

FINAL EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT

for the SLUSIK project

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by Peter Gušťařík, PDCS

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A. Executive Summary

This report reflects the final outcomes and impact, as well as challenges and lessons learnt from the Erasmus Plus co-funded project SLUSIK implemented between December 1, 2020 and November 30, 2022. This evaluation follows-up on the Interim External Evaluation which covered the period December 1, 2020 and November 30, 2021.

It tracks the record of this project in five areas of results defined at the outset:

1. **Research:** The State-of-the-Art Report has been successfully completed and provided an overview of the approaches to service learning used by project partners and beyond.
2. **Upscaling the model for service learning:** Led by the University of Limerick, the activities to produce the upscale model for service learning resulted in practically applicable and easy-to-understand model for schools to launch their service learning initiatives. The model captured well the dynamic in the relations and cross-sector cooperation among all major players in service learning – and brought innovation when compared to pre-existing publicly available models by combining the involvement of secondary schools, universities, role models, and community partners. With feedback from project partners during its development, and after some iterations, the model became ready for use in training for teachers and further elaboration in the Toolkit.
3. **Toolkit and training materials:** The key output of the project, the Toolkit for service learning produced in this project, has become the first of its kind in Europe which is aimed at secondary schools and is designed to be freely available. With the high ambition to be readily applicable in various countries and cultural settings, by schools of different sizes, and operating under different legislations according to different school year calendars, the project consortium, and particularly the lead partner for the work package, The University College of Teacher Education in Vienna, has managed to strike a delicate balance between making the Toolkit detailed enough to be ready for practice and flexible enough not to create unnecessary constraints. The Toolkit has been translated into languages of countries of project partner organizations and been used as a basis for training of teachers in pilot phase.
4. **Piloting:** To provide robust data for verification of the impact that this model of service learning, and by implication, service learning in general, has on social and civic competencies of secondary school students, and consequently on their social inclusion and decrease of drop-out rates, the pilot testing was coordinated by Out-of-the-Box

International and conducted by participating universities in collaboration with schools and partners. The piloting generated valid data for formative evaluation in January-February 2022 and summative evaluation of the model by May 2022.

5. Quality and Evaluation: The evaluation model developed under the leadership of the Matej Bel University, with desk research inputs from the University of Granada and comments from other project partners, has allowed from the early stages to collect both project monitoring data and evaluation data. The quasi-experimental design allows the project consortium to evaluate causality between pilot service learning projects as the intervention and the improvement in the level of social and civic competencies as the intended results. The evaluation model is designed to evaluate both quantitative indicators and qualitative data and provide robust results on the impact of service learning programme in secondary schools.

Overall, the project consortium achieved its objectives, produced the intended results and laid the ground for further public policy changes, established a community of practice, and has taken steps towards further promotion of the produced output and uptake of the toolkit in practice.

Service learning implemented in secondary schools within the project (using a combination of engagement of role models, involvement of secondary schools, and partnerships with community partners) has successfully showed its promise in contributing to social inclusion through reduction of intention to drop out of school.

The evaluation process aimed to critically assess the most relevant aspects of the project and determine its overall effectiveness and potential for sustainability. The data collection relied heavily on qualitative methods such as interviews and observations. The evaluation focused on four main criteria: relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

In terms of relevance, the project was found to provide evidence that service learning programs are capable of impacting the intention to drop out of school. SL programs proved to be a unique and valuable platform for students to engage in real-world problem-solving and civic engagement. The project outputs (especially the Toolkit) were found practically usable by schools considering introducing SL programs into their curricula.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the project were rated as rather high considering the ability of the project team to complete activities and deliver outputs despite significant restrictions due to the Covid19 pandemic.

The impact of the project was on several levels: (1) on those directly involved in project implementation including students, teachers, role models, community partners, and universities, then (2) on policymakers through the countries involved and EU-level multiplier events, and also (3) on practitioners outside the project partnership through project outputs such as the Community of Practice as particularly through the Toolkit which remains the only freely available toolkit for implementing SL programs in secondary schools in multiple European languages and based on a unified methodology.

