Chapter 2 Community Service Learning: Engaging Social Science Students

Ghent University

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2.1 Introduction

Community engagement of students in (higher) education is a 'hot topic'. An awareness has emerged that educational institutions and practices cannot see themselves as detached from society. At all levels, including the OECD[6], there is now an acknowledgement that educators should not merely transfer and assess academic and cognitive competencies in learners. Rather, a critical sense of citizenship and professional competencies are needed to enable young people to function in a quickly evolving, interconnected, and super-diverse global society. This renewed focus on this aspect of its mission is particularly relevant for the higher education sector, where the forces of neoliberalism have also affected the world of learning and teaching. For instance, consumerist approaches to university education are increasingly prevalent amongst students, leading to corresponding expectations about teaching (Wong and Chu, 2019). Similarly, the assessment of research output encourages lecturers to opt for merely safe, strategic approaches to teaching in which risks are avoided, a compliant mode of teaching identified as 'vanilla teaching' (Harland and Wald, 2018). These structural challenges cannot be sufficiently addressed by advocating different pedagogies alone. However, as a counterweight, we would like to share our experience with Community Service Learning (CSL) as a form of Engaged Learning which radically re-centres notions of citizenship, community involvement, and an emancipatory re-thinking of pedagogy. By sharing our pedagogy and a number of findings, we hope to inspire colleagues.

2.1.1 CSL in the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences

2.1.1.1 Development

The Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University is one of the pioneers of CSL in the Flemish (Belgian) HE landscape. Unlike

[6] https://www.oecd.org/pisa/innovation/global-competence/

their counterparts in the USA, Flemish universities do not have a tradition of credit-bearing community engagement. This is also the case for our faculty, which offers study programmes in Communication Sciences, Political Sciences, and Sociology at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It was only in the academic year 2015-16 that CSL was formally introduced in a study programme, namely in the Master's programme of Sociology. A major impetus was given through the strategic plan of Ghent University (2012-16) and it served as a pilot of Ghent University as part of the Erasmus+ project Europe Engage.[7] In the subsequent years, CSL was gradually scaled up throughout the faculty and it is now offered as an elective module in all Master's programmes taught at the faculty.

As will be explained in the subsequent sections, the philosophy and practical approach to Engaged Learning, as enacted in our CSL modules, encourages our students to expand and critically apply their existing academic knowledge of society and social scientific research to a real, problem-based context at either a societal organisation or a public organisation. This specific approach has its roots in an understanding of citizenship education, which does not shy away from acknowledging that pedagogical choices about student engagement in (higher) education are inevitably entwined with questions about justice and wider, political choices. Therefore, it is necessary to first consider these 'politics of citizenship education'.

2.1.1.2 CSL and the politics of citizenship education

A central point of departure of Engaged Learning in HE should be that citizenship education is not a neutral or strictly formal pedagogic practice. Instead, it is an inherently political activity that embodies a "spectrum of ideas about what good citizenship *is* and what good citizens *do*" (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, p.237 - emphasis in original). Given that a central aim of Engaged Learning is to attain

[7] https://www.eoslhe.eu/europe-engage/

competencies in students that relate to their participation as citizens in democratic societies, the design of civic education courses unavoidably involves active deliberation and choice among educators about the kind of citizens that are needed to achieve democratic ideals. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) therefore rightly speak of a 'politics of educating for democracy' in which different conceptions of citizenship can be embraced, with different learning outcomes and political consequences as a result. Based on an empirical study of service-learning programmes in the US, these authors delineated three dominant visions on citizenship as reflected in the diverse practices observed: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. Before we elaborate on the three visions, we must emphasise that the context of HE (and the role of government therein) significantly differs between the US and Belgium/Europe, which means we must be careful when interpreting and transferring findings. However, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) do provide meaningful angles to look at contrasting conceptions of citizenship education.

