

# INTRODUCTION OF THE CONCEPT OF »SERVICE LEARNING« IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MONTENEGRO – PRACTICE AND CHALLENGES

## ABSTRACT

*In the era of globalisation of business, industrialisation, digitisation, etc. higher education systems face a lot of challenges, and higher education institutions all around the world develop different strategies and tactics in order to achieve key educational goals and create a competitive system that will meet the demands and overcome challenges of the modern labour market. Especially important are the educational goals defined by UNESCO, that, more than ever, seem to describe the essence of the educational process which can be introduced through idea - »I learn to know, I learn to do, I learn to be and I learn to live together«. In the last decade, the idea of community learning (as well as learning from the community) gains more importance, so it is not surprising that many educational policies around the world and many prestigious higher education institutions devote a lot of attention to the introduction of*

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***the concept of »service learning« in curricula. This paper presents the process of introduction of the concept of »service learning« at the Faculty of Visual Arts, Mediterranean University and describes all challenges that were faced in order to adopt this concept and make it an integral part of the curricula.***

## **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education institutions all around the world put in a lot of effort in order to create and develop a competitive system that will meet the demands and overcome challenges of the modern labour market (Kaye, 2010). Some of the key challenges and issues that are imposed not only on higher education institutions but also on policy makers are: Which pedagogical methods and techniques as well as strategies of teaching and learning may contribute to students' better preparation for modern labour market needs? How to connect a higher education system with a cultural, social and economic dimension of society? Are universities only resources of knowledge? What is the role of the community in education and how may it contribute to improving the quality of the higher education process? (Schoenfeld, 2004).

The structure of the higher education system in Montenegro is in line with modern trends in Europe and is based on three cycles: undergraduate (bachelor studies), postgraduate (master studies) and PhD studies. This system of study was introduced in 2003/2004 when the University of Montenegro organised experimental courses harmonised according to the Bologna Declaration. In the academic year 2004/2005 this model was introduced to all faculties and all study programmes in Montenegro for the first-year students.

The introduction of the Bologna Declaration led to some important changes in the higher education system in Montenegro. These are: the introduction of the three-cycle higher education system, the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the introduction of a diploma supplement with a detailed description of all courses taken during the studies, the introduction of the concept of learning outcomes at the level of the study programme and individual courses as well, etc., the introduction of the National Qualification Framework which is completely in accordance with the European Qualification Framework, etc.

But, although formally harmonised with EU practices, the educational system in Montenegro in the past several years has shown many weaknesses. Research carried out by relevant ministries and the Chamber of commerce, among a large number of companies and enterprises in Montenegro have shown that graduate students lack practical skills and competence, as well as communication and soft skills. There is a lack of harmony between the higher education process and labour

market needs, as well as insufficient effort on the part of different stakeholders to improve the social dimension of the higher education system. These research results referred to students from all higher education institutions in Montenegro and they pointed out the necessity of introducing new strategies and tools that will lead to the improvement of quality of the higher education system in Montenegro.

That is the main reason why, in the last few years, new legal and strategic documents have been adopted by Government, such as the Law of higher education, Strategy of higher education 2016-2020, Strategy of science and research 2017-2020, etc. and all of them, in addition to documents at the institutional level, have recognised the necessity of reform of the higher education system and its continuous improvement. The main accent in all these documents - at national, as well as international level, was put into the introduction of practice in the curricula and harmonisation of the content and learning outcomes of study programmes and labour market needs. But at the moment, all higher education institutions are still facing many challenges especially in implementation of different measures and activities regarding these issues, while the social dimension of the educational process is still not recognised as one of the main strategic goals.

One of the possible models to develop and improve this social dimension of the higher education system in Montenegro is the introduction of the concept of »service learning« or »learning through engagement«, which involves improvement of student competence to perceive and solve community problems - the focus is actually put on learning outside the classroom and making a strong link between knowledge acquired within the formal educational process and experiences gained through community work, as well as on the strong connection between learning outcomes defined in the curricula and problem solving in the community.

