to analyze the challenges and prospects for equality and reciprocity in ICEL across Europe and the Global South, using the Capstone as a case study. In doing so, we contribute to this special issue's third theme of promoting equality and reciprocity in ICEL partnerships.

Our article is structured as follows. In the next section, we explain how we study reciprocity and equality in ICEL. After a brief Methodology section, we reflect on our experiences with equality and reciprocity in the CHARM-EU Capstone, in particular in South Africa. We end by reflecting on the opportunities for equality and reciprocity in ICEL and providing recommendations for European Universities alliances in fostering equality and reciprocity.

Conceptualizing Equality and Reciprocity in (I)CEL

Equality and reciprocity are common principles highlighted as the backbone for successful (I)CEL educational initiatives (Mtawa, 2019). Both embody the goal of moving away from hierarchical relationships between a receiver and giver (Lupas, 2021) and toward those where actors share an interest in working together for the common good (Bernal et al., 2004). The optimal form of reciprocity would be one wherein partners with diverse interests and perspectives join in a synergistic partnership that constitutes a new entity with decision-making power (Davis et al., 2017). From a didactic perspective, ensuring that students make connections between and within the values of equality and reciprocity (Morton et al., 2023) is key for their achievement of learning goals and competency acquisition.

Reciprocity is a key concept for (I)CEL partnerships, often examined in terms of Dostilio et al.'s (2012) orientations of exchange, influence, and generativity. Exchange, defined as "the interchange [or giving and receiving] of benefits, resources, or actions" (p. 19), is highly nuanced in each situation, and can be motivated by personal gain, collective interest, authority, or relationships, and be balanced or unbalanced, equitable or inequitable. Influence in reciprocity is complex, with interactions and relationships influenced by social, economic, and environmental factors. Generativity is linked to how the interrelatedness of individuals and the wider world can lead to institutional or collaborative transformations, and new ways of being and understanding. Together these orientations highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of reciprocity in (I)CEL initiatives.

Similar to reciprocity, equality is a complex principle due to differing stakeholder perspectives, experiences, inputs, and drivers; existing structural and participatory inequalities; and varying economic, cultural, societal, and political factors. Possible approaches to equality include respecting equal knowledge and experience provided by participants (Hartley et al., 2010), equality of access to knowledge outcomes (Garlick & Palmer, 2008), equality of methodology and implementation, equality of opportunities (Mtawa, 2019), and equality of funding (Chmelka et al., 2020). In essence, equality should be a long-term goal for (I)

CEL partnerships, and participants should be committed to fostering equality. In this article, we use the term "equality"—sameness of treatment in education—rather than "equity"—just allocation of (educational) benefits (Espinoza, 2007). We use the term "equality" as this is more aligned with the literature we draw on, and to maintain consistency with terms used in this special issue. We do acknowledge, however, that the term "equity" more closely aligns with the purpose and arguments of our article, in considering the diverse elements and benefits of ICEL partnerships for different partners across Europe and the Global South.

For the purposes of this article, we structure our Reflection section around the elements of equality in CEL defined by Lightbody (2017), namely power-sharing and representation, partnerships, bureaucracy, and funding and resources. We chose this framework since it is based on a large literature study around CEL and at the same time is presented as a practical guideline to enhance equality in CEL. As we center our analysis on Lightbody's equality framework, we show how the elements of this framework interrelate with dimensions of reciprocity discussed above.

Power-Sharing and Representation

We define equal power-sharing as sharing decision-making power over the design, execution, and (desired) impacts of CEL. Decision-making power can be shared among various members of staff from different universities, students, stakeholders, and/or community members. Although full equality in decision-making power is not always possible, actors involved in CEL should be engaged in meaningful ways to influence decisions, with transparency on how decisions are made and how they can be influenced (Lightbody, 2017). Equality is also crucial for reciprocal exchanges of resources and outcomes in that the influence of social and economic factors should be integrated and considered. Striving for equality in this way can lead to transformative and innovative decision-making power (Dostilio et al., 2012).

Equal representation in decision-making around CEL requires the authority to represent, inclusivity of representatives and representees, and accountability to representees. Inequality can arise when society (or a specific community) is not cohesive or homogeneous; when representatives self-select, often because they have more ways and means to invest in their representative roles; or when representatives exploit their roles rather than engaging in reciprocal exchanges of resources, knowledge, or benefits (Lightbody, 2017).

Partnerships

Equal partnerships are those wherein partners together decide on common visions, common goals, and common ways to reach them, in a collaboration that benefits all partners, with mutual openness and support. Equal partnerships are by definition reciprocal without "forced relations," "power struggles," or competition (Lightbody, 2017, p. 13). This type of reciprocal partnership can often facilitate transformations (or generativity) in partnership activities (Dostilio et al., 2012).

Bureaucracy

Challenges with bureaucracy have been highlighted in CEL initiatives, with the slow pace of university processes to allow for CEL commonly mentioned (Greenberg et al., 2020). Equality and reciprocity require a functioning bureaucracy that can ensure sufficient transparency and regulation of activities. It is important not only that bureaucracy benefits partners in equal ways, but also that partners have equal opportunities to work with or around the bureaucracy (Lightbody, 2017).

Funding and Resources

Equality and reciprocity in CEL require sufficient, timely, and shared funding. Inequality can arise when some actors can access funding or resources better than others, or if funding criteria benefit some partners or activities more than others (Lightbody, 2017).

The different elements identified by Lightbody above are closely interrelated. Power-sharing and representation, for example, are important to ensure that all partners can influence a well-functioning bureaucracy around CEL, and receive equal shares of funding and resources from CEL. Similarly, partnerships are often impossible without funding and resources and without a well-functioning bureaucracy that all partners can work with. Our Reflection section is structured around the elements of equality themselves; in the Conclusion section, we will reflect on their interconnections.

Methodology

Autoethnographic Approach

This study employs an autoethnographic methodology, leveraging the personal experiences and reflections of the authors. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that blends autobiography and ethnography, allowing researchers to draw on their own lived experiences to gain insights into broader cultural, social, and institutional phenomena (Slade et al., 2020). Although traditionally an individual methodology, it has been increasingly used in collaborative and group contexts (Chang, 2013; Mack et al., 2021; Olmos-López & Tusting, 2020; Ratnapalan & Haldane, 2022). This approach is particularly suited for this study as it enables a deep, reflective analysis of our interactions and engagements within the European Universities alliance and across Global South partnerships in order to identify gaps and opportunities for equality and reciprocity in ICEL. All authors engaged in the autoethnographic reflections. They have been leading the development and execution of the Capstone and include the coordinators of the Capstone, educationalists, and South African supervisors of a Capstone challenge. The latter were employed by the University of Pretoria, which also acted as societal stakeholder for the Capstone challenge. Because our article primarily focuses on the challenges and opportunities for equality and reciprocity in (longer term) partnerships, we did not include reflections of students who were merely involved in a 3-month fieldwork exercise without engaging in (building) partnerships.

Using Gibbs's Reflective Cycle

To structure our reflections, we utilized Gibbs's reflective cycle, a well-established framework for experiential learning that promotes systematic thinking about phases of an experience (Grant et al., 2017). Gibbs's cycle includes six stages: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan (Gibbs, 1988). Each stage was used to structure a series of discussions among the authors in order to create consistency and opportunity for everyone to voice their perspectives on their ICEL Capstone experiences. The online discussions took place between April and June 2024, and were based on experiences from two cohorts of the Capstone (September 2022–February 2023 and September 2023–February 2024) involving about 120 students across 26 teams. The discussions were supported by an online Miro board in which the authors added and linked their reflections on the six stages. Miro boards are an online platform that allow easy collaboration around free-form ideas. In our case, the phases of the Gibbs cycle were used as a template and the internationally distributed team could use this space to discuss, add, and edit ideas together in real time during the meetings and asynchronously outside the meetings. The different stages of the cycle allowed for emergent themes and to think proactively about future actions. Before each meeting each member was asked to reflect individually using the current stage as guidance. These individual reflections were then shared and discussed online, updating the Miro board as appropriate. Our reflections in the analysis stage, as well as the presentation of the outcomes of all the stages (Reflection section), are structured around the above-mentioned elements of Lightbody (2017). Our autoethnographic reflections, however, were not priorly structured around these elements so as to enable "free" brainstorming without preconceived ideas. Thus, our reflections were categorized into Lightbody's elements only during the analysis stage of Gibbs's reflective cycle (see below).

The six stages of Gibbs's reflective cycle are as follows (see also Figure 1):

1. Description: In addition to noting the nature of the projects undertaken, we documented the specific activities and events that occurred during the Capstone projects. These included the formation of student teams, interactions between European and African partners, and the overall process of collaboration and knowledge exchange.

2. Feelings: We reflected on our emotional responses to various aspects of the ICEL experience. This stage encompassed our initial expectations, moments of frustration or satisfaction, and any emotional challenges faced during cross-cultural engagements.

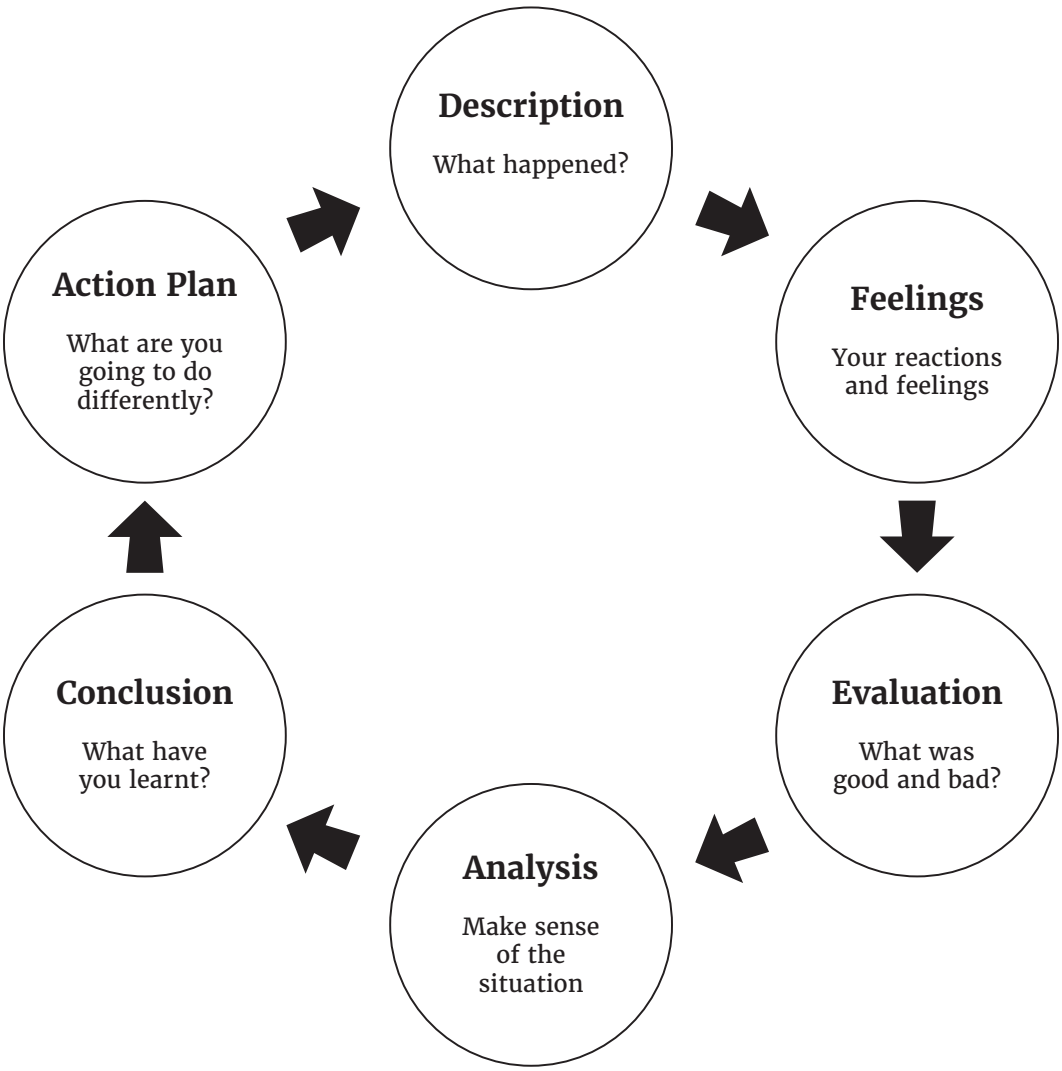
3. Evaluation: We assessed what was positive and negative about the experience. This process involved critical reflection on the effectiveness of our collaboration, the degree of reciprocity achieved, and the impact of institutional and funding structures on the outcomes of the projects.

4. Analysis: We examined the underlying reasons for the successes and challenges encountered. This stage involved a deeper analysis of how cultural differences, institutional policies, and funding mechanisms influenced the ICEL activities and partnerships (Reflection section). We structured our Miro board and reflective discussions according to the elements of equality in CEL described by Lightbody (2017).
5. Conclusion: We derived conclusions from our reflective analysis, identifying key lessons learned about promoting equality and reciprocity in ICEL (Conclusion section). This included understanding the dynamics of intercontinental collaboration and recognizing areas needing improvement.
6. Action plan: Based on our conclusions, we formulated actionable recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of ICEL within the European Universities alliance and in future international collaborations (Conclusion section). This plan addresses how to foster shared ownership, improve funding structures, and institutionalize support for ICEL across different continents.

Ethical Considerations

Given that all the authors were participants in this study, formal ethical approval was

Figure 1. Gibbs's Reflective Cycle



Note. Adapted from *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*, by G. Gibbs, 1988, Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

deemed unnecessary. However, we adhered to ethical guidelines for autoethnographic research, ensuring that our reflections and analyses were conducted with respect and sensitivity toward all individuals and communities involved in the ICEL Capstone projects. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and our reflections focused on collective experiences rather than individual narratives to protect the privacy of students and staff (Lapadat, 2017).

Positionality and Bias

The authors are affiliated with two European universities (Utrecht University and Trinity College Dublin) and one South African university (the University of Pretoria), and have diverse personal backgrounds from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, and Spain), South Africa, India, and Indonesia. They thus represent three different continents across the Global North and South. Authors are also diverse in terms of their employment role, including academics, educationalists, and management staff from both inside and outside the CHARM-EU alliance. The authors acknowledge and recognize that their perceptions of equality and reciprocity are influenced and shaped by disciplinary backgrounds, personal experiences, and cultural views. Thus, our individual positionality influences this autoethnographic methodology, its analysis, and the reflections within. Specific biases such as Eurocentric academic norms; overreliance on alliance structures; and personal definitions of reciprocity, equality, and equity were discussed, acknowledged, and interrogated.

Reflection: Equality and Reciprocity in CEL

To advance the narrative flow of the article, this section synthesizes the outputs from the analysis stage of Gibbs's cycle, which builds on both the shared individual reflections and joint discussion under the description, feelings, and evaluation stages. Although the initial stages were an open form to reflect on the experiences of the participants overall, it was deemed important to structure the analysis using common themes. Therefore, we followed a structure using the elements of equality in CEL as defined by Lightbody (2017) as a priori themes to structure the outputs of the analysis discussion and create a common language to categorize the outputs from the previous stages of Gibbs's cycle. These common threads are brought together in the following section, with the conclusion and action plan stages reported in the article's Conclusion section.

Power-Sharing and Representation

Decision-making power to design and execute the Capstone mostly rests with the Capstone team, with equal representation from each of the participating CHARM-EU partner universities. Most decisions are made by staff; however, the Capstone team also consists of student representatives, who are selected by the students. Stakeholders are not involved in decision-making around the Capstone, but have two ways to influence decisions. First, they codefine the sustainability challenges and desired products that students work on in the Capstone. Stakeholders, including from the Global South, thereby influence the content as well as desired impacts, without any prompts from the (European) university partners. Second, stakeholders are asked to provide feedback on the design of the Capstone. The feedback is, however, solicited after the end of the Capstone and in a format decided by the Capstone team, without transparency or follow-up on how this feedback is incorporated in the next version of the Capstone. This protocol limits the extent to which all stakeholders have decision-making influence, and thus ownership, over the design of the Capstone. Stakeholders often are content with this level of influence since higher education is not their core business. However, the stakeholder who submitted the Capstone challenge in South Africa was the University of Pretoria. In theory, the University of Pretoria has the resources—knowledge, skills, administration, and so on—to codesign and jointly execute the Capstone with the possibility for South African students to participate as part of their (elective) studies. However, the University of Pretoria can never be a full partner in CHARM-EU, as it lies outside the EU. Full equality is therefore not possible in the partnership's decision-making and funding distribution, a limitation that all European Universities alliances have to deal with in their collaborations with the Global South (see also the Conclusion section).

Partnerships

In terms of equal partnerships, CHARM-EU was jointly established by its five founding partners across five countries (Spain, Ireland, Hungary, France, and the

Netherlands). The founding partners started CHARM-EU by developing a common mission and vision, with core values and educational principles that lie at the heart of all CHARM-EU's educational and research programs. CHARM-EU has its own rules and regulations and governing bodies to direct (among others) the Master's and Capstone (i.e., graduation). CHARM-EU represents a very open and inclusive atmosphere in which diversity is highly valued, which is conducive to fostering (future) collaboration with and among partners. What the authors observed, however, is that the Capstone has not yet reached its full potential for fostering equal partnerships and is biased toward alliance-level structures. First, an open forum for Capstone stakeholders to meet and create new partnerships does not yet exist; all partnerships are forged among CHARM-EU partners and with (rather than between) the stakeholders. Second, CHARM-EU's strategy for sustainable, continuous, and deeper/broader partnerships with its partners from the Global South is still under development. Long-term partnerships are important to establish relations with a range of activities that are jointly developed, mutually beneficial, and reciprocal. Such potential development is especially relevant for the University of Pretoria, where options have been proposed but are yet to be started for integrating the Capstone into the university's existing educational and/or research programs. For such integration to happen, appropriate funding needs to be available (discussed in the Funding and Resources section below). A third important aspect in fostering equal partnerships is reciprocity in performing fieldwork for the Capstone. In CHARM-EU's collaboration with the University of Pretoria, student teams are sent to a research station of the Faculty of Veterinary Science in Kruger National Park, the Hans Hoheisen Wildlife Research Station. This research station focuses on research, community engagement, and training to analyze complex challenges and codesign sustainable solutions together with communities in the area. This collaboration forms an exemplary case of how universities can engage in transdisciplinary participatory research and education with strong local/regional connections. Hence, it fits well with CEL's approach and with the Capstone, wherein students codefine, analyze, and address a sustainability challenge together with stakeholders. However, students felt uncomfortable with the approach of flying into Kruger National Park from Europe for relatively short-term (3 months) fieldwork with limited interactions with South African researchers and local communities. They felt that it was hard to interact due to research fatigue among community members and their limited experience with codesigning research and reflecting on their positionality as researchers. A further challenge is that the Capstone group is not yet linked to local students who can support the sensemaking process or bridge the feeling of working on short-term projects with limited impact. Alignment between study and research programs across CHARM-EU and the University of Pretoria is currently being explored, which would promote joint and sustained knowledge production and utilization among students, researchers, and local communities (see also the Funding and Resources section).