Sustainability of the project was rated as medium high. There is motivation among educators and administrators to continue building SL programs and their clear relevance to the students and community. However, more financial and policy support is necessary to ensure long-term success, including incorporating SL into national legislations on school curricula. The expectation is that project partners are going to continue collaborating on research on SL and secondary-school practitioners of SL programs will be motivated to network and maintain their community of practice.

B. Methodology

This final evaluation report reflects on the results and challenges faced in the project as the project consortium proceeded to fulfil its goals, and to inspect the lessons learned along the way.

The final evaluation is based on the analysis of project outputs (State-of-the-Art Report, PLACE Model, the Toolkit, the evaluation report from pilot testing, the Policy Paper), and especially on the interviews with seven key stakeholders, and the results of project monitoring.

It was performed in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. It is meant to provide the donor agency, the project consortium members, and the wider network of stakeholders with evaluation of project outcomes and impact and describe also unintended results or challenges encountered in the project.

The major questions addressed by this evaluation are:

- 1. What are the key results of the project activities for the period from December 2021 to October 2022?**
- 2. What are the main lessons learnt from the project implementation in the period from December 2021 to October 2022?**
- 3. How has the internal evaluation model been successful in evaluating acquisition of social and civic competencies in secondary school students through service-learning in pilot testing?**

This report covers how the final project outcomes measure against the main evaluation criteria and offers observations and conclusions.

It draws upon the following sources of information:

- Analysis of the project working documents: project application, project monitoring data, project coordination meetings reports.
- Evaluation interviews with seven key stakeholders held in November 2022.
- Conversations with the lead of WP6 Alžbeta Brozmanová.

C. Findings

C3 Relevance

The project aimed to reduce the chances of social exclusion through inclusion of service learning in the curricula for children aged 12 to 16. The project sought to demonstrate that it is possible to develop and implement a theoretical model through rigorous analysis and evaluation.

The connection between social inclusion and the parameters used in the project pilot testing – civic and social competencies – proved to be a relevant starting point on which to design the research elements of the project.

To ensure relevance of the intervention across all European countries, substantial effort was made to design a service learning toolkit which was universal enough to be adaptable to different country contexts and yet specific enough to be practically usable.

To ensure relevance of the results, the project incorporated a research design that could differentiate it from other service learning programs – by including **collaboration between secondary schools, university-level mentors, and community partners** addressing the social needs of local communities.

To make the project results relevant Europe-wide, a consensus needed to be achieved among partners on the approximate length of service learning projects in individual countries and resources had to be dedicated to guarantee that research conditions of the experimental design are met. Adjustments were required in the light of the challenges faced by teachers involved in pilot testing during the Covid pandemic.

Overall, while **dropouts are a difficult issue to address**, this project showed that **service learning might be one of the effective preventive measures**. The overall efforts to reduce dropout rates need to take into consideration multiple factors such as teaching methods, school design, teacher training, and the quality of learning opportunities. Service learning might be one of the elements to ensure that students develop the **cognitive and emotional skills necessary to succeed in society and the workplace**, as well as keeping them away from potential risks. Such preventive impact is greater when service learning projects become part of primary and secondary education as **adolescent age is when values and pro-social habits can still be formed**.

Conclusion: Relevance of the project is rated as high.

C4 Effectiveness and efficiency

Before joining this project, the partners were conscious of the fact that to achieve visible change through service learning and for pilot projects to be impactful, the **pilot testing would need to be of certain duration, and with a certain number of hours of student involvement**. Such parameters would make the impact visible in the results, and might lead to a transformation or shift in the perception of service learning in some countries.