First, the *personally responsible citizen* reflects a more liberal and privatised conception of citizenship. This kind of citizen acts individually by taking personal responsibility in one's own neighbourhood and community (e.g. picking up litter, giving blood, volunteering to help those in need). It is a duty-based conception of citizenship, focused on obeying laws, paying taxes, and being economically active. According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), programmes that aim to nurture personally responsible citizens build on the core assumption that "to solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community" (p.240). Pedagogic practices will focus on building civic virtues such as honesty, integrity, compassion, self-discipline, and hard work.

Second, the *participatory citizen* mirrors republican ideals of good citizenship in terms of active participation in civil society and politics

at the local, regional, or national level. Core assumptions underlying this type of civic education are that "to solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures" (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, p.240). Educational programmes aimed at developing participatory citizens consequently focus on teaching civic knowledge and civic skills necessary for active participation in community organisations and for organising community initiatives. This includes knowledge of how governments and organisations work, how to plan and mobilise for collective action, and developing cooperative and leadership skills (e.g. how to run a meeting).

Third, the *justice-oriented citizen* is inspired by more radical-democratic conceptions of citizenship aimed at disrupting the status quo and seeking fundamental social change. The central conviction of justice-oriented educators is that "to solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, p.240). Students, therefore, need to be trained to critically analyse the structural root causes of social problems and build competencies to effect social change. Rather than the charity and volunteering of the personally responsible citizen, and the participatory citizen's community organising efforts alleviating existing social needs, the justice-oriented citizen will seek involvement in social movements aiming for systemic, justice-oriented change.

Given the complexity of the present-day challenges (climate change, sustainability, structural inequalities, migration …), it is logical that the approach which underpins our CSL modules should gravitate toward the third conception. This is particularly the case for Master's students in the social sciences. For this reason, partnerships were sought and developed with those organisations willing and able to offer these

educational opportunities to our students, such as NGOs or public authorities (e.g. city council departments).

2.2 Overview of the Chosen Initiative

Our CSL activities are fully embedded in modules at the Master's level. These modules are the following:

- **Seminar Political Sociology: Community Service Learning** (5 ECTS; Master Sociology -major Political Sociology)
- **Seminar on Social Demography and Health Sociology** (5 ECTS; Master Sociology -major Health and Social Demography)
- **Community Service Learning: Seminar Political Sciences** (7 ECTS; elective module in the Master Political Sciences, the Master EU Studies and Master Conflict and Development)
- **Strategic Communication Challenges** (7 ECTS; Master in Communication Science -main subject Communication Management)
- **Community Service Learning: Citizenship in a Digital Society** (7 ECTS; elective module in all Master's programmes in Communication Science)

The first CSL module in our faculty was the 'Seminar Political Sociology', which was introduced in the academic year 2015-16. The following year, it was joined by a second sociology module: 'Seminar on Social Demography and Health Sociology'. In 2017, CSL was introduced to students in Political Sciences and EU Studies: 'Community Service Learning: Seminar Political Sciences'. From 2022 onwards, this module will also be included in the Master's programme in Conflict and Development. Finally, since 2019, communication science students have been given the opportunity to participate in CSL, initially only through a designated track of the existing module 'Strategic Communication Challenges'. In 2021, a separate module with an exclusive CSL-focus was set up, namely 'Community Service Learning: Citizenship in a Digital Society'. The two sociology modules

run during a single term, the other modules are spread out across the whole academic year. Despite differences in terms of academic background, the approach and structure of all CSL modules offered within the faculty remain analogous.

2.2.1 Structure of the CSL-modules

Since their inception, the CSL modules at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University have consisted of three major components, which all CSL students participate in throughout the year or the term: an '*academic component*', a '*practical-professional component*', and a '*reflective component*'. The three components run concurrently throughout the year or the term. Although the components interact, each component fulfils a specific function within the pedagogic approach of our CSL modules.