Bureaucracy

The topic of bureaucracy generated the most reflections among the authors. We observed both a negative and a positive relation between levels of bureaucracy and equality/reciprocity. Capstone coordinators experienced a lack of rules and regulations in the first iteration of the Capstone (2022–2023). CHARM-EU was at the time still a fledgling alliance and thus had significant freedom and flexibility to design the Capstone and integrate a diversity of perspectives among students, staff, and stakeholders from Europe as well as the Global South. Minimal bureaucratic restrictions allowed for continuous and quick adaptations and improvements of the Capstone based on feedback and internal reflections of the team. At the same time, the lack of rules and regulations also reduced equality and reciprocity in ICEL. There was pressure to design and execute the Capstone in a short period of time, a lack of formal rules/procedures for consultation, uncertainty about the (evolving) rules and regulations, and a need for more coordination of CHARM-EU-wide stakeholder engagement. This necessitated a more directive approach with limited opportunities to consult with stakeholders and consider ways of building longer term, equal, and reciprocal partnerships. Stakeholders, including from the Global South, were able to submit sustainability challenges that students worked on during the Capstone; however, they had little opportunity to otherwise influence the design of the Capstone. Although a lack of rules and regulations can reduce reciprocity, a

plethora of rules and regulations can also make partnerships between Europe and the Global South more difficult. In particular, the need to take account of rules and regulations across five universities posed significant challenges on practical aspects such as insurance policies and channeling funding for fieldwork, which negatively affected the exchange of students between Europe and Africa. A slow bureaucracy, related to the complexity of operating from five universities, also resulted in delays in the distribution of travel grants to students, which negatively affected less affluent students.

As CHARM-EU becomes a more mature alliance, ICEL projects such as the Capstone also become increasingly institutionalized in each of the CHARM-EU partner universities, and better aligned with each partner's respective rules and regulations. This increasing institutionalization can facilitate equality and reciprocity in partnerships between CHARM-EU universities and the Global South, particularly in the field of generativity or institutional/collaborative transformations. Enhancing certainty and transparency around rules and regulations can aid equality and reciprocity; however, further institutionalization also runs the risk of making ICEL more rigid and bureaucratic and biased toward European institutional norms. These additional strictures can compromise the freedom and flexibility to codesign ICEL with various partners, including partners from the Global South.

Funding and Resources

With regard to funding, the authors observed that a lack of funding privileges the more resourceful partners or societal stakeholders who have the opportunity to make themselves available for student teams, and in some cases even provide funding for students' fieldwork during the Capstone. We observed the need for distributing such funding more equitably. Paradoxically, however, CHARM-EU's strong focus on equality and inclusivity can also be an impediment for equal partnerships with the Global South. Requests from stakeholders for additional funding to execute Capstone challenges were not granted because CHARM-EU does not want to favor some student teams over others in funding travel and fieldwork. This financial evenhandedness impedes opportunities for pilot projects with Capstone challenges in the Global South. Such pilots are justified and funded by CHARM-EU only when they come with a commitment of establishing longer term partnerships with Global South partners, which is the case for the University of Pretoria. The University of Pretoria also made institutional investments for the Capstone challenge, which strengthened the partnership and fostered reciprocity and joint ownership. Although the funding condition of commitment for long-term partnerships fosters strategic planning and longer term considerations of reciprocal and equal ICEL, strategies for partnerships are best built on a careful selection of pilots that are tested, optimized, and have shown success with partners that have a good track record. This procedure, however, requires the freedom to experiment with pilots without the burden of immediately linking them with longer term strategies. This conflict represents a dilemma in fostering partnerships for ICEL.

Also, in applying for external funding for collaborative education and research programs, the authors noted challenges in engaging with the Global South. European Universities alliances such as CHARM-EU heavily rely on EU-level funding, such as Erasmus+, Horizon2020, or Marie (Skłodowska) Curie actions. Criteria for such funding, however, often do not allow channeling funding to Global South partners. Most funding schemes focus on European-led education and research, the exchange of staff/students, or capacity-building in the Global South, rather than on building reciprocal long-term partnerships that bridge Europe and the Global South. ICEL with Global South partners therefore requires additional, separate funding, making it challenging to fully integrate Global South partners in the regular educational activities of CHARM-EU, for example, through codesigning (rather than only engaging in) ICEL. Such separate funding acquisition can, however, still be useful to initiate the first steps in aligning educational programs across Europe and the Global South. A recent application for student exchange funds from the French government, for example, would enable several students from the University of Pretoria to participate in and align their thesis projects with the Capstone. Although such exchanges are still small-scale and piecemeal, they can gradually develop into sustained partnerships, building on a patchwork of initiatives with various sources of funding from Europe and the Global South.

Although a lack of funding could be an impediment to sustained partnerships,

we observed that nonfunded partnerships could also occur through research barter, where high-quality research was carried out in a hybrid environment without being a transactional exercise involving funding or money. This option meant that CHARM-EU was not prescriptive about the problems to be solved and, unlike many funded projects, was conspicuously not driven by vested interests. The partnerships were instead initiated by the Global South when they submitted a challenge and became stakeholders in the Capstone challenge. The process and the ensuing solution were cocreated by the students and the stakeholders (from the Global South) organically, based on complementing mutual domains of expertise and skills, thereby enhancing reciprocity in the exchange. Here, the Global South partner was not the recipient of Western expertise but was a partner in a shared journey of solving sustainability challenges by combining perspectives, disciplines, and methodologies within a transdisciplinary framework reinforced by transnational collaboration. This process resonates with equitable and reciprocal partnerships, based on a balanced and organic sharing of power (or responsibility). The product synthesized during the process added to localized adaptation strategies with considerable geographical replicability, and the learning experience associated with it was consistent with challenge-based learning within a transdisciplinary framework.

A final important aspect of funding and resources that is relevant to mention is the allocation of hours for staff to work on the Capstone. Collaboration with societal stakeholders is highly time-consuming and expensive (Ramus, 2003). Societal stakeholders and their challenges need to be found and verified, stakeholders' expectations need to be clarified and matched with the coursework, and students need to be guided in their interactions with stakeholders. As indicated above, partnerships with the Global South require special attention. These requirements are not always reflected in the hours allocated to staff for work on the Capstone. Time availability was limited and unequally divided across the CHARM-EU partners, and staff at the University of Pretoria received no hours or funding. This lack of resources made it hard to equally distribute decision-making power and responsibilities, which mostly rested with those who had (official and/or free) hours to dedicate to the Capstone, especially the Capstone coordinators at Utrecht University.

Conclusion

In this article, we reflected on the challenges and opportunities in fostering equality and reciprocity in international community-engaged learning, which can be particularly challenging across countries with (systemic) inequalities, such as between Europe and Africa. We drew on an example of an ICEL project by the European Universities alliance CHARM-EU, which collaborated with the University of Pretoria in its joint degree Master's program.

European Universities alliances, through their collaborative structure and room for educational innovation, provide a focal point for ICEL. Their growth in number and influence over the past years (Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023) invites a reflection on learnings that could benefit ICEL more widely. We have shown that European Universities alliances such as CHARM-EU can provide unique and innovative institutional infrastructures that have the potential to foster equality and reciprocity in ICEL. The long-term partnerships established as part of the alliance are a central component in achieving equality and reciprocity. In its initial phase of institutional freedom, CHARM-EU has seen particular opportunities in terms of creative space and room for ICEL but also dangers of inequality in the distribution of responsibilities and workload and implicit (knowledge) hierarchies caused by a lack of institutionalized procedures. The maturing and growth of the CHARM-EU alliance now brings along new (potential) challenges in terms of increasing bureaucracy that must be accounted for. In light of the increasing number of partners in the alliance, which many European Universities alliances are currently dealing with, a key challenge will be reducing complexity and enhancing transparency in procedures.

Generativity (or reciprocal institutional/collaborative transformations) seems to be key in fostering equality and reciprocity in ICEL. Reaching full equality in ICEL across the Global North and South is highly challenging, if not impossible. In European Universities alliances, partners outside the EU cannot receive the same (EU) funding and cannot become full partners with decision-making power in the alliance. However, some degree of reciprocity can be attained by allowing non-EU partners to tap into different kinds of opportunities, or add-ons to the collaborative ICEL project. In collaborating with CHARM-EU, for example, the University of

Pretoria got involved not only in the Capstone phase, but also in coauthoring publications, in small-scale student exchanges, in developing an Erasmus+ exchange grant, and in committees to codesign CHARM-EU's external relations strategy. This example of collaboration shows that ICEL, with its equality and reciprocity, should be considered not a standalone exercise, but rather one part of longer term collaborative transformations in the educational relations across countries and universities with a patchwork of initiatives and sources of funding. That said, in order to realize the European Union's goal of enhanced and sustained collaboration in research and innovation across Africa and Europe (EC & AU, 2023), the European Union would do well to restructure some of its criteria for funding to foster longer term and reciprocal partnerships across African and European partners.

Although the above-mentioned add-ons or patchwork of initiatives do not immediately lead to institutional or collaborative transformations, they can be gradually institutionalized, thereby slowly leading to higher degrees of reciprocity. The University of Pretoria, for example, initially regarded the Capstone as a fairly isolated small-scale ICEL project, but gradually realized that the collaboration with CHARM-EU generates long-term opportunities with potential strategic redirections and additional capacity for North–South exchanges. The University has since sought an academic home for its collaboration with CHARM-EU within one of its faculties. This change in administering ICEL, which initially took place from the University's Strategic Partnership Office, can help to place the collaboration more squarely in the organization and eventually lead to institutional and/or collaborative transformations. As we argued above, funding can help in this regard but is not always necessary or even desirable, given the possibilities for barters and reciprocal arrangements, what we earlier called research barters.

To identify possibilities for such barters and more broadly advance equality and reciprocity, we recommend that ICEL exercises be accompanied by reflective exercises such as the one we used for this article. We found that making the individual elements of equality and reciprocity explicit through Lightbody's (2017) framework (power-sharing, representation, partnerships, and funding/resources) was very helpful in identifying gaps and opportunities for equality and reciprocity in ICEL. Although reflection on these individual elements was useful, seeing all these elements together as a holistic whole, and identifying possibilities for exchanges between the elements, can also help in sustaining long-term equality and reciprocity in the development, implementation, and optimization of ICEL. In addition, addressing personal biases, positionalities, and assumptions during this reflection in an open and supportive manner is key to providing depth and nuance in critical engagement within and between topics. In reflecting on Lightbody's elements for CEL, we noticed scant attention for positionality and biases. These factors are particularly but not exclusively important in international CEL projects where inequalities, sometimes systemic, exist between partners. In our case, not only did the authors use Gibbs's reflective cycle to write this article; students also are asked to use the cycle to reflect on their personal and professional development, positionality, and biases in all phases (including the Capstone) of the Master's. We therefore recommend that reflective exercises are incorporated into any (I)CEL exercise among both staff and students, including with a specific focus on equality and reciprocity.

Ultimately, equality and reciprocity in ICEL do not arise from providing identical benefits to all partners, but rather from partners jointly deciding on a fair distribution of the various benefits that are most valuable to the different partners. Making this allocation necessitates continuous reflections on the feasibility and desirability of sharing decision-making power, funding, and resources, with possibilities of exchanges between these assets to realize reciprocal and holistically equitable and long-term partnerships in ICEL.

To end this article, we reflect on the final stage of Gibbs's reflective cycle, the action plan. Translating the insights of this article into practical steps, we propose the following action plan for ICEL projects:

1. Establish clear reflective processes:
    - Integrate structured reflective exercises (e.g., using Gibbs's reflective cycle) for all participants, including both staff and students.

- Schedule regular reflection sessions to monitor and adjust practices related to equality and reciprocity.
- Consider all elements of CEL (power-sharing, representation, partnerships, and funding/resources) in order to manage each ICEL project as a holistic whole that can generate different benefits for different partners.
- Define personal biases and positionality at the start of the process, and ensure that these biases are considered throughout the ICEL project.

2. Formalize collaborative procedures:
   - Develop and implement procedures to ensure balanced responsibilities and transparent decision-making.
   - Create guidelines for resource sharing and power distribution that can be tailored to different partnership contexts.
3. Foster reciprocal opportunities:
   - Identify and promote alternative opportunities for non-EU partners (such as research barters and collaborative add-ons) to ensure meaningful engagement.
   - Encourage partners to jointly design strategies for resource allocation and capacity building.
4. Monitor and adjust governance structures:
   - Regularly assess the alliance's administrative and bureaucratic processes to reduce complexity and enhance transparency.
   - Implement feedback mechanisms to capture and address emerging challenges as the alliance grows.

By jointly deciding on a fair distribution of benefits and continuously reflecting on the effectiveness of these strategies, European Universities alliances can pave the way for long-term, equitable, and reciprocal collaborations in ICEL.

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Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji: "United We Are Stronger": Reflections on Over a Decade of Transformative Community-Engaged Learning and Research With Indigenous Shuar Communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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Abstract

In this reflective essay, we (community and university partners) recount a course-based ongoing cross-cultural 10-year+ Global South–Global North partnership (before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic) between four Indigenous Shuar communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon and a U.S.-based institution of higher education. We report on developing, maintaining, adapting, sustaining, and enriching that relationship. The experience is founded on a changing decolonizing conceptual framework that integrates participatory action research with Indigenous epistemologies and methods. As we collectively reflect on a decade of collaboration, we explore the transformative potential of *Minga* (collective action and cooperation) and *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (strength in unity) as Indigenous Shuar models for shaping community-driven learning and research. This ongoing partnership underscores the significance of trust, accountability, reciprocity, equity, and humility, cultivated through over a decade of solidarity with shared goals and outcomes, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable form of international community-engaged learning.

Keywords: Indigenous models of engaged learning and research, COVID-19 impact on global community engagement, cross-cultural challenges, equitable community-driven research

In this reflective essay, we (community and university partners) recount an ongoing cross-cultural 12-year+ (2012–2024) Global South–Global North partnership (before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic) between four Indigenous Shuar communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon and a U.S.-based institution of higher education. We describe developing, maintaining, adapting, sustaining, and enriching community-based engagement models for learning and research.

This experience encapsulates transitioning from in-person engagement to virtual engagement and back, fortified by the Shuar principle of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (strength in unity). We use a dual, Two-Eyed Seeing, interactive lens of community and academic perspectives (Broadhead & Howard, 2021; Hill & Coleman, 2019; Reid et al., 2021) on interpreting course-based learning experiences in an attempt to shed light on how integrating modified models of engagement during these transitions not only preserved but energized the partnership. A key theme is how these events fostered a shared preparation for in-person engagement amid global uncertainties and cross-cultural challenges.

The community-engaged learning and research experiences discussed are founded on a changing conceptual framework that

integrates participatory action research with Indigenous epistemologies and methods. This approach is focused on a collaborative decolonizing process through *Minga*, a form of Shuar collective action and cooperation. In this essay we as Indigenous community members and course facilitators jointly reflect on over a decade of collaboration and explore the transformative potential of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* and *Minga* as Indigenous models in shaping community-engaged learning and research for Global South–Global North collaborations. We also challenge the reader to critically assess the current theory and practice of outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and Indigenous communities from the Global South.

Our ongoing partnership underscores the significance of trust, accountability, reciprocity, equity, and humility, cultivated through over a decade of solidarity with shared goals and outcomes. Our reflections integrate insights that emphasize the importance of sustained engagement models that resonate with the core values of each community, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable narrative of transnational international community-engaged learning (ICEL) overall (see Fukuzawa et al., 2020; Hartman et al., 2018; Larkin et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2024).

Two fundamental and linked research questions have shaped our assessment of the ICEL Ecuador experience, especially for the purpose of this reflection: (1) How can an existing collaborative Indigenous community partnership be maintained, sustained, and strengthened through virtual community-engaged experiences, developed during the pandemic, and prepare students for in-person engagement? (2) How did those opportunities change student community-engaged learning, engagement, and research experiences when in Ecuador?

To begin, we will review the context of the students who take part in this immersive experience. We feel it is important to provide information to the reader on the ways in which the students are prepared for the trip and a broader view of how it is designed for specific global learning outcomes. We have tied our descriptions to the themes of this JHEOE special issue by emphasizing that ICEL can be achieved only by promoting equality and reciprocity in transnational ICEL partnerships through the Indigenous strategies utilized in navigating cross-cultural challenges across a 4-year social justice–oriented program.

Ozanam Scholars Program

The university-based focus of this international community-engaged learning and research experience is embedded in the Ozanam Scholars Program (OSP) at St. John's University (SJU) in New York City (NYC), one of the largest Catholic universities in the United States. The OSP is an academic and service social justice initiative supported through the SJU Office of University Mission, dedicated to the example of St. Vincent de Paul, who based his ministry on helping the poor. It is a key initiative of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action. The program's namesake, Frédéric Ozanam, was a 19th-century French historian, lawyer, and scholar who helped establish the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to bring about a more just and compassionate society through service. Therefore, for the OSP, social justice is defined and realized through actions that support the mission of working to create just societies where everyone, everywhere receives equal rights, opportunities, and access, regardless of identity. The OSP is a 4-year scholarship-supported program that students apply to before entering the university as first-year students. The OSP selects students who have a strong academic record and a passion for service from across all colleges and academic programs at the university. Through their development as scholars, they elevate their contribution to society through service and research. During their junior year, the Scholars travel to Ecuador for 2 weeks, taking part in a course-based ICEL experience that integrates community-engaged learning, service, and research.

Key social justice pillars of the OSP program include (1) Vincentian leadership—promote and deepen the understanding of the Vincentian mission and its focus on facing the challenges of the underserved and marginalized through volunteering, reflection, and research at local, national, and international locations; (2) global citizenship—learn about the rights of all human beings and factors that hinder their rights and dignity through local, national, and international experiences; and (3) academic scholarship—develop skills to analyze social justice issues and propose workable solutions, through academic study and research. Students in the program graduate from SJU with the interdisciplinary minor Social Justice: Theory and Practice in the Vincentian Tradition.

Student Development as Ozanam Scholars (Pre-COVID 19)

To provide further context for the OSP student's preparation for this international community-engaged learning and research experience in Ecuador, we list the 4-year sequence in the program that they follow:

> Year 1 (First-years)—Introduction to social justice concepts, research techniques, and the Vincentian tradition of service, through ongoing volunteer experiences in NYC and a volunteer trip to Puerto Rico.
>
> Year 2 (Sophomores)—One semester volunteering and study abroad at the SJU campus in Rome, introducing the analysis and articulation of global poverty concerns, and one semester of continued ongoing volunteer experiences in NYC.
>
> Year 3 (Juniors)—Begin a social justice community-based action research capstone project linked to hunger, homelessness, health care, and/or education, under the guidance of a SJU faculty mentor. All OSP participants have historically been required to complete a course-based community-engaged learning and research trip to Ecuador, and for a smaller select group (based on their performance in Ecuador), a subsequent community-engaged learning volunteer trip to the Oglala Lakota Nation in South Dakota.
>
> Year 4 (Seniors)—Complete and defend a capstone research project that creates an implementable solution to a social-justice-based research question. After graduation (before the COVID-19 pandemic), a select group (based on the merit of their capstone project and performance in the OSP) took part in a global volunteer learning and service trip. Locations have included Vietnam, India, and Ghana.