This model was introduced in the curricula of the Faculty of visual arts as a pilot project in order to try to improve this social dimension of the higher education system in Montenegro. The idea was to make students more active citizenships with civic competence, who know their rights and responsibilities, but who are, at the same time, willing to show solidarity and ready to contribute something to society. That process may lead not only to the improvement of students' own knowledge, skills and competence, but to the improvement of the quality of the educational process as well.

## **AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The results of a lot of research carried out in Montenegro have shown that graduated students lack practical skills and competence, as well as soft skills, which include skills of communication, presentation, negotiation, problem solving and

conflict resolution, etc. This is partly influenced by the system of education which was dominantly focused on providing theoretical knowledge without its practical implementation. That fact as well as quite inappropriate pedagogical approaches, including method and some fast and huge changes on the global market such as processes of globalisation, internationalisation, digitalisation, etc. led to inappropriate preparation of students for modern labour market needs. Under these conditions, in order to create a competitive higher educational system and to prepare graduate students to meet the needs and demands of the modern labour market, it is necessary to introduce some new concepts in the educational process which will make stronger connections between the higher education system and the business community, as well as between the higher education system and society, in order to make students active citizens with civic competence. In order to reach this, the Faculty of visual arts introduced the concept of »service learning« into the integral part of its curricula as an initial step in the continuous process that should be carried out in the future.

## METHODS

The main hypotheses that were defined before the introduction of the concept of learning into the curricula were:

- The introduction of the concept of »service learning« will improve students' practical skills;
- The introduction of the concept of »service learning« will improve students' soft skills;
- The introduction of the concept of »service learning« will enable students to reach learning; outcomes defined in the curricula, but knowledge, skills and competence will develop in the long-term;
- The introduction of the concept of »service learning« will make the learning process more dynamic, creative, interesting and motivating;
- The introduction of the concept of »service learning« will improve students' organisational and leadership skills;
- The introduction of the concept of »service learning« will change the role of teachers and professors in the learning process.

The idea of the introduction of the concept of »service learning« in the curricula of the Faculty of Visual Arts was initiated by the dean and a group of professors who attended several seminars and workshops at European higher education institutions regarding this issue. After becoming familiar with experiences of some other countries regarding »service learning« and its implementation as well as the analysis of some examples of »best practice«, the idea was presented to the Faculty's

Council in order to discuss the possibility of realisation of a pilot project as a part of one course at the Faculty. After a brief presentation of the concept itself and discussion by members of the Council, the decision about introducing this concept in curricula was made and a formal framework for realisation of planned activities was established. It was concluded that the realisation of planned activities would be most appropriate for the final year of the undergraduate study programme for the »Visual culture course« because of the nature of the course itself which allows flexibility and possibility to move the realisation of activities out of the classroom. At that same time the course was led by two professors who opened up the possibility of forming two groups of students and compare results achieved.

Bearing in mind the fact that is a completely new concept in higher education institutions in Montenegro, its implementation had to be planned succinctly, in all details in order to achieve the best possible results and improve the quality of the teaching and learning process (Farber, 2011). The initial step was a presentation of a concept of »service learning«, experiences of other countries and institutions, possible benefits that may be achieved and goals that may be reached, etc. The presentation was prepared by the dean of the Faculty, along with professors of the »Visual culture course«. Students were briefly informed about the possible activities which may be realised, their implementation, rules and obligations, learning outcomes, time framework for realisation of activities etc. The idea was to »move« a »Visual culture course« from the classroom to some other place in order to provide something useful for the community, while still reaching the learning outcomes defined in the curricula. After brainstorming with students, the idea which was found most appropriate one was painting the Children's hospital in the capital city which is the biggest and the most important one in the country itself.