1. **The academic component** consists of a limited number of plenary sessions, led or coordinated by the lecturer. These sessions focus on preparing the master's students for their practical engagement in the field, regarding their knowledge and skills specific to their course. The topics, which are discussed in these sessions or lectures may include, for instance, citizenship and citizenship education, structure and governance of the not-for-profit sector and/or local authorities, decision-making, and communication strategies in organisations. In addition, a small number of plenary response seminars are organised. In this way, these lectures and seminars aim to stimulate students to apply their previously acquired forms of social scientific knowledge and specific research skills. Students are thus encouraged to consult and synthesise those forms of academic research relevant to the needs of the organisation and their chosen project.
2. **The practical-professional component** consists of the students' actual interaction *with* and *for* a societal or public organisation. After the allocation of students (either as individuals or as a small team) to an organisation, the students make the first appointment

with the organisation in which the details of the assignment and its expected 'deliverables' or end product are discussed and agreed upon. Subsequently, under normal circumstances, 'field work' takes place (9-10 weeks). During this time the students spend 40 hours (half a day per week) at the organisation itself. When this is not possible, alternative forms of interaction are scheduled (e.g. weekly video calls between the organisation and the student).

The time spent there is employed to immerse oneself in the ways of working of the specific organisation. The main goal, however, remains to use this time to address the assignment through a form of research. After a comprehensive review of the relevant social scientific literature, quantitative (e.g. surveys) or qualitative data (e.g. interviews) are collected and analysed. Finally, at the end of the term or year, students give a formal presentation of their 'end product', a document that addresses the given assignment and in which (policy) advice is given to the organisation. This presentation is also attended by the lecturer.

3. **The reflective component** links the academic and practical components of the module. Throughout the year or the term, the reflective component aims to stimulate a sense of questioning amongst the students. This happens through several reflection sessions. In these sessions, a formal reflection model is used, such as Korthagen's reflection cycle (Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005). After an introductory session on reflection, students are asked to reflect on specific topics. How do they expect to apply their personal skills, values, and attitudes to their CSL project? What does 'being a citizen' mean to them, and why? How is the cooperation with the organisation going? Which problems do they encounter with their assignment and/or in their cooperation with the organisation?

At the end of the module, a concluding reflection session aims to probe into the changes in the student's attitudes by asking them to consider how their CSL-experience strengthened their personal vision on

citizenship. Additionally, they are challenged to consider how and whether this experience changed their thinking about the relevance of their discipline. On average, a student takes part in three reflection sessions. These sessions take the form of student-led teaching, as they are coordinated by the teacher training students in the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences. Similar to the two other components, the reflective component is also assessed. This happens utilising submitted documents (such as a reflection essay) and by participation in the sessions.

Table 1 illustrates the practical roadmap of our CSL trajectories for one of our CSL-modules, namely the *'Seminar Political Sociology: Community Service Learning*', as it was organised during the first term of the academic year 2020-21. Although some details differ between the different CSL modules, it gives a good overview of the organisation of the modules' three-fold composition and the types of activities students engage in throughout the term or the year.

Week	Date	Activity or deadline	Location
WEEK 1	22 Sept	Introduction to the course, introductory lesson on citizenship and participation	On campus
	22 Sept	Presentation of available CSL-projects	On campus
	25 Sept	Deadline to indicate student preference for a project	/
WEEK 2	28 Sept	Allocation of projects to student/small teams	/
	29 Sept	Citizenship Education: Theory and Practice	On campus
	By appointment	Students visit the organisation in their teams to develop their focus and planning	At the organisation
WEEK 3	06 Oct	Lesson: sociology of the not-for-profit sector and volunteering. *Feedback about the focus of the task and a 'literature brainstorm'*	On campus