It is important to note that except for the semester study abroad experience in Rome, all travel-related expenses described above are paid by the OSP. Therefore, except for their time, students bear no cost for their experience in Ecuador (i.e., transportation, lodging, food, and course tuition are all covered). Covering expenses in this way is one of the factors that has been considered when the pandemic and postpandemic return led to a rethinking and restructuring of both preparing students for Ecuador and initiating a selection process for establishing greater commitment by the students to the overall experience, discussed in more detail below.

Context of Learning, Research, and Engagement

Over the past 12+ years (2012–2024) it has been through a credit-bearing 2-week international experiential learning course in Ecuador, Anthropological Field Methods in Global Sustainable Development, that cohorts of juniors in SJU's OSP program are concurrently involved in ICEL, community engagement, and community-based participatory research projects with four Indigenous Shuar communities. Specific ICEL learning outcomes are discussed below. To date, over 200 students, faculty, and support staff have participated in this annual 2-week experience. On average 15 students take part in the trip each year.

The authors of this reflection have been involved in various ways with the program since its inception in 2012. Two are Indigenous Shuar educators from two of the partnering communities; one is a White U.S. settler of Northern European descent, faculty and professor of anthropology, and one is a Mestizo, first-generation bilingual Salvadoran American and health data analysist who was first an OSP student, then support staff, and then a faculty member.

The course is designed to support the growth of the Ozanam Scholars as social justice practitioners through experience with applied anthropological research embedded in ethical community partnerships. Course objectives and learning outcomes for the students are achievement of the following goals: gain experience in applied, community-based research; contribute to sustainable strategies for community-led development; understand Indigenous knowledge and practices within research and development work through a decolonizing and Indigenizing process; and practice ethical engagement within community partnerships that are centered on relational accountability, mindful reciprocity, and cultural humility. It is through this approach that strategic allyship with

partnering communities is reinforced (see, for example, Gadhoke et al., 2019; Heidebrecht & Balzer, 2020; Judge et al., 2021; Louie et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2018; Snelgrove et al., 2014). A primary focus of this course-based partnership has been centering the community-engaged research and learning experience around the core areas of cultural heritage, education, health, empowerment, and community collaboration as avenues for supporting sustainable development.

Although not a focus of our essay, a key component of this and any ICEL experience is the central role of reflections tied to the course learning outcomes (noted above). During the 2 weeks each evening after returning from the communities and having a quick meal, students, faculty, and staff meet for 1–2 hours to openly reflect on the day's events. The reflections rotate from a focus on the research process one day to an emphasis on the service experience and broader implications of our partnership the next day. Students' grades are primarily determined by their participation in the overall experience, detailed written daily reflections tying the experience to course learning outcomes, and research team project reports. All writing is submitted after returning to the United States.

All research conducted has been approved by the SJU Institutional Review Board (IRB). Research questions are founded on a changing conceptual framework that integrates community-driven participatory action research with Indigenous epistemologies and methods (see, for example, Brown & Strega, 2005; Datta, 2018; Denzin et al., 2008; Gone, 2019; Hayward et al., 2021; Kimmerer & Artelle, 2024; Kovach, 2009; D. McGregor, 2018; L. McGregor, 2018; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017; Padmanabha, 2018; Pidgeon, 2019; Ray, 2012; Smith, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Whitt, 2009; Whyte, 2021; S. Wilson, 2003, 2008).

Through this community-engaged and community-driven process a decolonizing and Indigenizing approach to this work has developed over time. We have thus collectively sought to transform and redefine our use of Western research methods, such as participatory action research, to contribute to creating meaningful and lasting partnerships between academic institutions and Indigenous communities (for various other models see, for example, Ambo & Gavazzi, 2024; Bartleet et al., 2014; Drouin-Gagné, 2021; Dushane et al., 2016; Fraser & Voyageur, 2016; Goforth et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2020; McDermott et al., 2021; C. McGregor et al., 2016; McNally, 2004; Padmanabha, 2018; Thibeault, 2019; Tobias et al., 2013). It should be noted that community-engaged research, teaching, and learning examples in the literature on the use of Indigenous models in the Global South by U.S.-based universities are uncommon, with the majority of existing North American literature on the topic coming out of Canadian institutions (see, for example, Bartleet et al., 2019; Bolea, 2012; De Souza & Watson, 2020; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017; K. Wilson, 2018). This balance of source locations is perhaps not so surprising given the support for a systemic change occurring across postsecondary Canadian institutions through Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation as a guiding principle from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008–2015). Creating such a national model for the United States does not seem likely in any foreseeable future.

Our approach is specifically focused on a collaborative, decolonizing process through *Minga* (Gadhoke et al., 2019), a form of Shuar collective action and cooperation, and more recently also embracing the Shuar term *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (united we are stronger). Both concepts are discussed further below. The four Shuar communities that are part of this mutually engaged experience are located in the high Amazonian jungle (Selva Alta) region on the eastern slopes of the Andes, in the Ecuadorian state of Morana Santiago, Limón Indanza Canton, parish of Yunganza. Three of the communities are recognized by the government of Ecuador as Indigenous Shuar Centers (this recognition includes providing support for teaching Shuar language and culture in primary school). One community is a blend of Shuar and Mestizo households. For additional information on the historical establishment of Shuar communities in the 20th century see Rubenstein (2001).

Minga as Metaphor and Action

Shuar view the concept of *Minga* as a deeply ancestral term that literally means "to work in a group" or "mutual help" (think of a traditional barn-raising or husking bees in a historical U.S. context). It is a term borrowed from the Indigenous Andean Quechua/Quichua word *Minccacuni* (*Mink'a*, *Minka*, or *Minga*; Sanz Ferramola et al., 2020). It refers to forming a communal

effort in which members participate in group work to achieve an outcome that is equally distributed (Faas, 2017; Partridge, 2024; Townsend, 2012). *Mingas* are now at the heart of our work as a practice of decolonizing and Indigenizing social justice research and experiential learning (Gadhoke et al., 2019; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). *Minga* is practiced through our shared investments, shared accountability, reciprocity, humility, and social bonds with university students, faculty, staff, and Shuar community members, all working together in a collaborative and respectful way. What has been key to this process is the understanding that the relationship between the community members and students is about the mutual benefits received and building collaborations, and less about labor and resources.

Beyond its literal meaning of "working in a group," *Minga* in our partnership also represents a broader communal ethos that facilitates both cultural continuity and social cohesion. Drawing on the holistic approach described by Brown and Strega (2005), *Minga* as noted is not simply about physical labor or resource sharing; rather, it involves collective responsibility and interdependence that surpass Western notions of volunteerism. By creating a foreground of Shuar perspectives on relational accountability and mutual support, *Minga* serves as a living framework through which community and university partners cocreate both knowledge and reciprocal trust.

Meaningfully, *Minga* provides a decolonizing lens that actively challenges top-down and extractive research paradigms. As Tuck and Yang (2012) emphasized, decolonizing practices require engagement with Indigenous ways of knowing without recentering dominant Western frameworks. In our experience, *Minga* operationalizes these ideals by structuring how research questions are formulated, how decisions are made, and how outcomes are shared. This process resonates with S. Wilson's (2008) emphasis on recognizing Indigenous protocols of reciprocity, accountability, and collective benefit in building equitable research relationships. Thus, *Minga* not only shapes how we work together but also acts as a mechanism for assessing whether our cross-cultural interactions uphold the values of shared responsibility and shared power.

By situating *Minga* in conversations with academic literature on communal labor and collective action (e.g., Gadhoke et al., 2019), we underscore how it transcends a mere volunteer "service" model for ICEL. Instead, *Minga* enables community-driven priorities to guide the research process and course-based activities, thereby supporting the Shuar principles of cooperation, solidarity, and the pursuit of a just and sustainable future. Together with the Shuar principle of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*, where we work collectively and united to become stronger, *Minga* binds students, faculty, and local community members to a shared purpose, ensuring that no participant engages as a passive recipient or an external "helper"; rather, all are fully invested partners in collective transformation that strengthens the community and the partnership.

A Shuar community leader, when discussing the lack of experience student-volunteers have in relation to performing manual labor during service activities, stated, "Students do as much as they are able to, within their capabilities . . . what matters is their enthusiasm and collaboration." Another Shuar man noted, "You are coming and supporting us, and we also unite and support all of you. And, together, we complete the given work, a work that helps all of us to develop more." As will be discussed further in reflections below, it is important to note that the Shuar are keenly aware that students are getting a university education in a program that supports social justice, and as one part of that experience they see themselves supporting student development and look forward to sharing their worldviews through cultural exchange with each cohort.

Tied to both trip and course logistics, *Minga* involves teams of students taking part alongside community members in 2 weeks of service activities that are linked to community-driven projects that had been informed by research completed by the previous year's cohort. The projects are funded in part by a small grant that the OSP provides to each community in recognition of our reciprocal partnership and related outcomes. All communication during this time is in Spanish. Therefore, depending on a student's Spanish-language proficiency, each team has the support of both a translator and a research facilitator (often that role is performed by the same person). Indigenizing the research process and methodologies has involved the integration of *Minga* in establishing collaborative modes of data collection through interviews, community conversations,

and informal participant observation over the same 2-week period. Based on that research, student teams are then responsible for presenting to the community (in Spanish) a potential community-informed and community-driven project that the next year's cohort will implement. This cyclical iterative process has shaped the experience for both students and community members over the past 12 years.

To date, action-research project themes that have been implemented through *Mingas* include access to health care; water and sanitation; Indigenous knowledge of food and medicinal plants; school-based gardens for healthy eating; cultural heritage, traditional arts, and performance; youth engagement and gender empowerment; community-based income-generating programs; and trilingual education (Shuar–Spanish–English). These themes continue to emerge each year, and some projects have driven the general focus of the *Mingas* and related outcomes for over a decade. However, it must be noted that the research not only informs the next student cohort's potential service projects with the communities through *Mingas*; it also shapes and organizes ongoing community conversations about community projects beyond the 2 weeks we are there. The four communities with whom we work are not only highly diverse in their history of maintaining Indigenous Shuar language, culture, and traditions, they also have distinct approaches to setting community development priorities, including their viability and interest in leveraging our engaged work for additional funding support from their local municipalities to continue those projects in our absence.

Changing Modes of Engagement Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

The following insights are drawn from methods and modes of inquiry that have informed our reflections in and around the COVID-19 pandemic and include a number of assessments for gaining outcomes-related measures. Our sources include assessments of community and student engagement during virtual dialogues in preparation for in-person engagement and assessments of the overall experience by partners during in-person engagement in the communities.

The pre-COVID in-person structure of the course (2012–2020) included pretrip workshops (10–12 weeks) on the U.S. campus to prepare students for the experience. While in Ecuador for 2 weeks the students took part in the following activities: *Mingas* in Action (a communal work and community service activity); community-based participatory research; language workshops; and community presentations on proposed *Mingas* for the next cohort.

Pandemic Adjustments and Transformations

A cohort did travel in January 2020, shortly before the pandemic put the world on pause. Since it was not possible to travel in 2021 due to pandemic restrictions, the communities became concerned regarding if and when the program would return. To maintain our partnership and mutual commitment, trip facilitators and community members organized and implemented a virtual structure for the experience in May 2021. Despite navigating such cross-cultural challenges, this adaptation presented an opportunity to rethink our approach and maintain the core elements of the partnership. Similar to workshops prepandemic, 10–12 weeks of Zoom workshops were organized to prepare students for a culminating virtual event in which representatives from the Shuar communities participated in discussions sharing their experiences and addressing changes due to the pandemic.

Throughout the preparatory workshops, experts and community leaders conducted virtual sessions on Shuar education, traditional knowledge, and local history. Google Classroom was also utilized to facilitate ongoing dialogue and knowledge exchange, with university students presenting research and engaging with high school students from the communities. A culminating 3-Day Global Learning Event allowed Ozanam Scholars and community partners to share lessons learned and recommendations for future iterations of the course, considering the uncertainty presented by the pandemic as well as new avenues for connectivity tested through the use of online platforms.

The virtual adaptation set a new precedent for year-round communication with the Shuar communities and continuous engagement. Tools like Zoom and Google Classroom facilitated direct and immediate lines of communication, making it easier to coordinate activities, share knowledge, and collaborate on projects related to the core partnership. These platforms enabled

continuous and wider reaching engagement despite the physical separation imposed by the pandemic and ensured that dialogue between the Ozanam Scholars Program and the Shuar communities remained active and productive.

Community partners played a pivotal role in this virtual engagement model, taking on clearly defined roles in planning and facilitation workshops, discussions, and course sessions. Their contributions were not only recognized, but also fairly compensated (receiving the same standard rate as a guest speaker from the U.S.), emphasizing the partnership's commitment to equity and reciprocity. By involving community educators and leaders in the virtual classroom setting, we were able to deliver lessons on Shuar education, traditional knowledge, and local history from the perspective of Shuar educators. This form of sharing was a critical enriching experience for students that highlighted the cultural and intellectual wealth of Shuar people.

This virtual adaptation not only maintained, but meaningfully enhanced, the partnership's foundational principles of mutual respect, shared knowledge, and cultural exchange. It set a new precedent for continuous communication, establishing a robust framework for future ethical engagement that is not dependent on in-person interactions. This approach has ensured that even in the face of global uncertainties or domestic challenges, the collaborative spirit and mutual goals of the partnership continue to thrive, cultivating a resilient and dynamic relationship that benefits both the Shuar communities and the Ozanam Scholars.

New Digital Skills

One of the key advantages of this adapted model was the integration and familiarization with various digital tools and platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom. Educators and community leaders adapted to these technologies in order to engage with virtual partnership models, and have since utilized these skills for broader educational and community communication purposes. The production of digital resources for education and representation of community interests has enabled educators to share information with greater efficiency among their students as well as other interested parties, including neighboring learning institutions and local governments.

Participating educators' ability to navigate these digital tools not only facilitated learning for Ozanam Scholars, but also brought a sense of immediacy and relevance to the content. The ability to interact in real time, to ask questions and receive instant feedback, created an engaging and participatory educational experience despite the physical distance. The collaborative nature of these online tools also enabled educators to upload their own material, comment on student work, and share deeper perspectives on their lived experience as it related to traditional knowledge, culture, and local history. This ability was especially important for maintaining the sense of community and mutual learning that is central to our partnership. As one Shuar educator noted, "It is indispensable for us to use a learning tool, especially during the pandemic, where we share knowledge with students outside the classroom . . . it's a tool we can use with our own students, as well as share with local community leaders." This sentiment highlights the broader impact of these tools beyond just the immediate educational context.

Digitization of Linguistic and Cultural Resources

Progress in digital proficiency has also presented potential long-term benefits for the Shuar communities. By integrating these digital strategies into their local education efforts, Shuar educators feel better positioned to enhance their teaching methods, broaden their outreach, and stimulate their own continued learning. These new digital skills have also enabled educators to digitize language learning materials and cultural resources, such as Shuar myths and legends. This effort not only preserves their cultural knowledge but also facilitates a self-managed, wider dissemination of Shuar Indigenous knowledge resources.

To support this initiative, we have begun developing a central hub for educational and cultural resources through an online platform where Shuar educators can curate and share representations of Shuar culture with a broader audience, including other Shuar communities. As a Shuar educator explained,

> Our ancestors would teach us Shuar orally, through stories and song. Then, with the Salesian priests, we began writing our language and stories. Then we relied on the radio

> to disseminate cultural resources across Shuar communities in the Amazon. And now, we look to digitize, and further extend the reach of awareness and understanding of our culture across Ecuador and beyond.

The ability to manage and distribute their digital resources empowers Shuar educators to contribute to global consciousness and dialogue, asserting their presence within the global community on their own terms.

Return to In-Person Engagement

The return to in-person engagement in January 2022 marked a reinforcement and reaffirmation of our partnership. This phase underscored the trust and willingness to evolve the partnership, as the community and students navigated the transition from virtual to in-person interactions.

A notable programmatic change in the post-COVID course structure was the shift from mandatory participation in the trip to Ecuador (previously a requirement of the Ozanam Scholars Program) to an opt-in model through an application process. This adjustment was prompted by the ongoing health risks associated with international travel and the continued spread of the virus, which necessitated greater flexibility. Whereas prepandemic participation in this experience had been a requirement for maintaining a student's status in the Ozanam Scholars Program, the new opt-in model reframed the trip as a voluntary commitment. Observational data from students and facilitators suggest that this shift has led to more motivated participation and stronger engagement overall—students who choose to participate tend to display a deeper sense of personal investment. Moreover, the actual number of students who elect to participate is still the significant majority (85%–90% of those eligible).

Early feedback suggests that, compared to cohorts who participated under the mandatory framework, students are more open to aspects of the experience that challenge their initial expectations and generally exhibit greater enthusiasm when collaborating with Shuar community members on site. Although further reflection and data collection are needed to quantify these differences, the anecdotal evidence to date points to positive student learning outcomes and richer cross-cultural experiences among students participating in this intensive community-engaged learning and research experience. Additionally, pretrip workshops were streamlined to prioritize essential information, such as partnership history, Shuar culture, and ethical standards for applied research. This optimized preparation period has contributed to a more focused and effective in-person experience.

Reflecting on the lessons learned from the virtual engagement model and the transition back to in-person engagement, it is clear that the integration of digital tools and platforms has created a more resilient and dynamic partnership. Moving forward, we aim to increase capacities further by exploring new avenues for digital and in-person collaboration, including the piloting of a virtual learning partnership between SJU and the community high school. This program would emphasize knowledge and cultural exchange facilitated by online communication while continuing to develop our in-person approaches and efforts in Ecuador.

Closing Reflections

At this point we would like to provide some brief closing reflections through direct first-person narratives shared by the two Indigenous Shuar coauthors on over a decade of transformative community-engaged learning and research.

> The last 10 years of community work, through the *Mingas* carried out with the support of the university, have generated different forms of development in each of the communities. This includes social, economic, cultural and infrastructure dimensions, and has strengthened the unity of families and work in *Mingas* that has been fading in recent years. The projects have been chosen through collective meetings, always seeking a horizon for social, cultural, and economic development. The *Mingas* carried out in each community during collective work is the strength in the development of our communities, and that which characterizes us. Working together, we complete the effort in less time and with better outcomes. The work carried out with the university has contributed to residents of each community embracing the values that characterize us: "United we are

strong" (*Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*). Promoting that strength emphasizes our ancestral customs and greatness of our people.