However, due to the Covid19 pandemic, **the project needed to be more flexible and not rigidly focus on the one idea of perfect service learning methodology**. It became important to be creative and adaptive to establish meaningful cross-sector collaboration between schools, universities, and community partners at the time of Covid restrictions. Overall, the **project partners had gathered substantial variety of experience and sufficient data** in running pilot projects which allowed **for conclusive observations** to be drawn from the research data.

Project activities timeline was disrupted slightly as was the case with many projects implemented during the Covid pandemic lockdowns and restrictions. Schools were harder to engage, they switched to online teaching, the access to community partners was restricted, and mentoring was more difficult due to misalignment of schedule between schools, universities and student role models. In some countries, groups of students were not able to be together physically and had restrictions when leaving the school building. Nevertheless, **the project was able to keep on time with most of its deliverables**.

The partners felt that under non-pandemic circumstances, the length of service learning should ideally be longer and more organic, allowing time for relationships to grow between students, community partners, and schools. Some also observed that the community partners may also need supplemental help from a service learning coordinator to improve their specific skill set to engage with secondary school students.

In Croatia, the pilot projects were implemented in cooperation between project partner University of Rijeka, and the Delta non-profit organization focusing on youth work, youth policy, and civic education. This collaboration turned out to be very productive as Delta had

substantial previous expertise in designing and running experiential and non-formal learning experiences in civic education.

All interviewed project partners emphasized **the preparation and reflection elements in service learning**. Some felt developing mentor plans for the student role models might have been beneficial too.

In terms of the pilot evaluation work package, the quasi-experimental design and methodology based on pre-test, intervention, and post-test proved fitting. In terms of the particular age group, the research and evaluation of the model as applied to the age group 12-16 were innovative in Europe, because similar initiatives have previously been employed only in the United States, or when in Europe, they involved mainly university students rather than high school or middle school students.

The **use of previously validated scales for measuring social and civic competencies proved effective**. The data-collection instruments were either fully validated or composed of items from validated questionnaires. The collected data was not fully comparable between countries as the experimental design of working with a control group could not be fully adopted in one of the project countries due to privacy regulations and internal reasons.

Conclusion: Effectiveness and efficiency is rated as rather high.

C5 Impact

All work packages contributed to project impact in different forms. While the pilot testing was subject to separate research model evaluation. Its impact on direct target groups (students and teachers) came through the training, the use of the service learning Toolkit, the implementation of pilot testing including reflections, and through subsequent sharing at multiplier events.

The experience of project partners from pilot testing confirmed that **service learning is most impactful when integrated into the school curriculum**. Such integration requires approval of headteachers/school principals and buy-in from teachers, as well as external support from universities experienced in implementing service learning. In this project, it took some effort to recruit and engage teachers and get them to make extra effort above

their already demanding tasks, but the data showed that teachers and students were convinced by the results once they went through the process.

The impact was assessed through both quantitative and qualitative research data. The data demonstrated that having **students connect with community partners to address the identified problems through joint solutions had a transformative effect**. Though the results were significant, caution should be taken in interpreting them due to potential mathematical, statistical, and methodological issues such as sample size. Further research would be needed to determine if changing certain parameters would lead to more robust results.

The project partners, experienced in service learning programs, were aware of the essential elements needed to make service learning a value-forming or even transformative experience. They incorporated those elements into the pilot testing or flexibly designed workarounds needed in the light of the pandemic restrictions applied at the time. **The elements were elaborated in the service learning model with selective extra focus in individual countries placed on reflection (reflexive thinking and self-analysis), context, or the experiential element**. The service learning projects varied in duration as they are likely to be varied in future practice when SL methodology is more widely adopted by schools.

The qualitative feedback showed that students reported positive shifts in their regular high school educational environments, and readiness to adopt new ways of doing things. Both the students and the teachers reported that the knowledge gained through service learning would stay with the students in the long term and open up new possibilities and perspectives for them.