WEEK 4	By appointment	Start field work: **9 participation sessions of 3 hours each** (continues until week 12)	At the organisation
	13 Oct	**Lesson on reflection** by teacher training students and presentation of the projects by the CSL-students	On campus
	16 Oct	Deadline to submit planning (includes participation planning @the organisation): 1 to 2 pages	/
WEEK 5	20 Oct	Feedback on planning + *response seminar 1*	On campus
WEEK 6	27 Oct	**Reflection session** coached by teacher training students	On campus
WEEK 9	17 Nov	**Reflection session** coached by teacher training students + response seminar 2	On campus
WEEK 12	08 Dec	**Reflection session** coached by teacher training students	On campus
	11 Dec	Deadline submission of final report (draft)	/
WEEK 13	By appointment	Feedback on the final report	
Examination period	By appointment	Presentation of the final report	At the organisation
Examination period	22 Jan	Definitive version of the final report; hand over to the organisation	/

Table 1: Term planning 'Seminar Political Sociology: Community Service Learning'

2.2.2 How the community is matched with the initiative

The matching of the organisations with the students is a two-level process. The first level of the matching process involves the selection of organisations. In many cases, these organisations (and their contacts) had cooperated in past projects or research, conducted by lecturers or their research groups. Through these informal networks, a still expanding pool of organisations has emerged. These are either

NGOs or governmental organisations (including city council departments). To enable short feedback loops and to reduce financial and environmental transport costs, most organisations are either based in Ghent or are easily accessible by train (e.g. Brussels).

The second level of matching involves the allocation of students to specific organisations and projects. First, at the start of each CSL module, organisations present themselves, their aims, and a specific research question, which they would like to see addressed. This may take the form of short 'live' on-campus presentations by a staff member of the organisation or it may happen via the upload of info sheets or short video-'pitches' via the University's electronic learning environment. Afterwards, students are given a short period to indicate and motivate which project they would preferably like to engage with.

At present, a university-wide electronic 'stakeholder platform' to match organisations, potential CSL projects, and university departments is under development. This will widen the choice, enhance the matching process, and alleviate some of the administrative workload.

2.2.3 How the initiative is resourced

Currently, the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences does not receive any separate funding for the organisation of its CSL modules.[8] In terms of staffing resources, the major cost is, not surprisingly, the time spent organising the whole module, teaching and assessing the students, and liaising with organisations throughout the whole process. As the presentations of the 'end product' in organisations are usually attended by the lecturers, time may also be spent travelling to different sites. All these aspects make the running of CSL modules a

[8] However, some additional costs are covered by the Faculty. For instance, from the academic year 2020-21 onwards, the faculty offers a "Community Service-Learning award" (worth 250 euros). This annual award goes to those students who have delivered the best and most valued CSL end product.

particularly labour-intensive undertaking, even in comparison to other forms of experiential learning, such as internships or field exercises. Fortunately, a significant part of the teaching workload is taken up by teaching assistants and doctoral students within the faculty departments.

2.2.4 Outputs of the initiative

The principal outputs of the CSL projects are the end products, which students produce *with* and *for* the organisations in response to their research question. Subject to an iterative process of negotiation in which the initial question may be further delineated, the question is then addressed using a literature review and a section of empirical research (qualitative or quantitative). Generally, the outcome is a report (of approximately 30 pages) that not only addresses these dimensions, but also contains several concrete recommendations for the organisation.

In several cases, the end product may take the form of a practical tool, such as a validated questionnaire, a roadmap, a communication plan, and/or campaign or a self-evaluation instrument, to name just a few. To give an indication of the type of research topics which are addressed in these reports, a small number of (past) projects are listed below.