—Franklin Antunish, educational leader for the Velasco Ibarra Shuar Bilingual Intercultural Community Educational Center, Metzankim, Ecuador

For us in the community where the university has been supportive, it has been of utmost importance to strengthen certain values that perhaps as a community have not been practiced in recent days. For example, the organization of the *Minga*, of joint work, of joint plans. The participation of the university in developing our infrastructure plans for addressing challenges in education, cultural traditions, and the environment has also motivated our local regional authorities to also support these initiatives. It has been a pleasure during these 10 years to receive the support of the university, not so much in terms of the economic benefit, but the presence of cultural exchange, the exchange of experiences, the friendship, the trust that has been generated between us, allowing us to speak the same language of development and continue working together. In my part as a teacher, as a parent, and as a resident of this area, we hope that we will continue to carry out other activities, other projects that strengthen us as a community, strengthen us as an educational institution, and strengthen us as a family.

—Romero Vega, primary school teacher for the Unidad Educativa de Yunganza, Yunkuankas

Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of this reflective essay was to share and highlight how our existing University–Shuar partnership through a course-based international community-engaged learning and research experience was maintained, sustained, and strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic. These outcomes extended to the reestablishment of in-person engagement in the years that have followed. The key lesson from adapting to global uncertainties in this case is the high degree to which ongoing commitments to community partners can be mutually articulated and sustained through both in-person and virtual dialogue and engagement. However, it should be noted that this persistence was possible only because of the strong existing relationships that had developed before the pandemic that centered Indigenous models of engagement, such as *Minga*, and other Indigenous models of trust, responsibility, and partnership-building that resonate with the core values of each community, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable outcomes during Global South–Global North cross-cultural encounters.

We recommend other institutions adopt similar models that blend digital and in-person engagement, supported by continuous communication with community partners and a commitment to mutual learning for improving the partnerships themselves. By leveraging the strengths of both virtual and in-person interactions, partnerships can thrive even in the face of unforeseen challenges, ensuring adaptive and sustainable partnerships for the future. For example, a current challenge is that Ozanam Scholars Program leadership recently decided to take a different approach to determining the lead personnel involved in the experience in order to exercise more institutional control. We have deep concerns that this will potentially impact over a decade of developing community-centered Indigenous models of trust that have strengthened our relationships, but are confident that our Indigenous partners will respond as always with strength, autonomy, and self-determination.

In closing, integrating the use of different Indigenous models of engagement has been critical to maintaining trust and reciprocity in our relationships with Indigenous Shuar communities. Transitioning from in-person engagement to virtual engagement and back was fortified by the Shuar principle of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (strength in unity) and supported by the Shuar concept of *Yeimiu* (solidarity). Furthermore, the collaborative decolonizing process of engagement through *Minga* builds on the cooperation, collaboration, solidarity, accountability, and humility that we have developed through over a decade of engagement.

—*Yuminsajme* (Thank you—until we meet again).

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New Forms of International Community-Engaged Learning: Unveiling the Benefits and Limitations of a Digital Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab

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Abstract

Globalization and digital technology have transformed how knowledge is shared, but they have also amplified the spread of misinformation—challenges now intensified by advances in artificial intelligence. To navigate this landscape, students must develop digital literacy and learn to critically assess open-source materials. One key area is digital open-source investigation (OSI), which teaches students to identify, collect, verify, and analyze materials like news reports, social media posts, and satellite imagery. These skills are essential for addressing contemporary global issues. This article explores the benefits and limitations of Utrecht University's 2023–2024 digital OSI Lab, developed within the framework of international community-engaged learning (ICEL). Using qualitative analysis, including student surveys and reflections, we found that students of this lab not only gained a deeper understanding of global justice but also developed greater awareness of their own positionality within complex global contexts—an outcome fostered through structured reflection and experiential learning.

Keywords: International community-engaged learning, positionality, reflexivity, reciprocity, open-source investigation

Increased globalization and the widespread integration of digital technology into all aspects of our lives have ushered in an unprecedented era of knowledge dissemination, giving rise to an "information revolution" that has, in many ways, democratized access to information (Cummings, 2016, para. 6). Simultaneously, these developments have been accompanied by the rise of misinformation and fake news, with current developments in artificial intelligence posing new challenges (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Koenig, 2019). It is thus imperative that students cultivate skills that allow them to harness technological advancements and learn how to critically analyze digital open-source materials, that is, material that is freely available online (Livingstone et al., 2023). One aspect of digital literacy involves learning digital open-source investigation (OSI) techniques. Through OSI skills, students can learn to identify, collect, document, verify, analyze, and evaluate open-source material such as news reports, social media posts, and satellite images. Being able to understand and dissect the wealth of openly available information is an indispensable skill in tackling contemporary global challenges (Dubberley et al., 2020).

Realizing the need to develop these skills, Utrecht University set up a Digital Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab in 2023–2024, which combines digital innovation with new media literacy. The interdisciplinary and cross-level (combining bachelor's and master's students) lab is based on five key concepts, ranging from substantive and skills-based concepts to pedagogical and psychological ones. These five key concepts inform the design and implementation of the lab: human rights and global justice; digital OSI skills; inter-

disciplinarity; international community-engaged learning; and trauma and resilience. Of these, the pedagogical approach of international community-engaged learning (ICEL) has enabled students to work together with societal partners on real-world global justice projects.

ICEL has been defined as an experiential education process involving collaborative efforts among students, teachers, and societal partners to tackle global challenges (see Introduction to this special issue). It is deeply rooted in global social justice aims, challenging students to grapple with real-world issues, engage in cross-cultural dialogue, and better understand their responsibilities as both local and global citizens (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Grusky, 2000; Latta et al., 2018). Concepts that are particularly relevant within ICEL work are reflectivity and positionality, as they encourage deeper understandings, critical thinking, and personal growth, as well as reciprocity, which highlights the importance of fostering equal exchanges and authentic relationships between students and their societal partners.

In this article we seek to unveil the benefits and limitations of a digital open-source investigations lab grounding itself in the framework of ICEL. Through qualitative analysis of scholarship and empirical data, specifically student surveys and student reflections, we aim to answer the following research question: How can a digital open-source investigations lab, grounded in ICEL, facilitate the development of student learning, especially in relation to the concepts of positionality, reflexivity, and reciprocity? The first section of this article provides a literature review of ICEL and its purposes, including the concepts of positionality, reflexivity, and positionality therein. The next section details our methods of data collection and analysis. Thereafter, we present our findings, focusing on the benefits and limitations of an ICEL-based course structured around digital open-source investigations. Based on the data, we conclude that students experience greater awareness of their positionality within complex problems by means of reflection, as well as a moderately deepened understanding and interest in the topic of global justice. Furthermore, by acting within an OSI course based on reciprocal exchanges with well-regarded nonprofit partnerships, students are able to practically contribute to international global justice aims while averting the negative consequences of working directly with vulnerable populations. We conclude that students are indeed highly motivated to contribute practically to real-life justice goals; however, mutual communication and coordination are key in fostering reciprocal relationships between students and partners. Finally, we lay out recommendations and future lines of research.

International Community-Engaged Learning

Traditional community-engaged learning allows students to connect theory with practice and provides a space for students to reflect upon their experiences (Bringle et al., 2006). It is premised on reciprocity and respect between students, teachers, and societal partners (the "community") and requires special attention to the learning objectives, activities, assessments, and outcomes, with emphasis on learning through experience. Community-engaged learning is closely connected with service-learning, a term widely used at Anglo-American universities. Whether referred to as service-learning or community-engaged learning, it is an approach to learning that has taken hold across universities around the world (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002, p. 15; Meijs et al., 2019). Within Europe, the growth of experiential learning is largely in response to a shift in how universities view their roles in a wider (global) community and the desire of students to have strong connections to society in order to address wicked global challenges.

In addition to the more specific and traditional types of community-engaged learning that focus on students working with local community partners, a new and specific type of community-engaged learning has emerged: international community-engaged learning or ICEL (also referred to as global service-learning). As noted above, ICEL can be defined as an experiential education process in which students, teachers, and societal partners work together on challenges in an international or global context. The international context can refer to many different things. It may include students physically traveling to an international location for their experience, but it may also involve students working at the university with an international partner via regular online communication. Additionally, it may include students working with a local

partner but on subject matter that has international implications or scope.

As with traditional community-engaged learning, ICEL programs aim to foster relationships of closeness, equity, and integrity (Bringle et al., 2009; Crabtree, 2008), as well as partnerships of reciprocity that include collaboration, respect, mutual benefit, and trust (Crabtree, 2013; Hammersley, 2012; Keith, 2005). In such reciprocal relationships, both the students and partner organizations contribute to each other's goals. Fostering reciprocal, genuine relationships between university actors and the community, however defined, requires an approach to learning as not just a vehicle for the transformation of privileged university students, but about creating mutual benefits that genuinely engage with societal partners and their work (Crabtree, 2013; Hammersley, 2012; Keith, 2005). Reciprocity is furthermore crucial in pursuing social (and global) justice goals together with critical reflection (Asghar & Rowe, 2016), and is also central in the scholarship of ethical international community engagement by universities (Bosio & Gregorutti, 2023; Hartman et al., 2018). It is thus important that students gain an awareness of the impact of their learning and are able to position this impact within a greater global context and in relation to their partner organization.

Participating in ICEL should contribute to a student's sense of civic place in a global context. ICEL has a responsibility in raising global, social awareness among those participating. Here, one can think of cultural understandings, power relations, and (global) social responsibility (Hartman & Kiely, 2014). ICEL also has the potential to disrupt or challenge existing knowledge–power structures and relationships by, for example, adopting a decolonial stance and disrupting North–South colonial relations and assumptions (Smaller & O'Sullivan, 2018). A fundamental component of the ICEL model of learning is reflection. Academic literature demonstrates that learning can be reinforced through reflective activities for students (Veine et al., 2020), such as by keeping reflective journals (Deeley, 2022). By reflecting on the real-life impact of their international societal engagement activities and positioning themselves within this setting, students are believed to gain a greater sense of themselves and their (global) civic responsibility.

The ability to reflect, or to be reflexive, is crucial within research, education, and learning, and is central in an ICEL context in understanding complex global issues (Gillis & Mac Lellan, 2010, p. 20). Reflexivity is the ability to examine and react to one's own emotions, motives, and environment (Cambridge University Press, 2021). It requires one to critically assess themselves and those around them. It requires a consideration of one's influence on an investigation (Holland, 1999) and, importantly, evaluation of how power relations operate (Reid et al., 2017). According to Grusky (2000), reflexivity is shown when one is able to consider one's place on axes such as wealth, gender, and economic factors such as class. Accordingly, taking stock of one's own position becomes essential for a wide variety of reasons from the ethical to the epistemic. Positionality is, therefore, closely connected with reflexivity. According to Darwin Holmes (2020), positionality describes one's worldview and the position one adopts about research or knowledge. It involves the researcher (or student) becoming aware of who they are, their values, beliefs, and assumptions. This awareness is important because self-identifications and experiences of marginalization or privileges influence the way one approaches the world, including research questions, data collection, and analysis (Massoud, 2022). Critical thinking is required to achieve the transformations sought by community-engaged learning programs oriented toward social justice (Asghar & Rowe, 2016). Such critical thinking can result in power-shifting dialogues only when students can meaningfully reflect on social issues, which involves the often uncomfortable or painful awareness of one's own privilege (D'Arlach et al., 2009).

Other related concepts, such as intersectionality, privilege, and oppression, also become important when learning about positionality and reflexivity. Learning about these concepts is particularly useful because cultural schisms and diverging expectations in the ICEL context can lead to asymmetrical exchanges. According to Kiely (2005), community service, or ICEL-informed work, has to intentionally analyze dynamics such as racism, oppression, and privilege at work in community organizations. Reflection is thus a key facet at the heart of ICEL and necessary for a critical approach (Hammersley, 2012). This reflection is exactly what causes the "discomforts" that arise in situations where asymmetries are uncovered through self-positioning and reflection (Sharpe & Deare, 2013). This discomfort is not some-

thing to be shunned or to turn away from: Realizing one's position in global inequalities is inherently uncomfortable, but necessary if ICEL is to truly become a reciprocal practice between the university and (global) community. ICEL not only requires reflexivity and self-positionality from practitioners but also introduces students to critical perspectives. ICEL centers reflexivity and positionality within the learning process to encourage deeper understanding, critical thinking, and personal growth.

The Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab

The Global Justice Investigations Lab at Utrecht University, a large public university based in The Netherlands, embraced the label of ICEL for a number of reasons. First, unlike other types of learning approaches that encompass working societal partners, such as challenge-based learning (Leijon et al., 2022) and transdisciplinary learning (Budwig & Alexander, 2020), the ICEL label explicitly emphasizes the international or global component in the work carried out by the students with their societal partners. This international aspect was important to our lab given its global justice emphasis. Second, we opted for the label of ICEL because of its focus on community *engagement*. We see the work as a reciprocal relationship between students and societal partners and feel the term "engagement" captures this reciprocity better than the word "service," making the nature of the relationship explicit to students. That said, we recognize that these terms are often interchangeable when it comes to the practices behind the labels. Finally, our university has also decided, from an institutional perspective, to adopt community-engaged learning as one of its pedagogical labels, and ICEL fits well within this institutional frame.

The Global Justice Investigations Lab, as a program rooted in the learning of new technological and digital skills, equips students with the tools needed to closely engage with pressing real-life global justice issues around the world. Technology is rapidly dissolving many of the spatial and language barriers that previously isolated and limited individuals and communities from engaging with and knowing each other. In this new era of connection, the Global Justice Investigations Lab is able to bridge divides across national boundaries and allow students to research and meaningfully contribute to global justice issues without having to physically move across borders.

One of the fundamental and ground-breaking aspects of OSI is that it lends anyone the skills to meaningfully investigate and report on real-life issues using the wealth of open-source data available to us online. Here, one can think about geolocating a video of an attack by military personnel against civilians posted on social media (Swain, 2018), using satellite imagery to track systemic fire damage and fire haze across geographic boundaries (Plain, 2024), or using social media to help collect information on potential extrajudicial executions or attacks against journalists, geolocating online material and potentially identifying individuals involved (Arms, 2023). The skills that the lab offers inherently allow students to continue engaging in these issues after the end of the program. This temporal aspect is especially relevant for the longevity of the aims of ICEL, as more traditional international approaches can easily result in short-term results in student awareness of global problems, but not lead to any further learning after the program has terminated and students are back in their home environments.

The lab has three components: (1) team-taught lectures covering topics such as global justice, human rights, positionality, critical thinking, and framing; (2) skills trainings and workshops covering different types of digital OSI skills such as geolocation, chronolocation, internet scraping, and flight and vessel tracking; and (3) the opportunity to apply OSI skills to real-life scenarios by collaborating with a societal partner working on global justice issues. In the 2023–2024 academic year, our teaching team comprised six teachers from four different faculties across the university, including one specializing in open-source investigation techniques. Two teachers have a background in law, one in criminology, one in media and communications, one in cultural anthropology, and one in information sciences, specifically artificial intelligence. For the first iteration of the lab, we had 25 students: 11 master's students (4 male, 7 female) and 14 bachelor's students (5 male, 9 female) in their second or third year from across different faculties and programs. The lab is a 7.5 European Credit elective course running over two periods from early November to mid-April—approximately 20 weeks. The students are expected to spend 10 hours per week on

the course, which allows them to combine it with their mandatory courses. We partnered with four NGOs from the global justice field who use OSI in their work, focusing on exposing either human rights violations or environmental harms. In total, there were five project teams (with one NGO having two project teams), with approximately five students per lab project. Students could indicate their preference for a lab project, and every student was placed with their first choice.

From the start of the design process for the lab, we focused on building in reflexivity and positionality as key aspects of ICEL. We also sought to emphasize the importance of uncertainty and discomfort in the learning process (Lamnina & Chase, 2019), especially as associated with work on global justice issues. To this end, our syllabus starts with a quote from Barnett (2007):

> The student is perforce required to venture into new places, strange places, anxiety-provoking places. This is part of the point of higher education. If there was no anxiety, it is difficult to believe that we could be in the presence of a higher education. (p. 147)

We discuss this quote in class and mention its significance periodically throughout the course of the lab. We believe that reminding students of the learning value of uncertainty is helpful because the lab, with its real-world connections, demands students to work outside their comfort zone in often uncertain environments.

The lab is organized by pairing students with a societal partner after students receive coursework on OSI competencies. Allowing students to become comfortable with the relevant practical skills before entering into a partnership allows for a more equal and reciprocal relationship to emerge. It gives students confidence in their exchanges with the partner while also equipping them with the means to produce an end product beneficial to the partner. This configuration avoids placing disproportionate responsibility to teach upon societal partners, and instead places them in a guiding role. The partner and student mutually benefit by putting students in a position where they can apply their skills and contribute to the partner's justice-oriented goals. The nature of an OSI-oriented lab, focused on digital skills such as verification, lends itself to student engagement with global justice without risking an entrenchment of power imbalances that often results from short-term student involvement with disadvantaged or oppressed host communities (Hammersley, 2012; Hartman et al., 2018; Latta et al., 2018). Instead, students were able to work collaboratively with partners that address systemic injustices, which, from a social change perspective, are those that can redistribute power rather than entrench it (Gillis & Mac Lellan, 2010, p. 2). By learning and applying practical OSI research skills, students are able to gain the benefits of ICEL (awareness of global justice, increased sense of global citizenship) without risking the perpetuation of colonial dynamics incompatible with ICEL's (transformative) social justice goals (O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2023). Additionally, through OSI, students can responsibly engage with grave global injustices (air strikes, state-sanctioned persecution, environmental crimes) in communities that may otherwise be too vulnerable to directly engage with the harm themselves. However, operating on these terms does mean that the reciprocity sought after is largely found between the student and partner organization rather than directly between the student and the community. The capacity of the partner organization to enable students to engage with a community's issues is therefore vital, requiring strong communication and coordination. We found that communication between students and the partner organization is a key factor in fostering reciprocity and thus fulfilling student learning goals.

In terms of our learning objectives, one of the four outlined objectives is focused specifically on the ICEL work. It states that after completing the course, students will be able to critically appraise and reflect upon open-source investigations in the global justice field as well as their role therein, and reflect upon their own work, attitudes, and collaborations in the course. To ensure constructive alignment between the learning objective, lab activities, and assessments, students were asked to work on a disciplinary self-reflection exercise, to perform three critical self-positioning exercises, and to reflect in groups at check-in moments. They were also asked to submit eight reflection logs and a final reflection report, which were assessed based on a reflection rubric. With this constructive alignment in mind, we sought to better understand the benefits and limitations of the lab with regard to ICEL. Below we detail our methods of data collection and analysis.

Methodology

The data analyzed for this research includes an anonymized baseline student survey, an anonymized endline student survey, and student reflection logs, which were not anonymized. In the months leading up to the launch of the lab, the teachers worked with educational specialists from Utrecht University's Education and Training department to develop the baseline survey and endline survey. The surveys included questions using a Likert scale as well as open-ended questions. The questions covered the five key areas underpinning the lab: human rights and global justice; digital open-source investigation skills; interdisciplinarity; international community-engaged learning; and trauma and resilience. For the purposes of this article, the baseline survey and responses crafted in relation to ICEL included both general and specific questions, as indicated in Table 1.