The researchers suggested that more pilots would increase the reliability and validity of the findings and also allowed for better interpretation of the pre- and post-test decline in some parameters within the experimental group, which could potentially be attributed to a shift of self-perception of students from overestimating their competencies before their first service learning experience to assessing themselves more realistically after the experience.

The impact of the intervention as measured between the experimental and control groups was more pronounced than pre-test vs. post-test results within the experimental group. There was a significant improvement in the intention to drop out and less pronounced shifts in other evaluated parameters. Further interpretation needs to acknowledge the role of intervening variables which was not insignificant.

Qualitative data from presentations, case studies, and conversations with teachers also proved important for understanding the impact within the context of particular groups or communities.

The case studies provided more information and understanding of the impact, particularly because the project followed quasi-experimental design and pilot testing was conducted during the Covid pandemic crisis.

Another element of the project was setting up of community of practice to add value and engage practitioners in sharing of experience and ideas. **The series of online community of practice workshops attracted predominantly people directly involved in the project.** To involve greater network of community partners or teacher coordinators of service learning projects, the community of practice would need to get greater traction which requires continued leadership.

Conclusion: Impact of the project is rated as rather high.

C6 Sustainability

The sustainability of the project was enhanced through the country-level and the central EU-level advocacy activities which included multiplier events to make the case for support for service learning to country-level policy makers and EU-level officials.

The multiplier events confirmed interest in the project outputs (particularly the toolkit translated into national languages of project partner countries) as relevant and useful for local context and future implementation.

At the European level, with education being the competence of Member States, the main effort to gain support from policymakers was through the policy paper with recommendations and the project concluding event where EU policymakers participated as speakers and attendees.

Several consortium members consider it feasible to take the idea of upscaling service learning further, either going into more depth in the same direction or pivoting to different age groups or consider service learning with different parameters. It appears the prerequisite for such upscaling or pivoting will be greater awareness of project results

among secondary schools who will be the main beneficiaries and hence a strong driver of demand.

The sustainability of service learning in secondary schools will depend on the ability to **provide clear incentives for teachers to invest their effort and time in service learning**. Such extra effort will be considered through cost-benefit perspective and the results must outweigh the cost. To create the conditions for this to happen, it is necessary to **further showcase the potential impact of SL programs**. In some countries, new legislation will also need to be passed to consider service learning part of the formal curriculum in terms of teacher workload.

As an additional and important element to strengthen sustainability of the project idea is the plan of project consortium partners to publish two research papers on project research results.

Conclusion: Sustainability of the project is rated as medium high.

D. Evaluation Matrix for final evaluation to complete the interim evaluation

Evaluation sub/questions	Indicators	Key data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
<u>Overall</u>				
1. What are the key results of the project activities for the period from December 2021 to October 2022?				
<i>Proposed sub-questions</i>				
1.1 How do the results compare to original project indicators?	Examples of outcomes	Lead agency Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
1.2 What have been the over-achievements/under-achievements in the second half of the projects and what factors contributed to them?	Examples of over-achievements/under-achievements	Lead agency Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
2. What are the main lessons learnt from the project implementation in the period from December 2021 to October 2022?				
<i>Proposed sub-questions</i>				
None	Reflections from project lead and partners	Lead agency Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis

Evaluation sub/questions	Indicators	Key data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
3. How has the internal evaluation model been successful in evaluating acquisition of social and civic competencies in secondary school students through service-learning in pilot testing?				
<i>Proposed sub-questions</i>				
none	Input from the lead of the evaluation and monitoring work package	Project partner organization	Interview Study of internal evaluation data	Qualitative analysis
<u>Relevance</u>				
1. How have pilot testing, community of practice, and advocacy work been relevant to achieving the project goals?				
<i>Proposed sub-questions</i>				
1.1. How has the pilot testing helped yield relevant data to help evaluate the SL model in terms of project objectives?	Internal evaluation of data from pilot testing	Lead agency Project partners Internal evaluation data	Interviews Online survey	Qualitative analysis
1.2. How has country-level and EU-level advocacy been relevant in affecting greater acceptance of SL model at the policy level?	Contacts of project partners with policymakers and examples of policy updates/modifications	Lead agency Project partners Project activity reports	Interviews Online survey	Qualitative analysis