Projects in the field of Political Sciences:

- The development of a questionnaire to evaluate a community currency for grassroots organisations from a user's perspective
- Critical evaluation of a city council district policy on 'citizen participation' initiatives
- An analysis of the outreach strategy of Europe Direct toward local authorities in East-Flanders
- The development of a practical checklist on gender intersectionality, to be used by a Belgian development NGO in the Philippines

Projects in the field of Sociology:

- Engaging refugees in voluntary work: an analysis of limitations and possible incentives
- Retention strategies for a walk-in centre for young people's psychological well-being
- The development of an evaluation instrument to assess and effectively address 'discriminatory remarks'
- An educational game to learn about barriers to initiatives that aim to tackle loneliness

Projects in the field of Communication Sciences:

- Recommendations concerning international expansion plans for a patient-centred, informative television channel
- The development of a health calendar as a communication tool for vulnerable groups
- Analysis of prejudice toward vegan lifestyles and possible strategies to address these forms of prejudice

2.2.5 How the initiative was evaluated

From its inception onwards, the CSL projects in our faculty have been positively received. Various forms of informal feedback from both students and partner organisations in the community principally pointed toward positive learning experiences and project outcomes. In addition, the formal student evaluations of teaching, as coordinated by the central education office at Ghent University, had been decidedly positive in terms of the experienced learning effects.

However, given the specific scope, it was necessary to explore a number of issues more in-depth. What are the principal learning outcomes of a CSL module? How do these learning outcomes differ from project-based work in 'regular' academic modules? From a practical perspective, how can the CSL experience be improved? What do the organisations think? And, more importantly, is our way of

organising CSL projects compatible with the type of Engaged Learning with which we would like to associate ourselves? To address these questions, a qualitative evaluation was rolled out. During the second half of 2019, all students who had been up to then involved in our CSL modules were contacted with a request to participate in this evaluation using an in-depth interview. This evaluation thus covered the CSL experiences of four different academic years. In addition, the organisations were also interviewed.

In total, 29 interviews were conducted:

- Fourteen individual interviews were conducted with (former) students from different cohorts (sometimes in the original configuration of the small student teams);
- Twelve interviews were conducted with employees from organisations where students had worked on their CSL projects; and
- Three interviews were conducted with former teacher training students who had facilitated the reflection sessions.

The range of respondents implies that, in some cases, past CSL projects were subjected to complementary, critical perspectives: the views of former students, the organisational views, and the views of the students who facilitated the reflection sessions, enabling a triangulation of perspectives. To ensure a sense of critical distance and to guarantee full openness by all interviewees, the interviews were conducted by a member of staff from the faculty who had not been involved in the organisation of a CSL module or the assessment of (former) students.

2.3 Engagement with Participants

2.3.1 Students

The learning effects in relation to their CSL projects as reported by the interviewed students tended to cover various, yet entwined

dimensions. For analytical reasons, we present them here in two separate categories. The first category of 'generic competencies' is undoubtedly less specific to the nature of our CSL projects. Therefore, these will be reported relatively briefly in the first sub-section. The second section will discuss, more extensively, the most relevant learning outcomes of our students, namely an increased sense of efficacy.

2.3.1.1 Generic competencies and learning gains

Not surprisingly, many of the reported learning gains tend to echo those of other forms of project-based learning in the 'real world', such as internships. For instance, the students reported that writing policy recommendations for an organisation, a type of writing they did not have any prior experience with, was a major learning gain. In addition, the 'real-life' application of previously acquired research skills (qualitative or quantitative) in an authentic problem-based setting often emerged as a highly positive learning effect from the CSL experience. Finally, some students reported that their work for a local city council or in a community organisation enabled them to reflect on the types of employment they would seek when entering the labour market.

2.3.1.2 Sense of efficacy

In general, students reported that the project enabled them to discover and enhance their sense of 'self-efficacy'. Having to plan and conduct a research project for a non-academic partner within a set timeframe and, particularly, within an unfamiliar context was reported as challenging. Many interviewed students reported that it was this difficulty that required them to connect to and develop their sense of self-efficacy. This was certainly reinforced by the students' reported sense of unfamiliarity, which encompassed a myriad of dimensions: the practical ways of working for organisations, the perceived 'seriousness' of some organisations (as opposed to the informal

characteristics of interaction at the University campus), and, at times, their perceived bureaucratic character were mentioned. However, it is principally the difficulty of the task and, quite often, the unfamiliarity with the exact nature of the domain which was reported as a catalyst for growth. Sometimes, students reported that they had felt a significant sense of 'doubt' at the start of the project.