The endline survey asked general and ICEL-related questions as shown in Table 2.

In addition to the baseline and endline student surveys, we asked the students to submit reflection logs throughout the course. They were asked to submit one- to two-page reflection logs every 2 weeks, totaling eight logs, as well as a final reflection report of maximum four pages (or in another form agreed upon with the teacher, such as a vlog or mind map). The students received prompts or questions to guide their reflections, such as "How did you feel before or after the meetings with societal partners?" They were also encouraged to think about power relationships on both micro and macro levels. Using the reflection rubric, students received oral feedback from teachers midway through the course if they needed to improve their reflections by, for example, focusing less on listing activities and more on how those activities made them feel about their work or the work of the societal partner. All students gave written, informed consent to use the data from their reflection logs and surveys for this research. We also received ethical approval from our faculty ethics committee to use the student reflection logs and surveys.

Findings

The baseline survey results clearly reflected the importance of gaining practical experience, especially in the field of global justice. More than half of the students indicated an ICEL-related reason for signing up for the course, noting that they were "keen on [gaining] experience with working with societal partners" or excited to work on real cases rather than hypothetical ones. In response to the baseline survey question of what would make the course successful for them, 14 of the 25 students noted

Table 1. Questions for Global Justice Investigations Lab Baseline Survey

Nr.	Baseline questions (ICEL)	Response type
B1	Why did you choose to apply for this course?	Long answer
B2	Using a max of three bullet points, what is your understanding of the contribution of NGOs to global justice?	3 bullet points
B3	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, please rate how often have you worked with a societal partner on an educational project?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer
B4	Using a max of three bullet points, what do you think will be your main challenges in working in a project with a societal partner?	3 bullet points
B5	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, please rate how often you have been asked in an educational setting to formally reflect on your own work?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer

Table 2. Questions for Global Justice Investigations Lab Endline Survey

Nr.	Endline questions (ICEL)	Response type	Cross-reference baseline
E1	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, please rate the likelihood that you will recommend this course to others?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer	n/a
E2	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, how has your experience been to work with a societal partner in terms of how valuable it was?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer	B3
E3	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, how has your experience been to work with a societal partner in terms of how challenging it was?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer	B3, B4
E4	What is your understanding of Global Justice after having taken the course?	Long answer	B2
E5	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, whether your understanding of Global justice has deepened?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer	B2
E6	Using a Likert scale of 1–5, and an explanation for your answer, whether your interest in Global justice has deepened?	Likert scale (1–5) Long answer	B1, B2
E7	Please rate the extent to which you feel you met the learning objectives of the course. Please provide an explanation for your rating for Learning Objective 4: critically appraise and reflect upon open-source investigations in the global justice field as well as your role therein, and reflect upon your own work, attitudes, and collaborations in the course.	Likert scale (1–5)	n/a

that the course would be successful if they learned practical skills applicable to real-life situations, which would help in a future career. A number of students emphasized the importance of making a real difference beyond traditional classroom assignments. One student emphasized the course would be a success "if I feel like I have made a real contribution to one of the projects," and another student noted their wish to make an "actual contribution to real-life problems." In addition to the expectations around practical skills and wanting to make a real contribution, some students had already considered their positionality and saw the course as an opportunity to make a difference. One student wrote, "I personally feel uncomfortable with the privileged position I was born in and like to use this [lab] for contributing to global justice" work.

Though the large majority of students had not previously worked with societal partners in an educational setting before, they did identify in the baseline survey some concerns as to what would be challenging. For instance, they identified time management issues both on the part of students and the availability of partners as a concern. Almost one third of students (7/25) also identified communication issues as a potential challenge.

In their reflection pieces, it was clear that the students were feeling stressed about working with societal partners on global justice issues. For example, a number of students specifically commented on the stress of working with societal partners and on mixed-level, interdisciplinary teams. One student wrote:

> I felt anxious at the start of the project both because of the responsibility I felt towards the societal partner and because of the uncertainty about my role in the group. I think especially because I'm used to take a step back in group assignments and rely on someone who, in my eyes, has more expertise or knowledge on the topic.

Later, however, this same student wrote, "Not only me personally, but the group has grown a lot during this project." By learning to first work together, the group was able to successfully work with their societal partner and contribute to their project's wider goals.

Learning to deal with uncertainty, insecurity, and stress was a large part of the lab, as was the importance of reflection around these themes. One student noted:

> I have become somewhat confident in the academic context because of its familiarity. Being pushed outside of it, to acquire new skills without being able to rely entirely on my existing academic research skills was new and made me insecure exactly because of its unfamiliarity. And because in the beginning, it was hard to grasp how the lab would unfold, it was challenging for me. However, as noted earlier my curiosity helped, as did the individual lectures and seminars which, despite my being unsure how exactly they related to the later stages of the project, made me reflect on myself again. I very much enjoyed being confronted with myself, my ways of perceiving and framing experiences and information, and our own role in the greater scheme of open-source investigation.

Similarly, other students also emphasized the initial stress of working on real-world issues. One student commented, "Although it may have been stressful and there were times that I wondered whether I was good enough, I have come out of it with better skills and knowledge that my diligence pays off." This same student was pleased that his work contributed to a larger project of the partner organization and that his work may also get published on their website.

Although the vast majority of the students (23 of 25 students) found the work with societal partners at least moderately valuable, they did, at times, struggle with their collaborations with societal partners, on average scoring the value of working with the partner a 3.681 on a 5-point scale (population average). Usually, these struggles were due to issues around mismatched expectations and communication—two points of concern identified by students prior to the course starting. One societal partner in particular, a well-known NGO in the global justice field, had poor communication with students in the final month of the lab, which is a crucial period for the students and their projects. Despite repeated attempts by the supervisors to get in touch with the partner, all communications stopped. One student reflected:

> For me personally, not receiving any response anymore took away something from the project which I had been really enjoying, namely our engagement being embedded into a greater project and being connected with other students. Not receiving any further response felt a bit devaluating of our engagement, made me feel quite disconnected, as if we had not really been part of it in the first place.

Another student working with a different societal partner also commented on the challenges she experienced in relation to communication and expectations. She wrote, "The lab work with our societal partner proved to be rather challenging. At times, it felt as though their expectations were high, however they simultaneously did not communicate their needs clearly."

In an assessment of the endline results, it became clear that students had indeed been adept in the baseline survey at anticipating future challenges with societal partners. Ultimately, many students felt that it was challenging to work with their societal partner, with 18 students scoring working with a partner as at least "moderately" challenging (population average: 3.476 on a 5-point scale). The most frequently cited challenges of working with societal partners in the endline survey related to communication and coordination issues. It can be seen in the results that one of the four societal partners stopped communicating with students and supervisors halfway through the project.

The results showed that this lack of communication with one of the partners resulted in feelings of disconnect and demotivation toward the project, making the project feel more challenging to students. One student said, "The contact wasn't good; in the end we were practically ignored. I didn't really feel like there was much of a relationship between us and the societal partner," and another student said, "The lack of communication and the feeling of disconnect did

make the project rather challenging." The importance of reciprocity here is paramount. It demonstrates that although students are highly willing to produce something of value with their societal partner, the motivation to do so has to be maintained and stimulated by communication and feedback. One student wrote, "Except for in the beginning, we did not receive any feedback or even got a reply from our partner, so it posed some issues with respect to our motivation and our engagement."

Significantly fewer students cited expectation management as a challenging aspect of working with the partners at the end of the course than had anticipated this difficulty in the baseline survey. Although 11 students noted their concerns in this aspect in the baseline survey, only three students in the endline survey cited expectation management as a challenge. One of these students said that it was "very challenging and intimidating to work with professionals and to deal with their workflow and expectations." Two other students noted that their concerns were alleviated over time. One of them said, "I was afraid not to get to the expectations of the [project] team. In the end, they were more than satisfied with their work."

The endline responses furthermore demonstrated that students were highly motivated by the real-life impact of their work and found the practical implications of the work a valuable aspect of the collaboration with societal partners. One student wrote, "I think we actually made a contribution by working on the Amnesty project. It felt really useful to discover and verify these cases that Amnesty might use in their reports." Another student said that "the project was very interesting and something that really matters and the experience of working on it made me better understand the issue." Such answers demonstrate that students have high motivation to contribute something of importance to societal partners and to feel useful. However, not all students felt they had the tools or the opportunity to do so. For example, one student said, "The communication and also how important our contribution felt (oftentimes very little) made the whole experience only moderately valuable." Another student said, "I wish our partner would be more responsive and more interested in our further development and involvement with other project." Overall, student experiences with the project and the learning itself can be seen as contingent on the communication and coordination of the partner, with the best student experiences resulting from situations in which students felt guided and valued.

Students demonstrated that the hands-on learning projects contributed to a moderately deeper understanding and new perspectives on the substantive theme of global justice. On a Likert scale of 1–5, with 1 being *not at all deepened* and 5 being *extremely deepened*, most students scored a 3 (Mode 3, population mean also 3.000) at *moderately deepened* when asked if the course had deepened their understanding of global justice. Fifteen students gave this question a 3 or above. One student said that the projects helped them "see injustices I didn't before," and another stated that their interest in global justice had deepened, but "not from an idealistic perspective, but from a more practical one on how to achieve global justice." Eight students stated that the projects made them more interested and motivated in pursuing a future in the global justice sphere. Importantly, the hands-on learning gave students an idea of "what was possible in the field." One student said, "I feel like OSINT [open-source intelligence] has immense potential to aid in global justice pursuits. I have much stronger interest in investigative research altogether now." It was a significant motivating factor for students that the skills they learned could be practically applied immediately after the course. One student said, "I was sceptic [sic] of international law and global justice issues before taking the course, but I found again the motivation to research in this field and discovered new ways and approaches to tackle the current challenges." The practical skill set gave students a grasp of what they could pragmatically do to address global justice issues, allaying the skepticism and helplessness students often feel in relation to global justice. One student said, "Our efforts can be of use, even if it's not obvious initially." Another said, "Now that I have been handed a new way of contributing to global justice, I feel like I can already start now, instead of waiting for later in my career."

The lab also contributed to a higher awareness in students about their positionality within the field of global justice, as well as a greater awareness of the role of open-source investigations and investigators in the field. One student commented, "I caught myself with some biases I didn't even know

existed," and another said, "The course has very effectively provided us with information about how to recognize our own positionality and why that matters so much." Seven students cited the reflection logs as the key exercise that contributed to greater awareness in the field. One student wrote:

> While I think I still have a lot to learn in this, I now know what good open-source research should be and how researchers should take their own biases, limits and responsibilities into account. While I will continue to develop my own reflective skills, I think I have become more aware of how I function within groups, as an open source investigator and a global citizen.

Another said,

> I feel within my work in the entire course I was able to reflect on my role in this and was thus consciously aware of the impact we would be having and thus I tried to work as actively as possible to maintain and improve my knowledge and understanding of everything whilst also being present and understanding towards my team and our project.

The endline survey results, as well as the reflection logs, demonstrate that despite the challenges, the students were highly positive about working with the societal partners, explaining that working with the partners gave them a better idea of what NGOs do to further global justice, and also helped them "put a face and name" to global issues. Indeed, despite the important concerns and the challenges encountered in their work with societal partners, a vast majority of students valued this interaction and viewed it as an important part of the course. One student commented:

> Overall, the lab has given me the privilege to learn about OSI [open-source investigations], OS [open-source] tools, partner collaboration, and teamwork but, most importantly, has given the opportunity to know myself better, to push my boundaries and get out of my (legal) comfort zone, to reaffirm my values and to fight my own biases. This was a lifetime experience.

And another wrote:

> I learned a lot throughout the lab—personally, academically and professionally. I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in it. Not only the personal lessons and experiences but more generally, the ability to learn about OSI, become convinced by its relevance and conceive of this whole new field for (professional) work has been very rewarding. I enjoyed the uncertainty (in hindsight :)) and the challenges that arose, exposing me to an unfamiliar field and also to myself.

Based on the results from the first iteration of our Global Justice Investigations Lab, we can conclude that students learned new skills and insights when contributing to global justice projects by working together with societal partners. In follow-up discussions with societal partners, three of the four partner organizations indicated that the students made valuable contributions to their work, helping them to achieve wider organizational goals (one follow-up discussion has yet to take place due to an inability to reach the partner). The willingness of three of the four societal partners to work with the lab again indicates their overall satisfaction. This reception indicates that one of the lab's aims, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship, was successful in these instances.

Discussion

Overall, the baseline survey revealed that students were primarily drawn to the course for its practical experience in global justice, with many eager to work with societal partners on real-life issues rather than hypothetical cases. Key to their course success was acquiring practical skills applicable to their future careers, and the opportunity to make tangible contributions. Challenges identified in the baseline surveys included time management and communication with societal partners. Despite initial stress and anxiety about roles and responsibilities, reflection logs showed that students grew more confident and capable as the project progressed, valuing the practical experience and its real-world impact.

The reflection logs by students demonstrated that the lab also assisted students' transformation in terms of the key concepts of reflexivity and positionality. As noted above,

reflexivity requires someone to consider their place on axes such as wealth, gender, and economic factors such as class (Grusky, 2000) and to do so in relation to others. It is closely connected to positionality, which requires looking at one's position in the world and dissecting the facets of identity that intersect to shape one's power and privileges in it. The findings show that demonstrating reflexivity and awareness of positionality were key drivers of student learning. Reflexivity is evident in how students reflected on their learning and interactions with societal partners, recognizing their own biases, insecurities, and the impact of their work. One student noted the discomfort with their privileged position and the desire to contribute to global justice, showing an awareness of their own social standing and its implications. Through reflection logs, students gained deeper insights into their perceptions and the influence of their positionality on their work, illustrating the importance of self-awareness in achieving meaningful engagement and learning outcomes. Within the learning environment of the lab, with its global focus and aims to give students new perspectives on their positionality in the context of global problems, both concepts played a central role. From the first day of the lab, students were encouraged (and supported) to critically reflect on their positionality within the context of the course. Fostering student awareness of their own positionality was fundamental in building collaborative relationships within their interdisciplinary teams and in learning to value the perspectives of both team members and societal partners, as well as contributing to the long-term social justice aims of the lab.

Students also became more aware about concepts such as intersectionality, privilege, and reciprocity. Reciprocity was the guiding principle of the lab, underpinning the relationship between not only the students but also the program as a long-term project with the societal partners (Hammersley, 2012; Latta et al., 2018; Sharpe & Dear, 2013). As the findings above indicate, reciprocity was key in motivating students. Students were highly willing to contribute to projects and to meaningfully contribute to social justice ends. The endline survey indicates, however, that to do so, students need clear mandates and guidance. Consequently, reciprocity is central to the success of the course, emphasizing the importance of mutual benefit and effective communication between students and societal partners. Students' motivation and engagement were closely tied to the responsiveness and feedback from their partners. Issues with communication and coordination, such as the lack of response from one societal partner, led to feelings of disconnection and demotivation among students. Effective reciprocity, involving clear communication and valuing students' contributions, was vital for maintaining motivation and ensuring the students felt their work was meaningful and impactful. This reciprocal relationship underscored the importance of collaboration in achieving the course's educational and practical goals.

However, reciprocity requires communication and coordination between the teachers, students, and partner organizations. As Dumlao (2018) highlighted, ideal partnerships in community engagement—those that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial—are "brought to life" by (interpersonal) communication (p. 36). The unique digital focus of the lab meant students communicated with partner organizations primarily by digital means (email, shared documents, and video calling). When this digital communication breaks down, as it did with one of the groups, stress, frustration, and disillusionment follow. Although a digital OSI lab provides benefits in terms of reciprocity by avoiding exploitative dynamics between the university and (vulnerable) communities, using digital communication also places much of the learning in the hands of partner organizations, which facilitate action and thus act as brokers between the students and the community. Clear communication with partners regarding expectations, tasks, and feedback on work was key in fostering reciprocity and, therefore, furthering student learning goals. Lack of physical immersion and reliance on digital communication methods, while beneficial, may thus also present unique challenges. Conclusions about the benefits and drawbacks of in-person as opposed to virtual community-engaged learning are mixed (O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2023; Sweet et al., 2023). But when digital communication goes well, as it did in most of the project groups, it is valuable to the learning of all involved, especially the students.

Overall, the course highlighted the intertwined nature of reflexivity, positionality, and reciprocity in experiential learning. Students' reflections on their experiences, awareness of their social positions, and the

reciprocal dynamics with societal partners contributed to a deepened understanding of global justice issues and their roles within this field. This approach not only enhanced their practical skills but also fostered a deeper appreciation of the complexities and challenges of working toward global justice goals.

Having discovered how ICEL has benefited students in the areas of reflexivity, positionality, and reciprocity, our research also points to the limits of what ICEL can achieve. For example, it is also clear from the findings that engaging critically with real-world global problems for a few months will often not result in a measurable change in the problems being addressed, which may be discouraging for students. In accepting that systemic social change may never be achieved in an ICEL program, it is important to recognize that the attempt to approach ICEL critically is valuable in its own right (Sharpe & Dear, 2013). Encountering global issues up close can challenge student comfort levels, so the intensity of these experiences provides a space for personal growth (Sharma et al., 2021). Reflecting critically on global issues and, in the context of an OSI lab, being exposed to unfiltered images, videos, and stories of injustice, can be difficult for students (Jones, 2002; Larsen & Searle, 2017), but these "discomforts" are the site where learning transformation occurs (Sharpe & Dear, 2013).

Discomforts were felt by many students as they navigated the new landscape not only of working with a societal partner but also of learning new OSI skills. As students apply their skills in OSI in a socially aware context, it is pertinent to recall that gaining such skills is possible due to a privileged position of learning within a Dutch academic landscape, access to excellent internet connections, and teachers with digital literacy. Although open-source investigating is often framed as revolutionary in democratizing research possibilities because it relies on open-access data, the extent of this democratization should not be overestimated on a global level. The sword that OSI wields against information opacity, overcoming hurdles that previously restricted such analysis to governmental (intelligence) agencies and well-funded investigators, is nonetheless a tool accessible only to those with the requisite digital skills and literacy. The perception that few resources and skills are required to engage in OSI rests on how one is positioned in accessing and, perhaps more importantly, understanding information and communications technologies that are often dependent on national infrastructures.

Having unveiled the benefits of the lab's approach to ICEL for student development, we plan to continue to emphasize the importance of reflexivity and positionality from the start of the course. We will also make adjustments for the future expansion of the project and utilize the limitations discovered as the basis for further research. First, we will build in greater feedback opportunities within students' reflection work, in order to stress the importance of practicing reflection. We will thereby give students more guidance in the reflection exercises and help steer them toward a better understanding of their own positionality in the process.