Evaluation sub/questions	Indicators	Key data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
1.3. What were the ways that community of practice turned out to be relevant in making the project successful? What have been the challenges related to community of practice?	Data on activity and interaction of community practitioners	Members of the community of practice	Online survey	Quantitative analysis
<u>Effectiveness</u>				
1. In what ways have pilot testing, community of practice, and advocacy activities been effective in achieving the project goals?				
<i>Proposed sub-questions</i>				
1.1. In what aspects has the pilot testing been effective in its objectives? What were the obstacles to optimal effectiveness, if any?	Results of internal evaluation on pilot testing	Project partner organization	Study of internal evaluation data	Qualitative analysis
1.2. What were the more effective and the less effective advocacy activities in terms of influencing policymaking	Examples of changes achieved at policy-level, in participating countries and EU-wide	Lead agency Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis

Evaluation sub/questions	Indicators	Key data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
decisions regarding SL?				
1.3. How has the community of practice developed against the original plan/expectations? In what ways has it been more/less effective than anticipated?	Data and metrics related to community of practice (interactions/sharing and level of involvement of member of the community of practice)	Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
2. What factors (internal/external) have made the results of pilot testing, community of practice, and advocacy possible?				
<u>Proposed sub-questions</u>				
2.1. What were the major factors influencing the achievement or non-achievement of the planned results?	List of factors	Lead agency Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
2.2. What were the limiting factors and how have they been addressed?	List of limiting factors	Lead agency Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
<u>Impact</u>				
1. What has been the impact of project on various stakeholders?				
<u>Proposed sub-questions</u>				

Evaluation sub/questions	Indicators	Key data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
1.1 What impact has project had on primary target group of secondary school students?	Examples of impact Data on impact from internal evaluation	Project partners Data collected for internal evaluation	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
1.2 What impact has project had on secondary school teachers?	Examples of impact Data on impact from internal evaluation	Project partners Data collected for internal evaluation	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
1.3 What impact has project had on role models?	Examples of impact Data on impact from internal evaluation	Project partners Data collected for internal evaluation	Interviews	Qualitative analysis
<u>Sustainability</u>				
1. What is the sustainability of project results in the field of social learning?				
<i>Proposed sub-questions</i>				
1.1 Which project achievements have produced changes likely to sustain in short-term, mid-term, long-term?	Examples of sustainable changes	Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis

Evaluation sub/questions	Indicators	Key data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
1.2 What follow-up would still be required/recommended to ensure greater sustainability? At which levels?	Examples of follow-up activities/projects	Project partners	Interviews	Qualitative analysis

E. List of respondents for the final evaluation to complete the interim evaluation

Online interviews:

Gabriella Civico

P1 - Centre for European Volunteering

Email: gabriella.civico@cev.be

Marko Paunovic

P2 - Out of the Box

Email: marko@outofthebox-international.org

Anne Warren-Perkinson

P4 - University of Limerick

Email: Anne.Warren-Perkinson@ul.ie

Jose Luis Arco-Tirado

P5 - University of Granada

Email: jarco@ugr.es

Rolf Laven

P6 - The University College of Teacher Education in Vienna

Email: rolf.laven@phwien.ac.at

Bojana Culum

P3 - University of Rijeka

Email: bojana.culum@ffri.uniri.hr

Maša Cek

Delta - cooperating partner organization of P3 – University of Rijeka

Email: masa.cek@udruga-delta.hr

Alzbeta Brozmanova-Gregorova

P7 - Matej Bel University

Email: alzbeta.gregorova@umb.sk

Observation and face-to-face interviews:

Participants attending the final project multiplier event in Brussels on November 17, 2022.



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