Take, for instance, the account of a sociology student, whose CSL project involved the programme evaluation of a mental health care initiative, which had been coordinated and funded by a city council department. This initiative, which was about self-care education for citizens, needed an 'expert gaze' to assess its relevance and success criteria. The student was given the brief to interview a set number (8) of nationally known mental health experts on the merits of this local initiative and report back on their assessment to the city council department. In her own words, the immersion in a very complex field that felt 'unknown' was a real catalyst:

> *I had to immerse myself into the project, because you are thrown into it. You have to conduct a policy evaluation but you have really not been involved in the running of the project. So you have to get to know it really, really well before you can ask questions about it. Then, afterwards, my data, I coded these and I wrote a policy evaluation document with recommendations for future practice. And then I gave a presentation for that department, with its team leader and a few other people present. They were very happy'. And getting to know a new sector very quickly, that was, I felt, something awesome, how fast that can go. Because I only knew so little about the health care sector, we had not had that much information about that, mainly theory in some university modules. And when you arrive 'there', that was really much more practical. And the health care sector is so complex and yet, at the end, one started to grasp how it works. And that's what they told me: 'ah, Ingrid, were you acquainted with this sector before'. And I said: 'very little'. And then they told me that it was awesome that I had got to know the sector in such a short period of time. Well, that's how one gets confidence in oneself, to know that*

> *you can do that fast.* (Interview with Ingrid, Seminar on Social Demography and Health Sociology)[9]

Many other interviewees also reflected in highly positive ways about the iterative nature of their CSL project. Intellectual and planning-related uncertainties often contributed to a major learning effect: the growth of internal efficacy.

However, it is our understanding that projects generating individual success experiences should not obfuscate the wider view of the political, a risk Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have warned against. In a follow-up publication, they rightly argue that "students need to consider issues of external efficacy - to whom and in what contexts do government and other institutions respond. Attention to politics and to the ways institutions respond to or create social problems is essential" (Kahne and Westheimer, 2006, p.294). For a number of students, the accounts in which they expounded on their sense of growth of internal efficacy also contained a reflection on this sense of external efficacy. For instance, some students expressed a sense of disjointedness between, on the one hand, the structural perspectives offered by their degree in political sciences and, on the other hand, the project-based practices of a certain NGO. Whereas the degree programme was felt to encourage a critical, structural understanding of development in the Global South, the activities of this particular NGO were perceived by the student as being informed by 'good intentions', but nonetheless decontextualised and lacking in structure. Whilst not all students openly reported such a sense of disjointedness, a number of them certainly expressed the view that their CSL experience had made them reflect on the actual limits of external efficacy. Take, for instance, the account of a student who had conducted a successful research project at an organisation involved in the training and coordination of volunteers in health care:

[9] The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms. All interviews were originally conducted in the Dutch language.

> *The CSL experience taught me to look at the world of volunteering in a more critical manner … This in spite of the fact that I used to be a volunteer myself in the field of youth work, helping young people to learn things, mean something to them …*
> *And when I now look back on that, particularly when you're involved in volunteering coordination in residential care… that's all ok, but there are also the ideological issues and a certain engagement…*
> *There's also the whole idea of getting more volunteers in health care, it's linked to the notion of the austerity state, that it's also a means to cut costs in care. And that is the effect that it had on me in terms of citizenship, learning to look at things in a more critical way, even those things which had become dear to oneself through past experience. Learning to appreciate that social engagement is also embedded in greater social logics, rationalities.* (Interview with John, Seminar Political Sociology)

Here, the CSL project led to a reflection on the wider rationalities in which the organisation's activities are implicitly embedded, clearly going *beyond* a perspective that focuses on personal responsibility.
It is obvious that a delicate balance needs to be guarded between, on the one hand, enabling efficacious project assignments that permit students to experience success and increase their internal efficacy, and, on the other hand, allow for authentic experiences of real-world barriers to change. The latter aspect, though, will raise students' awareness of limited external efficacy and may result in experiences that are somewhat frustrating or disappointing. From several student accounts, it appears that our approach to CSL has achieved this delicate pedagogical balance.