Second, we will give extra attention to reciprocity and the importance of partner communication and engagement. Despite best efforts to maintain good communication with partners, sometimes relationships break down, as occurred in the lab studied here. The negative impact of this withdrawal on students was clear. Fostering meaningful engagement, especially when dealing with a partner that is located far away geographically, is crucial for the success of the lab and the learning of students. This need for contact also connects with observations by Bowe et al. (2023), who found that partner communication was key in shaping students' "senses of relatedness and autonomy" in relation to service-learning projects (p. 2837). Our observations may also connect to future research on the relationship of (nondigital) factors that impact communication effectiveness, such as language barriers (Bash, 2009), accents, and cultural differences (Dumlao, 2018, pp. 99–115), and thereby impact reciprocity in ICEL partnerships.

For future iterations of the lab, we will engage in more up-front dialogues with our societal partners and raise our concerns about communication and coordination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Global Justice Investigations Lab demonstrated significant learning outcomes through the integration of reflexivity and positionality, as well as reciprocity, into its structure and curriculum. Students gained valuable skills and in-

sights by working with societal partners and contributing meaningfully to global justice projects. The positive feedback from most societal partners and their willingness to collaborate again underscores the program's effectiveness and the fostering of mutually beneficial relationships. Reflexivity and positionality were central to the students' learning, fostering a deeper understanding of their social positions and biases, which in turn influenced their collaborative efforts and engagement with real-world issues. Furthermore, the principle of reciprocity played a crucial role in motivating students and ensuring meaningful engagement with their partners' work. Students were shown to be highly motivated to collaborate with fellow students and partners and to have practical impact. The challenges faced, including communication breakdowns, highlighted the importance of effective coordination and expectation-setting in experiential learning. Despite the difficulty of achieving systemic social change within a short time frame, the course's critical approach provided valuable personal growth opportunities for students, enhancing their appreciation of the complexities in global justice efforts. Overall, the lab underscored the importance of critical engagement, self-awareness, and collaborative dynamics in addressing global justice issues, while also recognizing the privileged context within which this learning occurs. Overall, the course was seen as a transformative experience that provided practical skills, deeper insights into global justice, and personal growth.

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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 instil 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.

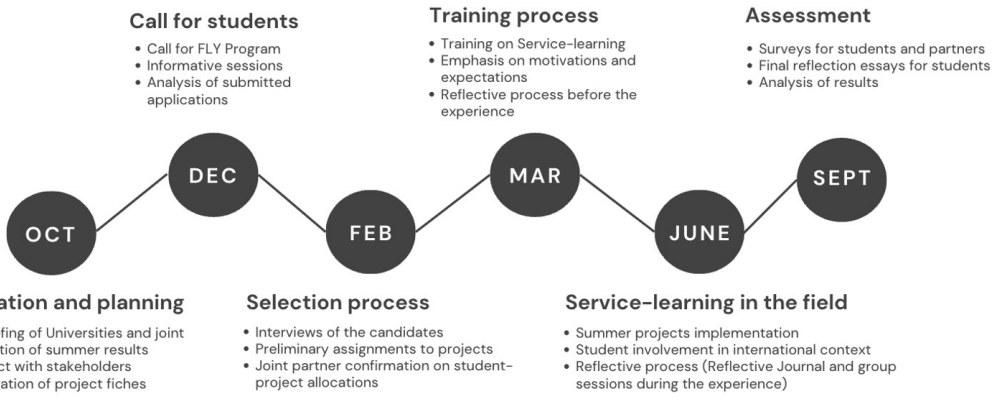
Organization, Coordination, and Implementation Schedule

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 dedicated 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 expec-

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.

Table 1. Student Self-Assessment on Skills Development

Skill	2023		2022		2021		Average
	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD	
Personal skills	**4.34**		**4.59**		**4.61**		**4.51**
Initiative and autonomy	4.04	1.04	4.52	0.74	4.53	0.87	4.36
Assertiveness	4.21	0.96	4.52	0.91	4.57	0.92	4.43
Empathy	4.50	0.84	4.58	0.68	4.69	0.77	4.59
Adaptability	4.59	0.72	4.74	0.66	4.64	0.73	4.66
Relation skills	**4.28**		**4.51**		**4.38**		**4.39**
Effective communication	4.23	0.87	4.71	0.65	4.74	0.65	4.56
Teamwork	4.38	0.92	4.71	0.55	4.61	0.56	4.57
Conflict resolution	4.22	0.89	4.11	0.98	3.80	0.89	4.04
Social and ethical skills	**4.54**		**4.57**		**4.46**		**4.52**
Social awareness	4.64	0.78	4.62	0.78	4.50	0.70	4.59
Social commitment	4.47	0.90	4.59	0.76	4.48	0.81	4.51
Respect and appreciation of diversity	4.56	0.89	4.59	0.77	4.55	0.83	4.57
Inclusive attitude	4.58	0.78	4.52	0.78	4.26	0.80	4.45
Global citizenship	4.43	0.96	4.53	0.77	4.49	0.68	4.48
Working skills	**4.13**		**4.52**		**4.46**		**4.37**
Creativity	3.97	1.01	4.36	0.74	4.50	0.87	4.28
Functional learning	4.18	1.03	4.62	1.03	4.45	0.95	4.42
Results orientation	4.25	0.80	4.56	0.73	4.42	0.76	4.41
Number of students	**102**		**66**		**74**		

Figure 2. Word Cloud of Students' Keywords on the FLY Program

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 political 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.

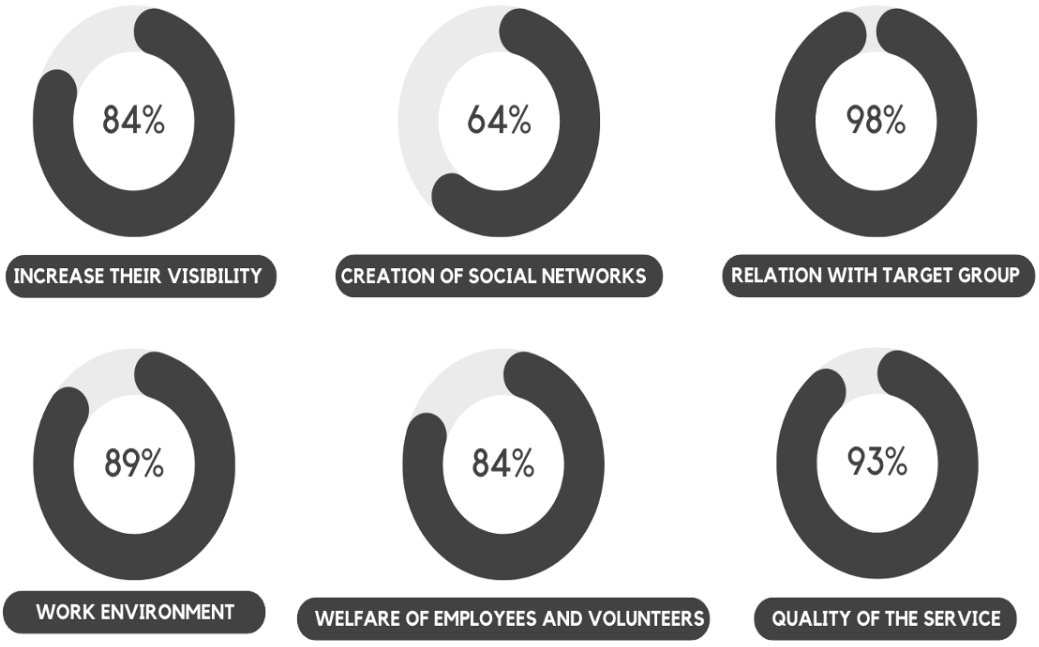
Finally, some students point out that the tutors they accompany are not always familiar with the context of the project and believe that this is a vital aspect of being better supported.

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 nongovernmental 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

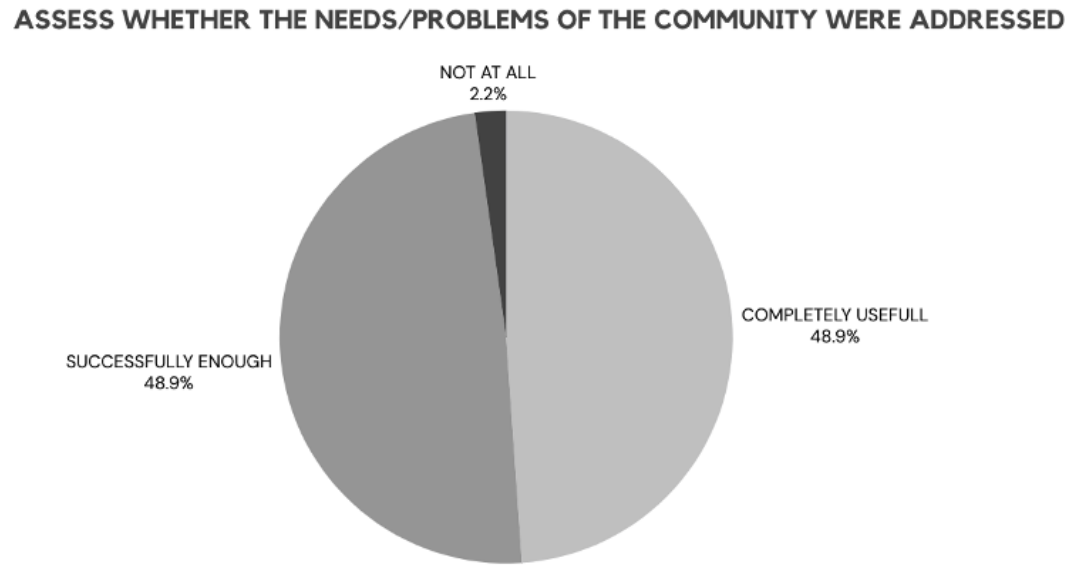


Figure 5. Community Partners' Assessment of Their Support for the University Students

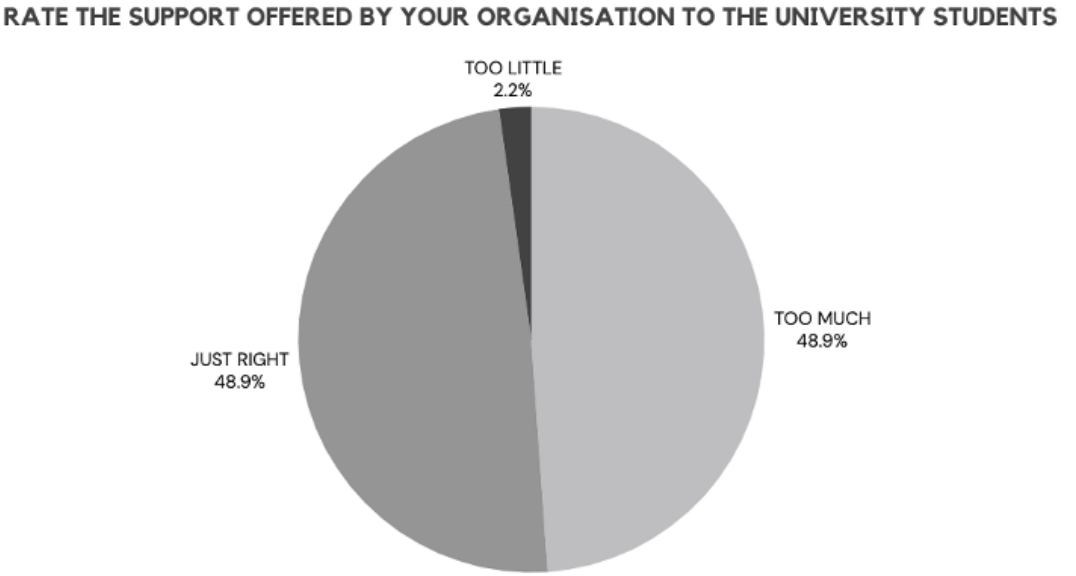
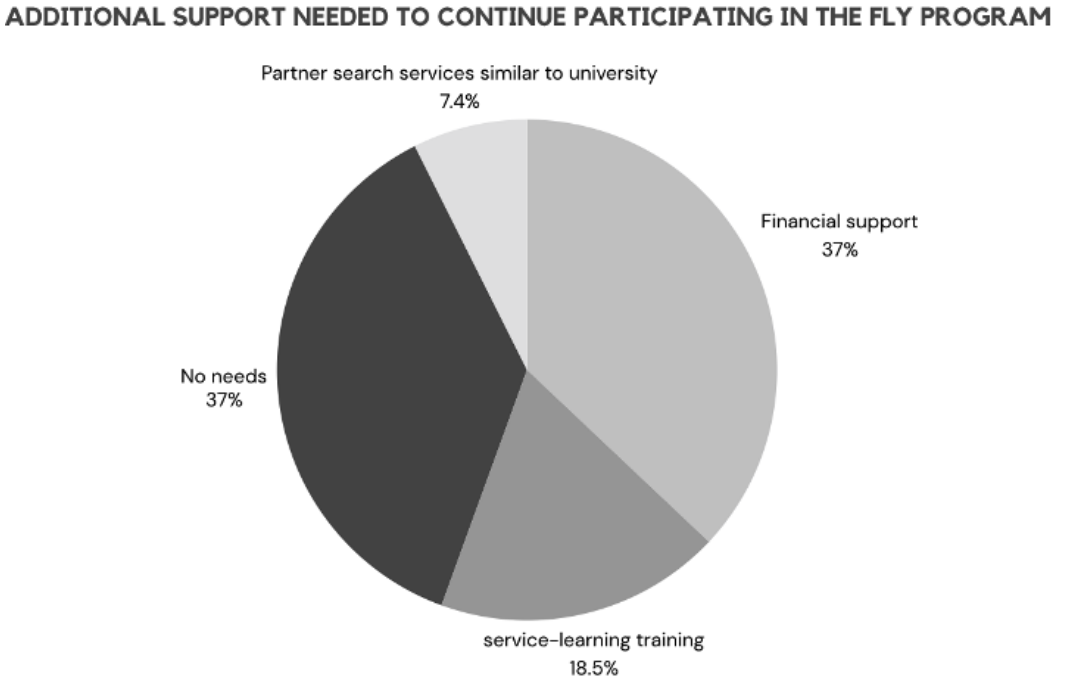


Figure 6. Additional Support for the Community Partners



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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The Impact of International Service-Learning on Students' Development in Intercultural Sensitivity

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Abstract

We examined the impact of international service-learning (ISL) on students' development of intercultural sensitivity. Participants were undergraduate students of a Hong Kong university (N = 132) who enrolled in a credit-bearing ISL course with service projects in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Mainland China. The research is primarily qualitative but also employs quantitative methods. Students were asked to write their views about the host country both before and after their service trip. Through thematic analysis of the responses, we developed a framework for intercultural sensitivity with four levels. Categories adopted from literature about intercultural competence or development were used to code the data set. Results revealed statistically significant differences in levels of intercultural sensitivity before and after ISL experience. Postexperience data further showed higher levels of intercultural sensitivity in the Southeast Asia and Africa groups than in the Mainland China group. Potential factors and implications are discussed.

Keywords: international service-learning, higher education, intercultural sensitivity, transformative learning

Preparing young adults to become agents of a more inclusive and sustainable world entails cultivating intercultural competence, a multidimensional capacity that includes understanding other worldviews, appreciating different cultures, and being able to communicate effectively and behave appropriately in situations of diversity (OECD, 2018). Education plays an important part in this process, and it is clear from the widespread inclusion of intercultural competence among graduate attributes and the proliferation of practices in international education that universities are aware of their role and responding to the challenge (cf. UNESCO, 2006).

Part and parcel of intercultural competence is intercultural sensitivity. This term refers to the affective or emotional dimensions of intercultural competence, which are intertwined with its cognitive and behavioral elements. Defined as "an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behaviour in intercultural communication" (Chen, 1997, p. 5), intercultural sensitivity builds upon intercultural awareness (cognitive) and leads to the acquisition of intercultural competence (behavioral).

Closely related to community-engaged learning is service-learning, an experiential pedagogy widely adopted in higher education for its potential to nurture civic responsibility along with academic, personal, and social outcomes (Conway et al., 2009). Service-learning programs with projects in foreign settings, or international service-learning (ISL), adds intercultural competence and global awareness to the prospective outcomes of service-learning (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Yang et al., 2016). ISL programs provide students with immersive experiences in host communities overseas, in the process generating opportunities to directly learn about other cultures, to contemplate and experience issues faced by

developing countries, and to communicate, interact, and collaborate in intercultural settings (Curtis, 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021; Short & St. Peters, 2017).

Educators argue that ISL can be an impactful pedagogy for cultivating intercultural competence (Bringle et al., 2011; Deardorff, 2009; Hartman & Kiely, 2014). There are ample studies reporting ISL's positive impact on intercultural competence. Most of these draw from Western contexts and rely on self-reports from quantitative instruments or qualitative interviews. Thus far too, studies have been mostly based on single programs or small participant sample sizes. Moreover, some studies have yielded mixed results (e.g., De Leon, 2014; Short et al., 2020). In this regard, ISL practitioners note from their experience that participating in ISL programs can sometimes fall short of transformative learning, or can produce results that run counter to intercultural sensitivity, such as reinforcing visiting students' stereotypes or superiority complex (Crabtree, 2008; Kiely, 2004; Simonelli et al., 2004).

This study will contribute to the existing body of ISL literature through research based on a large, multisite ISL program involving students from diverse academic disciplines. Developed from a non-Western context, the research can be used to corroborate studies from Western contexts. More importantly, our study offers an alternative to studies based on self-reports. Analyzing students' pre- and postexperience views about host countries constitutes a more direct and authentic assessment of development in intercultural sensitivity.

In this instrumental case study, we set out to explore the impact of ISL on students' development in intercultural sensitivity based on an ISL program offered in the 2023–2024 academic year. The program had 132 undergraduate students enrolled and service projects in three regional locations. Qualitative methods were used to analyze and code written tasks in which students expressed their views about their host countries before and after the ISL trip. Three research questions (RQ) are investigated:

> **RQ 1:** What can ISL students' views about the host country and its people reveal about their intercultural sensitivity?
>
> **RQ 2:** Do ISL students' views about the host country and its people change after their ISL experience?
>
> **RQ 3:** Are there differences in intercultural sensitivity development between groups that served in different sites?

Literature Review

This section focuses on the importance of intercultural sensitivity and how ISL contributes to developing intercultural sensitivity.

As mentioned, intercultural sensitivity may be seen as the affective component of intercultural competence. It springs from intercultural awareness and paves the way for behaviors and skills needed to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts. Intercultural sensitivity enables students to better understand and appreciate diverse perspectives, thus reducing stereotypes about others and avoiding misunderstandings and conflicts that easily arise in intercultural interactions (Furcsa & Szaszkó, 2022). At the same time, intercultural sensitivity strengthens students' ability to adapt to different environments (Gonzales, 2017). The increasing diversity in day-to-day settings, including workplaces and virtual spaces, makes intercultural sensitivity essential for students' professional development and future readiness (Jones, 2022). By boosting positive attitudes toward cultural diversity, fostering students' intercultural sensitivity can contribute to more inclusive and fair societies (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

Concepts and frameworks from the broader field of cultural studies are helpful for understanding aspects and degrees of intercultural sensitivity. For instance, Hall's (1976) cultural iceberg model uses the image of an iceberg as a metaphor to highlight how culture has surface-level elements that are readily visible, such as customs, language, and cuisine, which are like the tip of an iceberg, and hidden elements, such as values, beliefs, thought patterns, and social norms. The latter are deeper elements of culture that require more exposure and sensitivity to recognize (Yang et al., 2016).

