From volunteering to experiential learning: A service-learning project in tourism higher education

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Objectives | In recent years, there has been a growing adoption of more active, student-centered pedagogical strategies, which aim to develop skills beyond theoretical knowledge and better prepare future professionals. Motivated by a diverse range of factors, such as the need to bridge/fill in training gaps identified by the job market, or the difficulty to engage 21st century students, this adoption of innovative methodologies can also be framed by the lack of systematized data, which allows effective reflection and sharing of good practices in tourism higher education (THE). Innovative pedagogical methodologies are diverse and include service learning, which is understood as an approach that "combines the learning goals and the community service in such a way that it can simultaneously benefit both the students and the community" (Chau et al., 2023, p. 5). This approach is at the root of the Events Team project, a volunteer group that includes students from different courses and levels of higher education (vocational courses, bachelor's, and master's degrees) of the School of Hospitality and Tourism of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (ESHT-IPP), in Portugal. The project – Events Team – aims to support the organization of events promoted by and/or requested to the School, while providing students with the opportunity to engage in hands-on learning experiences. The research hereby presented aims to further contribute to the ongoing reflection on the affordances of service and experiential learning by sharing the insights and key results of the project, namely by exploring the students' motivations join and take part in the group's activities, as well as their perceptions on the contribution of the experience to the enrichment of their learning and their future employability.

Methodology | Regarding the methodological approach, the research was supported by an analysis of the literature covering the following topics: Experiential Learning, Service Learning, Volunteering, Extracurricular Activities, whenever possible, selecting published research applied within the scope of THE. Considering the specific features of the Events Team project, issues such as University Social Responsibility and Learning Environments were also discussed in the theoretical background. As for the study of students' perceptions, data collected through questionnaires was analyzed, once

students were required to answer a brief online survey about their motivations for joining the Events Team, as an integral part of the process of joining the Group. The data from those questionnaires was submitted to content analysis which allowed to identify the most relevant motives behind students' desire to be part of this initiative. The answer to these questionnaires also made it possible to draw the profile of the group's volunteer members, regarding the year and course of studies/ degree/ program they attend.

Main Results and Contributions | Overall, the students have demonstrated willingness to join this initiative, and since its inception, the number of volunteers and the scope of their training have expanded. The Events Team currently includes 25 students representing all the School courses and study cycles. In addition, the group includes teachers who support the different initiatives. As far as their motivations are concerned, most students refer that their love for organizing events and the desire to gain more practical experience are the most important reasons for joining the Team. Other motivations include the development of soft skills and the chance to engage with different individuals. Similarly, most students consider their participation as highly beneficial, both from the perspective of knowledge acquisition and from a more personal perspective, pointing out that the experience also contributes to their global motivation towards the School and their learning journey. Regarding the benefits for the community, here understood as the academic community, it can be seen that, in addition to the students directly involved in the project, a sense of pride and recognition for the work carried out has been developing, attested to by the smooth running of the events organized and the growing demand from the community outside ESHT.

On a different note, the project was recently awarded the prize for best educational project at the Hospitality Education Awards organized by Forum Turismo (National Tourism Organization). The award has contributed to the project's external visibility and to reinforcing the importance of this type of initiative in THE.

Limitations | The main limitations to this study are the number of participants which, from a statistical point of view, is still residual, as well as the difficulty of collecting information during and immediately after the events, given that the students are fully involved in the tasks assigned to them and are not, therefore, available to answer questions at that time. This could be useful for a longitudinal analysis of their perceptions. At the same time, the fact that no type of survey process was applied to the community (academic and external) restricts the analysis of the benefits resulting from this project, and only a few notes resulting from the authors' observation are presented.

Conclusions | Service-learning based projects can have a significant impact on the overall learning experience of students and are particularly adequate to THE. As a 'people' industry, tourism and event organizers are required to have diverse skills, both technical and personal, whose development

requires more practical, student-centered, experiential approaches, such as the ones pursued by the Events Team.

References

Chau, A. M. H., Chan, W. Y. C., & Chau, K. T. (2023). Service-learning tourism in Hong Kong. *Journal of Global Tourism Research*, *8*(1), 5-10.