2.3.2 Community

In the interviews, the people from the organisations praised the opportunity to learn from the students' work. Mostly, appreciation was expressed for the students' methodological insights and expertise. This was felt to be an important form of added value, as some interviewed people from organisations explained that they either

lacked the time or the expertise to conduct social scientific research *in* or *for* their organisation. As a form of co-creation, the combination of different types of experience that the students brought into the organisation and the local 'field knowledge' of the organisation was felt to have worked well. This was particularly the case where students conducted forms of empirical research. The CSL-formula was appreciated as a fruitful way of adding 'research expertise' to a specific issue or concern of the organisation. Nevertheless, some frustration was expressed. Because of the relatively short period the students could spend at an organisation (on average, 3-4 hours per week during nine weeks), the data which students could either collect or analyse during the allocated time period remained limited. In a number of cases, the end report which students produced was appreciated as an inspirational pilot study, yet deemed to be somehow limited in terms of its practical use, because any policy recommendations were inevitably based on a small body of empirical work.

In general, the commitment of individual students was positively appraised. Although the interviews did not explicitly examine the capacities of individual students, praise was often given for their maturity, the capacity for independent work, flexibility, and a committed attitude.

2.4 Added Value for Impact

2.4.1 What worked well and what didn't?

From our findings, it appears that our approach to Engaged Learning achieves a good pedagogic balance. The reported learning outcomes by the students cover a wide range of competencies. In addition, as reported, the realistic character and the project-based nature of the CSL modules lead to a sense of growth of 'efficacy' in students. From the perspective of the organisations, our specific approach to CSL is highly appreciated. This is supported by the established nature of the partnerships and the fact that every year various organisations

approach us with an explicit request to have our students address a specific research question.

However, there are still a number of challenges. For a start, the one-year master's programmes at our faculty have a high workload: in addition to various (compulsory) modules, students are required to write a master's dissertation, mostly based on empirical research. This makes it hard to allocate more credits and time to the CSL-modules without a substantial programme reform. Inevitably, this implies that the deliverable outputs for the organisation have limitations in terms of scope and length. Although the organisations are fully aware of these limitations, a number of them have suggested that longer and more substantial CSL-trajectories would be a desirable option.

A second challenge is linked to the organisation of our modules. At present, students in the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences take up separate CSL modules, depending on their master's programme. As yet, there is relatively little interaction between the CSL students from our different master's programmes. The organisation of a single overarching 'CSL module', available to *all* of our students at the master's level would enable the organisation of interdisciplinary teams (e.g. a political science student and a sociology student) conducting research for an organisation. This would, in the future, facilitate the organisation of cross-faculty CSL projects (e.g. CSL teams consisting of law students and social science students). Given the interdisciplinary nature of the 'real world', such a mode of organising CSL projects would be a real enhancement.

2.4.2 Facilitating factors

There are various factors that facilitate the beneficial outcomes of CSL modules, such as staffing support within the University departments. Without the engaged support of the teaching assistants, it is unlikely that the lecturers would have been able to sustain the organisation and supervision of the CSL modules. From the interviews, a number of

factors emerged, of which we will discuss the two most significant ones.