Hall's iceberg model reminds us that cultures are complex, living realities that resist the kind of simplistic or generalized views that lurk behind stereotypes. Stereotypes

can affect how individuals are perceived and judged, leading to the exaggeration of between-group differences and the minimization of within-group differences (Taylor et al., 1978). Intercultural sensitivity calls for more sophisticated and grounded perception of other cultures. Likewise, it entails better capacity to appreciate cultures. In this regard, the distinction between an asset-based approach versus one that is deficit-based is relevant to intercultural sensitivity. The latter focuses on the shortcomings, weaknesses, and deficiencies of a given community, often leading to stereotyping and discrimination (Button, 1977). In contrast, an asset-based view recognizes the strengths, resources, and positive attributes of the host country, emphasizing the value and richness of cultural, linguistic, and literacy practices (Reyes & Norman, 2021). An asset-based approach in understanding cultures or countries one is exposed to entails openness and respect toward others and is in line with intercultural sensitivity.

Another useful framework is the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS), which conceptualizes development in intercultural sensitivity as a progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative postures (Bennett & Hammer, 2017). To elaborate the opposite poles of DMIS, Sumner (1906) defined ethnocentrism as seeing "one's own group [as] the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated from it" (p. 15). Judging other cultures based on the standards and values of one's own culture unmasks a sense of cultural superiority and is an ethnocentric attitude that shows limited intercultural sensitivity. In contrast, ethnorelativism is characterized by openness to and acceptance of cultural differences. Individuals with ethnorelativist orientation are able to acknowledge and respect diverse cultural norms and values (Bost & Wingenbach, 2018). They are also more capable of adapting to cultural differences, integrating diverse perspectives, and engaging in intercultural communication (Hammer, 2015).

Turning to studies relating intercultural sensitivity and ISL programs, Nickols et al. (2013) is a qualitative study based on reflective journals and focus groups with American students (N = 9) who took part in an interdisciplinary ISL course. The authors reported that although collected data revealed apprehensions and challenges students faced in unfamiliar contexts, immersive experiences in the African host country enhanced students' cultural awareness and sensitivity. A similar study by Booth and Graves (2018) analyzed reflective artifacts of ISL nursing students (N = 11) and concluded that the short-term project led to various gains in intercultural competence, made manifest among other things in "awareness of community needs, decreased stereotyping, [and] increased confidence in working with culturally diverse populations" (p. 108). Another qualitative study by Wall-Bassett et al. (2018) employed Campinha-Bacote's cultural competency model (2002) to investigate the impact of an interdisciplinary ISL program on students' cultural awareness and competence (N = 8).

De Leon (2014) is a quantitative study of the effects of an intensive intercultural service-learning program on students' intercultural competence. Through pre- and postassessments using constructs from two psychometric measures, the Cultural Intelligence Scale (Van Dyne, 2008; Van Dyne et al., 2009) and the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (cf. Chen & Starosta, 2000), De Leon's study yielded modest results: Although statistical analysis confirmed that service-learning had a significant positive effect on students' intercultural strategy and action, the effect was not significant in terms of intercultural knowledge, motivation, or sensitivity. The author suggested that future qualitative studies based on student artifacts and postexperience interviews could help clarify her findings.

Two related studies were developed by Short and associates from an ISL program in the health field. The first one, Short and St. Peters (2017), also used Van Dyne et al.'s (2008) Cultural Intelligence Scale in a qualitative study of pretest–posttest design involving students of occupational therapy (N = 12). They reported that the ISL program enhanced students' intercultural competence in all four factors measured in the Cultural Intelligence Scale:

- metacognitive, or consciousness/awareness during interactions;
- cognitive, or knowledge of norms, practices, and conventions;
- motivational, or the capacity to direct attention and energy toward cultural differences; and
- behavioral, or appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions (cf. Van Dyne, 2008).

The authors provided further support for ISL's efficacy by comparing their findings with the results of short-term study tours. Reporting that short-term study tours did not have the same impact on participants' cultural behavioral competence, Short and St. Peters noted that service-learning provided students with more opportunities for in-depth interaction: "Students interacted with members of the host country, as well as translators, [which] required behavioral competence in working cross-culturally to achieve a goal [whereas] study tours often fail to provide intimate interaction with members of the host country" (p. 11).

Short and Peters revisited their 2017 study with a mixed-methods study conducted in 2020 to examine the long-term impact of ISL on students. Using the Cultural Intelligence Scale combined with written reflections collected at four intervals in a span of 3 years, Short et al. (2020) found that although ISL clearly had a significant short-term impact on cultural competence, significant long-term impact was seen only in the domain of metacognition. From a longitudinal perspective, other factors of the Cultural Intelligence Scale were above baseline levels but not statistically significant. Short et al. thus recommended "additional experience to solidify" ISL's positive effects on students. Notwithstanding, what Van Dyne (2008) explained about the metacognitive factor of the Cultural Intelligence Scale is worth noting. Accordingly, it is

> a critical component for at least three reasons. First, it promotes active thinking about people and situations when cultural backgrounds differ. Second, it triggers critical thinking about habits, assumptions, and culturally bound thinking. Third, it allows individuals to evaluate and revise their mental maps, consequently increasing the accuracy of their understanding. (p. 17)

In recap, studies offer support for ISL's contribution to students' cultural competence, of which intercultural sensitivity is an important part. However, mixed results and the reliance on self-reports in both quantitative and qualitative studies necessitate alternative approaches. In what follows, we present a qualitative study that uses a direct form of assessment with a large participant sample size compared to other qualitative studies.

Research Method

Context of the Study

We performed an instrumental case study based on a multisite ISL program offered in a large, public university in Hong Kong. Service-learning was institutionalized in the university in 2012, becoming a mandatory requirement in the undergraduate curriculum across disciplines. Service-learning courses are academic credit-bearing courses and typically have three components: teaching and project preparation, during which students learn concepts and master skills linked to the service that they will carry out; service project implementation in a local or foreign community; and reflection and project evaluation, during which students take stock of their process of learning and service experience. Over 4,000 undergraduates enroll in service-learning courses each year, choosing from more than 70 service-learning courses offered by different departments. About a third of service-learning courses involve projects in cross-border or overseas locations. In academic year 2023–2024 alone, approximately 1,400 students (or 35% of students enrolled in service-learning courses) participated in ISL projects. ISL project locations include various sites in Africa, Asia, and Mainland China. A note is in order here about ISL projects in Mainland China. Although Hong Kong is part of China and shares similar racial demographics, projects in Mainland China tend to constitute cross-border experiences for local Hong Kong students due to historical and linguistic factors creating culturally distinct environments.

Most service-learning courses in the university are general education courses. The present study is based on an ISL course offered by the Department of Computing to students of any discipline. As an instrumental case study, our research uses the ISL course in question to gain insight into a particular phenomenon ("Instrumental Case Study," 2010), namely ISL's impact on students' intercultural sensitivity.

An ISL Course on the Digital Divide

The title of the ISL course in question is Technology Beyond Borders: Service Learning Across Cultural, Ethnic and Community Lines. The academic content of the course covered basic principles of artificial intelligence (AI), programming knowledge, and ethical issues, zeroing in

on the problem of the digital divide and its impact on communities beyond Hong Kong. Data used in this study are from the course offered in academic year 2023–2024. The class had a total enrollment of 132 students. All students were allocated to one of the program's five project locations in Africa (South Africa and Tanzania), Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Vietnam), and Mainland China.

The ISL course was selected for the study for several reasons. It had a large enrollment number compared to other ISL courses, ensuring a more than adequate sample size. It involved multiple service locations, enabling comparison between groups that served in different locations. Moreover, the ISL course was open to students of all majors, meaning that enrollees were from diverse academic disciplines. The course is further described below.

Prior to their ISL trips, students attended lectures and trained and prepared for their projects in Hong Kong. Students learned about knowledge of global leadership, the digital divide, intercultural competency, and AI. They worked in small groups of three to four persons for the class activities and service projects. Each group designed a proposal and developed teaching materials for a 5-day workshop on AI for primary or secondary school students in the host countries. An important part of students' pretrip preparation was cultural activities delivered face-to-face or online to introduce students to common phrases and basic aspects of the culture in their service destination.

Turning to the service component, the ISL projects consisted of at least 40 hours of direct service in which students delivered in the host countries the AI workshops they designed and developed in Hong Kong. Workshop participants learned about object recognition, machine learning, and block programming through practical lessons and hands-on activities. The community partners of the ISL program were NGOs, universities, and primary or secondary schools in the host countries of the service projects. At the Southeast Asian sites, local university students were recruited to support the service delivery. They worked closely with Hong Kong students and helped overcome language barriers by acting as interpreters. To enhance cultural learning, a day was allocated in the ISL trip itineraries for students to visit places of cultural or historical interest.

Throughout the service trip, the teaching team organized at least three structured reflection sessions that tackled various topics such as service performance, intercultural sensitivity, leadership, the digital divide, the NGO, and the served community.

Participants

Approval for the study was granted by the university's Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee (Reference No. HSEARS20240219006). The target participants of the study were undergraduate students from different disciplines who enrolled in the ISL course explained above. The participants' distribution according to gender, academic discipline, and ISL project location are shown in Table 1.

Data Collection

The study is primarily a qualitative research study, which collects descriptive data and focuses on understanding the perspectives of the subjects being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The service trips of the ISL course lasted for 10 days each and took place in January 2024. Prior to the ISL trip, students were assigned a short, open-ended task with the following instruction: "In about 100 words, describe your view of the country/region and the people *you are going to* serve." This task was performed online during one of the classes. Students were given a QR code to input their answers in English or Chinese, and had about 30 minutes to complete the task. To encourage free sharing of honest opinions, the task was ungraded, voluntary, and anonymous. On the last day or within 2 weeks of the service trip, students performed the same written task with similar instructions: "In about 100 words, describe your view of the country/region and the people *you served* in the service-learning project."

The final number of written entries was 172: 81 pre-ISL and 91 post-ISL. The breakdown of the data set is shown in Table 2.

Students' views of the host country as documented in the pre and post written tasks served as the primary data source of the study. The purpose of the task, which in itself was a reflective activity, was explained to students, and their consent to use their answers for evaluation and research was obtained both verbally and in writing.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants (*N* = 132)

Distribution by	Mainland China		Southeast Asia		Africa	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Service Location	29	100.0	46	100.0	57	100.0
Gender						
Female	8	27.6	14	30.4	28	49.1
Male	21	72.4	32	69.6	29	50.9
Faculties						
FB	7	24.1	11	23.9	7	12.3
FCE	3	10.3	5	10.9	13	22.8
FENG	16	55.2	21	45.7	17	29.8
FH	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	5.3
SD	0	0.0	1	2.2	2	3.5
SHTM	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	3.5
FHSS	2	6.9	4	8.7	8	14.0
FS	1	3.5	3	6.5	5	8.8
SFT	0	0.0	1	2.2	0	0.0

Note. FB = Faculty of Business; FCE = Faculty of Construction and Environment; FENG = Faculty of Engineering; FH = Faculty of Humanities; SD = School of Design; SHTM = School of Hotel and Tourism Management; FHSS = Faculty of Health and Social Sciences; FS = Faculty of Science; SFT = School of Fashion and Textiles.

Table 2. Summary of Responses to Question About International Service-Learning Location

Service location	Total no. of students	Type of entries	No. of entries (Response rate)
Mainland China	29	Pre	18 (62.1%)
		Post	16 (55.2%)
Southeast Asia	46	Pre	29 (63.0%)
		Post	39 (84.8%)
Africa	57	Pre	34 (59.6%)
		Post	36 (63.2%)
Total	132	Pre	81 (61.4%)
		Post	91 (68.9%)

Data Analysis

Written responses were subjected to thematic analysis, Clarke and Braun's (2017) method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ("themes") within qualitative data (p. 297). Data analysis in the study adhered to the six steps outlined in Braun & Clarke (2021): familiarizing oneself with the data; systematic data coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and producing a final report. The steps are meant to guide systematic and rigorous interaction with the data but are not intended to be strictly followed in sequence since thematic analysis is a recursive and iterative process of moving back and forth between phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The research process for the study was as follows. In the initial stage, two members of the research team who were directly involved in the ISL course and accompanied students on the service trips read all answers to the written tasks to get a sense of the whole (data familiarization). Next, a third party helped remove all identifiers of the data, such as indicators of service location and whether the task was performed pretrip or posttrip. Anonymized, the pre and post data were mixed together and each entry was assigned an ID number. The combined data set was returned to the research team for thematic analysis. Next, four members of the research team engaged in discussion to discern themes or patterns that emerged from the data set (generating initial themes). Three themes called to mind existing frameworks in literature, namely, deep and surface cultural elements (Hall, 1976), asset-based approach (Button, 1977), and ethnorelative versus ethnocentric views (Bennett & Hammer, 2017). We further observed that some entries contained inaccurate or erroneous views, whereas others were more factual or circumspect in their statements about the host country or culture. A preliminary framework for intercultural sensitivity with four dimensions was thus developed through collaborative qualitative analysis (developing and reviewing themes). The four dimensions were then used as categories to code the data samples (systematic data coding). First, three members of the team performed a trial round of independent coding using 20 sample cases. Difficulties encountered during the trial round enabled the team to align their understanding of the categories and to refine the coding framework. In addition, the coders noted varying levels of intercultural sensitivity among the data entries (refining, defining, and naming themes).

Once a more complete and robust framework was in place, two members of the team independently coded the entire data set using the coding framework. Each entry was tentatively assigned a level of intercultural sensitivity based on a holistic judgment about how the entry fared in terms of the coding categories. Out of 172 entries, 38 discrepancies occurred between the two coders. The discrepancies were not so much about the categories as the levels. To resolve discrepancies, the two coders conferred to better articulate the levels of the coding framework (refining, defining, and naming themes). As a result, the number of discrepancies was reduced to seven cases. A third member of the research team was then brought in to resolve the remaining cases through discussion and majority voting (two against one), leading to further clarifications and the achievement of 100% agreement in the level assignments.

Next, information about the entries' timing (i.e., pre- or post-ISL trip) and service locations were reintroduced into the data set for cross-tabulation. Doing so allowed us to compare students' views before and after the ISL trips, likewise to compare results between different service locations. Since we had a large sample size at our disposal, we decided to run a Fisher's Exact Test to ascertain that the pre–post changes were not due to random error and to check whether the differences between pre and post results were statistically significant (Fleiss, 1981). Fisher's is a statistical test that requires no minimum amount of data and can manage cases with zero expected counts. To investigate differences in students' development of intercultural sensitivity according to service location, the data was grouped into three regional sites (i.e., in order of proximity to Hong Kong: Mainland China, Southeast Asia, and Africa), and breakdown analysis was conducted across the different regions.

Results

Detecting Intercultural Cultural Sensitivity From Student Views About Host Countries

This section responds to the first research question: "What can students' views about the host country and its people reveal about their intercultural sensitivity?" Analysis of the data set revealed several dimensions in how students viewed host countries:

1. Some entries dwelled on surface elements of culture, whereas others captured deep elements (Hall, 1976);
2. some focused on perceived deficiencies, whereas others highlighted strengths or assets;
3. some expressed ethnocentric views, whereas others expressed ethnorelative views (cf. Bennett & Hammer, 2017);

and finally,

4. some entries contained inaccurate or erroneous statements manifesting "stereotypical or impressionistic views," whereas others were more factual or circumspect, manifesting "evidence-based or open-minded views."

As explained earlier, these categories emerged from the data set and called to mind concepts and frameworks from existing literature. The four categories enabled us to develop a framework for evaluating intercultural sensitivity with four dimensions: (1) surface versus deep cultural features, (2) stereotypical/impressionistic versus evidence-based/open-minded views, (3) ethnocentric versus ethnorelative perspectives, and (4) deficit-based versus asset-based approach. Table 3 explains each dimension in detail.

Table 3. The Four Dimensions of the Coding Framework

Dimensions	Descriptions
Surface vs. deep cultural features	This dimension is indicative of the depth of cultural understanding. • Surface cultural features are visible or tangible, e.g., food, language, infrastructure. • Deep cultural features show more sophisticated or in-depth knowledge of other cultures, e.g., values, attitudes, beliefs.
Stereotypical/impressionistic vs. evidence-based/ open-minded views	This dimension is indicative of the accuracy of knowledge of other cultures. • Stereotypical/impressionistic views are general, simplistic, or inaccurate, seemingly based on mere opinion, or subjective or unsubstantiated information. • Evidence-based/open-minded views are balanced statements based on observation, experience, reliable sources, or critical/analytical reasoning, expressing openness to learn.
Ethnocentric vs. ethnorelative perspectives	This dimension is indicative of the degree of intercultural sensitivity. • Ethnocentric perspectives view one's own culture as the center or standard, and use it as a reference point to evaluate other cultures. • Ethnorelative perspectives are more self-aware and express insights about the complexities and/ or interconnectedness of cultures.
Deficit-based vs. asset-based views	This dimension refers to the balanced regard for other cultures, emphasizing negative or positive aspects. • Deficit-based views focus on the community's needs or problems, and tend to see the community as passive recipients of service. • Asset-based views attend to the community's strengths or potentials, recognizing their agency.

It was further possible to classify the entries into four different levels by making a holistic judgment about how each entry fared in the four dimensions. These four levels were Level 1, *novice*; Level 2, *emerging*; Level 3, *adequate*; and Level 4, *advanced*.

Responses coded as *novice* are characterized by limited knowledge about the host culture, mostly focusing on surface features. The statements about the host culture are general or simplistic, seemingly based on mere opinion, subjective views, or unsubstantiated information. They tend to be self-referent, setting one's culture as the standard or expressing some form of superiority. Level 1 responses may also focus on the deficits (inadequacies, needs, problems) of the host country.

At the other end of the spectrum are responses coded as Level 4, *advanced*. They exhibit more sophisticated understanding of surface or deep elements of culture. Level 4 responses usually contain well-informed or balanced statements about the host country that are grounded in experience, reliable sources, or critical reasoning. They manifest openness to learn from or about other cultures, and demonstrate self-reflexivity through insights about the complexities or interconnectedness of different cultures. Level 4 responses characteristically grasp both strengths and needs of the host culture and express perceptive ideas about its status and future.

Between these two poles are intermediary levels of intercultural sensitivity. Responses at Level 2, *emerging*, are similar to those at Level 1 but show more traces of cultural awareness. They may score well in one or two of the four dimensions. Level 3, *adequate*, responses, on the contrary, are similar to those at Level 4 but have minor indications of cultural unawareness. The following are direct quotes from students' written responses illustrating the respective levels.