The first major factor is student intake. Nearly all interviewed students explicitly described their decision to opt for a CSL module in terms of an intrinsic interest in the field. Sometimes, this interest was principally explained in intellectual terms. For instance, a student decided to opt for a CSL-project in the field of reproductive medicine because of a personal interest in debates surrounding gender and sexuality. Others had been active for many years in volunteering. By taking up a CSL-module, they wanted to supplement their past personal engagement with a more analytical perspective. Conversely, merely pragmatic or purely instrumental motives, such as wanting to brush up one's CV, rarely emerged. The strong commitment of the students was corroborated in the interviews with the staff from organisations and in their evaluations. Some employees from organisations indicated that this was due to a self-selection effect, suggesting that our approach to CSL -even in the hypothetical scenario of unlimited staffing and resources- should not be recommended to every master's student. Intrinsic interest and engagement are pivotal to avoid the risk of instrumentalisation of Engaged Learning in HE. A final observation regarding the student dimension is that those students who conducted their CSL project in a small team (as opposed to individual projects) strongly valued this option, as it allowed them to collect or analyse more data and produce a much more substantial 'end product' for the organisation.

A second facilitating factor is the established links between the University and the community organisations. From the accounts of the interviewed students and people at the organisations, the open lines of communication between the University and the contacts at the organisation were definitely seen as essential. With a handful of organisations, there are continuing partnerships that have existed since the start of CSL in our faculty. An additional advantage is that the contacts in organisations are thus fully familiar with the CSL-concept,

its goals and modes of assessment. This makes the coordination easier and less time-consuming, also for the lecturers. Nonetheless, these established links do not prevent that every year, additional CSL partnerships with different organisations are set up.

2.4.3 Broader societal impact

The societal impact is, in a sense, both extensive *and* limited. On the one hand, as a form of Engaged Learning, societal impact is there, as our CSL-modules continue to challenge different cohorts of motivated students to consider issues pertaining to social justice, in close interaction with societal organisations. Whereas the long-term effects for all actors may be extremely difficult to assess, our CSL programmes have nonetheless forged stronger links between academia and the 'real world'.

On the other hand, the tangible, wider societal impact is still limited, as the number of students and projects is relatively small. Because of their scale, the outcomes of the CSL-projects conducted by our students can only shed light on a highly specific, sometimes micro-level, aspect of the ways of working of an organisation. The wider impact for the organisations depends on whether and how the student research and recommendations for practice can be taken into consideration, followed up, and implemented. Here, organisational dynamics, budgetary constraints, staffing, and other dimensions internal to the organisation play an important role in the follow-up of the students' work. Thus far, there has been no longitudinal analysis of how and whether organisations actually make use of the growing body of student research which was conducted at their request. Nonetheless, there is some evidence of the actual take-up of the outcomes of students' work. For instance, some organisations are

currently making use of specific tools or instruments, which were developed or refined during CSL-projects.[10]

2.5 Conclusions

Since 2015, CSL has established itself as a pedagogic approach of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University. In our CSL modules, motivated master's students critically apply their research expertise to a specific problem or challenge, which organisations (societal or public organisations) have, in close dialogue with the organisations themselves. Feedback and an extensive qualitative evaluation reveal a positive appreciation by the various actors involved.

In our view, these positive outcomes are precisely made possible by a specific conception of CSL, which encourages students to critically consider the structural, root questions of social (in) justice and present-day societal challenges. This conception entails a number of concrete, strategic-pedagogic choices, particularly concerning student intake (master's level and intrinsic motivation), the balance and interaction between the three components of a CSL-project (academic, practical-professional, and reflective), and a suitable project/challenge at an organisation willing to work with students on their iterative process of addressing that challenge. As a pedagogy of Engaged Learning, there are obvious limits to an uncritical expansion of CSL. This would run the risk of instrumentalisation and dilution of the intensity of the programme. However, with careful monitoring and calibration of the balance between and within the different components, our approach to CSL offers strong learning opportunities

[10] A good example is the 'Stoempchecker' tool. This is a checklist for professionals to assess healthy and sustainable food provision in primary schools https://assets.goodfoodatschool.be/paragraph/attachments/tool_stoempchecker_voor_de_lager_school.pdf.

for those organisations and motivated students willing to engage themselves.