Level 1:

> I think Tanzania is a developing country, so it must be poor. There are no high-rise buildings. The toilets may not function well and have no water for flushing. Since Tanzania is not a coastal country, there will probably be no seafood to eat. I suppose most of the people in Tanzania are black, because of race. I expect Tanzanians to be kind because they have less competition in the workplace. (Participant 186)

The statement above was classified as Level 1 because it focused on surface features like infrastructure and cuisine. Given that "coastal," "seafood," and "workplace competition" are distinctive features of the participant's place of origin, the entry may be said to contain a subjective assessment of the host country using one's own culture as the standard or point of reference. Overall, the entry is deficit-based, focusing on what the host country does not have.

Level 2:

> In the coming January, we will go to Tanzania. In my point of view, this country's culture is diverse. It has over 120 ethnic groups and more than 125 indigenous languages. Our service recipients are local primary students. Their first language is Swahili. English is their second language. [From the preparatory] workshop, I think they have very basic computer skills. (Participant 114)

Participant 114's response was classified as Level 2. Although the statements are mostly about surface features (ethnic groups and languages), it names the exact number of ethnic groups and languages, showing that the writer learned some facts about the host country. The observation about "basic computer skills" is a generalization which, on the other hand, is based on an indirect but valid experience (preparatory online workshop with Tanzanian community partners). It demonstrates an active attitude to learn about another culture and an emerging intercultural sensitivity.

Level 3:

> I think the people in Vietnam are friendly and energetic. Although there are limited learning resources, my students showed eagerness and enthusiasm for the workshop. Some students kept asking questions and were willing to experience the AI and Scratch in 2.5 hours of daily workshop. One of my students, Anna, is not only very smart with Scratch, but showed her care when I was sick by giving me a biscuit. It

> is very heart-warming that a little kid can show this kind of spirit to a foreigner whom she hardly knows. Also, the assisting local university students, Valerie and Lily, put 120% effort into teaching. They spoke more than we did, and even spent their own time to learn Scratch to prepare for the workshops. From what I saw, I understand more about the country and its people. I hope the workshop was beneficial for them, that they will live a happy life in this digital era. (Participant 124)

Participant 124's response was classified as Level 3. The entry shows in-depth understanding of the other culture based on firsthand experience. The participant did not stay in the level of surface features but grasped deeper cultural elements such as caring and hardworking attitudes. There is also indication of building bonds with the local people and an appreciation of their qualities and potentials, reflecting an asset-based view. What is missing in terms of intercultural sensitivity is some expression of ethnorelative perspectives, showing awareness and understanding of the complexity of cultures.

Level 4:

> During my service-learning program in Pretoria, I was deeply impressed by the vibrant spirit and resilience of the local students and community. Despite the challenges they faced, including an obvious digital divide and limited educational resources, I was struck by the enthusiasm and curiosity of the locals. Learning alongside the students, I witnessed first-hand their curiosity and ability to adapt quickly, especially when exposed to new concepts such as artificial intelligence and machine learning. The experience not only highlighted the huge gap that exists in access to technology but also the transformative power of education. The people of Pretoria, with their unlimited potential and passion for knowledge, left an indelible mark in my heart, inspiring me to advocate for equitable educational opportunities for all, and to cherish every resource and opportunity available to me, to be passionate and curious. (Participant 166)

Participant 166's response was classified as Level 4 because the entry reflects high levels of all four dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. It expresses in-depth understanding and appreciation of others' cultures based on direct interaction. It also manifests self-reflexivity through insights about the interconnectedness of cultures (i.e., all should have access to education, and realization of one's role in the world).

In answer to RQ1, student views about the host country revealed different dimensions and levels of intercultural sensitivity as illustrated above. Using aspects of intercultural sensitivity that we observed in students' writing, we were able to develop a framework we had developed for assessing intercultural sensitivity with four dimensions and four levels. The resulting distribution of participants using this framework is summarized in Table 4.

Changes in Levels of Intercultural Sensitivity Before and After ISL Experiences

The second research question inquires about changes in students' views about the host country before and after ISL trips. Separating pre-ISL data from post-ISL data,

Table 4. Distribution of Intercultural Sensitivity Levels (*N* = 172)

Intercultural sensitivity levels	Counts	%
Level 1 (*novice*)	42	24.42
Level 2 (*emerging*)	74	43.02
Level 3 (*adequate*)	42	24.42
Level 4 (*advanced*)	14	8.14

we were able to compare the two groups of entries. Compared to pre-ISL entries, post-ISL entries showed a marked decrease in intercultural sensitivity Levels 1–2 alongside a marked increase in Levels 3–4. Table 5 is the distribution of intercultural sensitivity levels before and after the ISL experience.

The overall results indicate significant changes in students' intercultural sensitivity before and after the ISL trip. Levels 1 and 2 combined dropped from about 92% to 45% after the ISL trip. Level 3 had the most dramatic increase, from roughly 6% to 40%. Level 4 also increased from around 1% to 14%. All the changes were statistically significant according to Fisher's Exact Test ($p < 0.01$).

The answer to RQ2 is affirmative: There were very notable changes in students' views about the host countries before and after ISL experiences. Before the ISL experience, a majority of students placed in *novice* or *emerging* levels of intercultural sensitivity. After the ISL experience, more than half of the students placed in higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, implying that their written entries demonstrated deeper understanding and appreciation of the cultures of the communities they served.

Differences in Intercultural Sensitivity Development According to Service Location

The third research question probes into differences in intercultural sensitivity development between groups that served in different regions. Cross-tabulating results based on service locations showed that although a general improvement occurred in levels of intercultural sensitivity in all service locations, the increment differed between groups. Table 6 is a summary of the levels of intercultural sensitivity in three different regions before and after the ISL experience.

The Mainland China group showed the

Table 5. Distribution of Intercultural Sensitivity Levels in Pre and Post Data (N = 172)

Type of entries	Level 1, *novice*	Level 2, *emerging*	Level 3, *adequate*	Level 4, *advanced*	Fisher's Exact Test
	% (Counts)	% (Counts)	% (Counts)	% (Counts)	(p value)
Pre	39.50% (32)	53.09% (43)	6.17% (5)	1.23% (1)	
Post	10.99% (10)	34.06% (31)	40.66% (37)	14.29% (13)	$p < 0.01$

Table 6. Distribution of Intercultural Sensitivity Levels in Pre and Post Data by Regions

Type of entries	Level 1, *novice*	Level 2, *emerging*	Level 3, *adequate*	Level 4, *advanced*	Fisher's Exact Test
	% (Counts)	% (Counts)	% (Counts)	% (Counts)	(p value)
Mainland China					
Pre	55.50% (10)	38.90% (7)	5.50% (1)	0.00% (0)	$p = 0.335$
Post	43.70% (7)	31.30% (5)	25.00% (4)	0.00% (0)	
Southeast Asia					
Pre	34.48% (10)	55.17% (16)	6.90% (2)	3.45% (1)	$p < 0.01$
Post	0.00% (0)	30.77% (12)	53.84% (21)	15.38% (6)	
Africa					
Pre	35.29% (12)	58.82% (20)	5.88% (2)	0.00% (0)	$p < 0.01$
Post	8.33% (3)	38.89% (14)	33.33% (12)	19.44% (7)	

smallest changes compared to the other two regions. The changes were also not statistically significant (Fisher's Exact $p = 0.335$). It is worth noting too that the post-ISL data of the same group show a significant proportion of students (75%) remaining in Level 1 or Level 2. Although there was an increase in Level 3 from 5.50% to 25%, none of the post entries in this group reached Level 4.

Students in the Southeast Asian and African groups showed statistically significant shifts to higher levels of intercultural sensitivity (Fisher's Exact $p < 0.01$). The improvement in the Southeast Asian group is larger: There is a substantial drop in the number of Level 1 and Level 2 entries from about 89% before the ISL trip to 30% after the ISL trip. More than half of the students from the same group moved from lower to higher levels of intercultural sensitivity.

Data in the Africa group also showed significant progress in intercultural sensitivity. The percentage of Level 1 and Level 2 combined decreased from approximately 94% to 47%, meaning that close to half of the students moved from lower to higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. The percentage of Level 4 rose from 0% to 19.44%.

In answer to RQ3, we observed notable differences in intercultural development based on service location. The fact that the study was based on a multisite ISL program helped reveal these differences.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of the ISL experience on students' intercultural sensitivity. This examination was accomplished by analyzing and comparing students' views about the host countries and their people before and after their ISL trips. In the process, a framework for assessing intercultural sensitivity was developed. Students' views exhibited different levels of cultural understanding and attitudes toward other cultures. By collectively analyzing the data, we were able to identify four dimensions of intercultural sensitivity and develop a framework with four levels of intercultural sensitivity.

Significant shifts were observed in students' perceptions of the host countries after their ISL experiences, indicating an overall improvement in intercultural sensitivity. The results are consistent with our expectation and prior research (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021; Short & St. Peters, 2017), supporting the claim that ISL can have a positive impact on students' intercultural sensitivity. Higher intercultural sensitivity was observed in all four dimensions in the post-ISL data, with more mentions of deep cultural features, evidence-based and open-minded views, and ethnorelative and asset-based perspectives. By intentional design, each of the 10-day service trips of the ISL course involved cultural immersion and direct, substantial interaction with the host communities. In this regard, it is natural to expect that the students would have more to say about the host country and be able to correct or enrich their views about its culture. On the other hand, acquiring ethnorelative perspectives and taking an assets-based approach toward other cultures takes more than exposure. Fundamental attitudes of respect, openness, and curiosity are needed to develop intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

According to Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence, shifts in attitudes signify an internal change in frame of reference, which influences how an individual interprets and understands the world. Such internal change leads to more effective communication and appropriate behavior in the midst of diversity. Deardorff's process model concurs with Bennett and Bennett's (2004) developmental model, according to which the potential to exercise intercultural competence increases proportionally as an individual's perception of cultural difference becomes more complex and cultural experiences more sophisticated (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

The effect of ISL on intercultural sensitivity development was not the same across the groups that served in different regions. Compared to the Southeast Asian and African groups, students who served in Mainland China did not gain as much intercultural sensitivity, and the change from lower to higher levels was not statistically significant. We discuss our speculations about the differences in the next section.

Cultural Difference

Hong Kong is part of China but has a particular history and culture that sets it apart. China, moreover, is a large country where cultural diversity is quite pronounced from east to west and north to south. The marked cultural diversity in China explains why projects in Mainland China counted as ISL projects at the sampled university in

Hong Kong. Compared to Southeast Asia and Africa, however, the cultural difference between other parts of China and Hong Kong is not large, as they are the same country and have similar racial demographics (predominantly Han Chinese). Further, it is worth noting that the service site of the ISL course in Mainland China was Shaoguan, a small city in northern Guangdong Province bordering Hong Kong. Because of the physical proximity, the people of Shaoguan and of Hong Kong have similar cultural backgrounds. For example, elements of Indigenous Hakka culture can be found in both places, and Cantonese is widely spoken in both places. The Cultural Fixation Index (CFST) developed by Muthukrishna et al. (2020) measures Hofstede's (2001) and Schwartz's (2006) cultural distance and differences between populations. According to the CFST online tool (http://www.culturaldistance.com/), Hong Kong and China have the least cultural distance compared to Hong Kong and other service locations (except Tanzania, for which data is unavailable). Perhaps for this reason, ISL students who served in Mainland China did not need to exert as much effort to understand and adapt to diversity. From another point of view, perhaps the students knew more about Mainland China and thus possessed a higher level of pre-ISL intercultural sensitivity. Either way, their ISL experience did not seem to yield a significant increase in intercultural sensitivity. As some entries from the Mainland China group showed, students did not perceive much challenge in intercultural communication during the service trip. The relatively small change in intercultural sensitivity in the Mainland China group suggests that if intercultural sensitivity or competence is one of the intended learning outcomes of an ISL program, program designers should take into account the cultural differences between the origin and host countries.

Both the Southeast Asian and African groups demonstrated significant improvements in levels of intercultural sensitivity. As discussed in the Results section, nearly 60% of students in the Southeast Asia group and close to 50% in the Africa group transitioned from lower levels to higher levels of intercultural sensitivity after their ISL trips. It is worth noting that approximately 90% of pre-ISL entries in both groups were placed in lower levels. This substantial shift in intercultural sensitivity reflects the potentially transformative learning experience that ISL can bring about. The observation is supported by post-ISL entries mentioning changes in perspectives or behaviors. These transformative cases were classified as Level 4.

Interestingly, despite Africa being geographically farther and arguably more culturally distant from Hong Kong than Southeast Asia, the African group did not demonstrate a greater increase in intercultural sensitivity. These findings align with the mixed results found in previous research regarding the impact of cultural distance. For instance, Zou et al. (2023) surveyed 957 repatriates who returned to their home countries after living abroad and found that individuals from home countries that were more culturally distant than the host country were more inspired by the experience, leading to a positive effect on intercultural exchange. However, Suanet and Van de Vijver (2009) conducted a study with 187 first-year exchange students and found that a higher perceived cultural distance was associated with increased homesickness and reduced intercultural behavior in the host country. Other studies have identified a curvilinear relationship, suggesting that moderate cultural distance has the greatest positive impact compared to both small and large cultural distances (Baum & Isidor, 2016; Gocłowska et al., 2018). In our study, the Southeast Asian group exhibited the most improvement in intercultural sensitivity, surpassing even the African group, which traveled farther to an altogether different continent. These findings support the possibility of curvilinear effects. They also underscore the importance of further research to examine whether there is an optimal level of cultural distance for intercultural learning (Zou et al., 2023). It is worth investigating whether beyond a certain threshold of cultural distance, the positive effects diminish or negative effects increase.

Intercultural Interaction

Cultural differences aside, one way to account for the Southeast Asian group showing the highest increase in intercultural sensitivity is by looking into specific differences in the ISL experiences of the different groups. As mentioned earlier, all the students in the course regardless of service location attended the same lectures and had the same preparation before the trips. They all also had at least three reflective activities during the trip. One arrangement that stood out in the Southeast Asian group's experi-

ence (that the other groups did not have) was the close collaboration of local university students with Hong Kong students. In order to overcome language barriers, university students in the Philippines and Vietnam were recruited to translate and to assist Hong Kong students in their service delivery. Immediately before the service, the local university students joined the Hong Kong students in 2 days of preparatory sessions at the service sites. In addition, they accompanied Hong Kong students during and outside service hours, for example, for daily meals or to visit historical or cultural sites. In other words, unlike the other service locations where Hong Kong students' experiences in the host communities were limited to direct interaction with service clients, students in the Southeast Asia group spent more time with the host communities. They not only interacted with service clients but also had the opportunity for in-depth interaction with local peers while serving and during downtime. We believe that this arrangement gave the Southeast Asian group a chance for richer intercultural interaction, resulting in a larger positive shift in intercultural sensitivity. Based on Allport's (1954/1979) intergroup contact theory, a wide range of evidence has shown that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice toward people from other cultural groups, and that four features in the contact situation maximize the effect: equal status between the groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities (Barrett, 2018; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In the situation of the Southeast Asia group, students collaborated with the local university students with a shared objective of bridging the digital divide through AI workshops. In all likelihood, their collaboration in service fostered equality and partnership between the visiting students and their local counterparts. The arrangement also facilitated bonding. The contact conditions experienced by the Southeast Asian group may have thus led to friendships with diverse others, contributing to heightened appreciation for cultural diversity and increased sensitivity (Kirillova et al., 2015).

Limitations of the Study

By providing an alternative to self-reported surveys commonly used in ISL research to evaluate learning outcomes, the study responded to the need to employ more diverse methods in order to gain deeper understanding of ISL pedagogy and its impact (Bringle et al., 2012). Self-reports are prone to social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010). Respondents tend to give answers that they think are more socially acceptable than their true thoughts or behavior. Self-reporting also tends to capture surface-level data limited to what students are consciously aware of or willing to share. In the written task designed for the study, we did not directly ask students about their intercultural sensitivity but, instead, analyzed their views about the country or culture they were exposed to through ISL.

The study, however, has limitations. Readers should note that the pre-ISL and post-ISL data did not involve matched samples. The written task from which the data set originated was designed as a voluntary and anonymous exercise in order to encourage students to freely share their perspectives. This anonymity prevented us from the possibility of matching pre-ISL and post-ISL samples. It is difficult to rule out the possibility that the observed changes are due to sampling errors in the pre and post cases. Notwithstanding, the high response rates from both pre- and post-ISL groups give confidence that students' views were well represented. In future studies, researchers could consider asking respondents to provide a unique indicator to enable collection of anonymous paired samples. Additionally, including demographic questions in the written task would make it possible to explore potential correlations between student variables and intercultural sensitivity development.

Another limitation of the study is that the student views collected were 100-word entries. Lengthier student artifacts such as essays or interviews could provide more material for understanding and assessing intercultural sensitivity. Future studies could utilize the coding framework on more and other types of intercultural exercises in order to validate or improve the assessment framework.

Furthermore, although the study is based on a multisite ISL program involving students from different disciplines, the program was, in the end, a single course in one university. Future research could include multiple programs or institutions to triangulate the results and increase the applicability of the findings. Deriving data solely from the students' short-text descriptions was another limitation of the study.

Lastly, the researcher's subjectivity is inevitable in social research studies, particularly ones that require qualitative data analysis

(Roulston & Shelton, 2015). We acknowledge that bias is inevitable in this type of research, and we tried to mitigate it through various means, such as having a third person remove identifiers before coding, performing parallel coding, and involving multiple researchers in the research process.

Conclusion

In a special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* titled "A Global Perspective on Service-Learning and Community Engagement in Higher Education," Furco and Kent (2019) highlighted service-learning as a major practice that has advanced the integration of community engagement into schools and universities: "Service-learning is serving as the entry point for making community engagement a more central feature of the academic culture of higher education institutions in different corners of the world" (p. 1). In the past decade, service-learning received increased attention and resource allocation in institutions of higher education in Asia. In this light, this study about international service-learning (ISL) developed from an Asian context is timely, contributing a non-Western perspective to enrich our understanding and explore variations in international community-engaged learning (ICEL) across the globe. Therefore, the study is a contribution to the theme of "unveiling the benefits of ICEL" by providing evidence of how ISL impacts student development in intercultural sensitivity. Given the importance of global citizenship and intercultural effectiveness and higher education's role in cultivating them (UNESCO, 2014), ISL practice should be encouraged. At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all ISL programs achieve their desired impact, and simply sending students overseas does not guarantee intercultural learning (Prins & Webster, 2010). Our findings indicate that cultural differences between origin and host countries matter to some extent. There is thus an advantage in selecting locations with substantial cultural differences from students' backgrounds. However, not only the location but the amount and quality of interactions in the host communities are critical factors. ISL program design or arrangements could create environments conducive to intercultural immersion by, among other factors, fostering collaborative relationships between visitors and locals.

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