The realisation of the project lasted for one semester - four months. The participation of students in the realisation of activities was on a voluntary basis. Out of twelve students in total who attended the »Visual culture course« - six decided to attend the traditionally organised *atelier* course led by one mentor, while another six decided to attend the course based on the concept of »service learning« led by another mentor engaged in the realisation of this course. Students from the pilot group had a right to give up at any moment from realisation of the activities at the Children's hospital and to move to the traditionally organised course. In that case, the student would be replaced by some of the students from the master programme in order to finish the activities.

In order to be able to analyse and compare results of the quality of the teaching and learning process as well as results achieved and level of satisfaction of students with different elements of the education process, surveys were carried out in both groups at the very end of the course. According to the Law of higher education in Montenegro, at the end of every semester it is obligatory to carry out a survey

at the level of every individual course in order to estimate the quality of different elements of the learning and teaching process. This kind of survey represents a most important tool for the quality control process in the higher education system in Montenegro and the results are analyzed by the Faculty's Council, Senate of the University and published on web sites of higher education institutions.

The content of the survey is adopted by the Faculty's Council and is mostly focused on quality of the teaching and learning process, the content of the course, the pedagogical and methodological approaches of teaching staff, literature and equipment, etc. Bearing in mind that the possible benefits of the introduction of the concept of »service learning«, which include many other segments that may not be measured by traditional surveys which were used at the Faculty of visual arts, a team of psychologists, pedagogues and social workers were engaged in order to improve the content of the survey and to enable the measuring of some other aspects such as student empathy, perception of their role in the community, etc.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The survey was carried out at the end of the course among both groups of students. The students partaking on the course at the Children's hospital got the task of painting murals in the hall of the hospital with an area of 40 square metres. The initial plan was to spend 3 hours and 45 minutes per week as provided by syllabus of the *atelier* course. The process of painting murals included several phases: making sketches, preparation of the substrate, making choices about elements, composition, colours, preparation of colours, painting murals, etc. After the original plan of painting the hall of the hospital, students gave the idea of continuing with their work in other halls, operation blocks, waiting rooms, etc. and at the end of the course they had actually painted more than 500 square metres of the hospital. The results of the survey showed that these students spent approximately 20 hours a week painting; meanwhile, students from the other group spent approximately 5 hours a week on preparation and realisation of course activities. None of the students gave up or decided to move to the traditionally organised course.

Apart from traditional questions which refer to student evaluation of different elements of the teaching and learning process, the survey included some questions which refer to student self- evaluation regarding practical skills, soft skills, leadership and organisational skills, etc., which was later compared with their final marks on the »Visual culture course«, which included all these segments as well.

The first part of the survey referred to the satisfaction of the quality of the teaching and learning process and it included several segments such as the content

of the course; creativity and dynamics of the education process; the level of motivation for realisation of particular activities; the pedagogical and methodological approaches of the teaching staff; the literature and equipment, etc. The general conclusion is that the students who took part on the course at the Children's hospital were more satisfied with the quality of the teaching and learning process and they gave the creativity, dynamics and quality of learning process - mark 5, while the students who attended the traditionally organised course evaluated it at 3.9, a much smaller mark.

The second part of the survey referred to the process of student self-evaluation regarding practical, soft, organisational and leadership skills. The results of the survey showed that the students who took part in the »Visual culture course« at the Children's Hospital evaluated their own practical skills with mark 4.91 (the score of students from another group was 4.00), soft skills – 4.8 (the score of another group was 3.7) and organisational and leadership skills – 4.7 (the score of another group was 3.4).

In order to be able to compare the results of the students' self-evaluation process with the evaluation process carried out by professors, the evaluation process for this course was changed as well - instead of evaluation of final artwork and its presentation which was done during the final exam, the evaluation process included points for different segments of realisation of the activity of painting murals at the Children's Hospital, such as the preparatory, production and evaluation phase as well as the evaluation of the students' communication skills, leadership skills, practical skills, soft skills, their level of engagement, creativity, etc. When talking about learning outcomes, the average final mark of students of the group who carried out activities at the Children's hospital was 9, while for the group which attended traditional classes the average final mark was 7.8.

The fact that students spent approximately 20 hours a week at the hospital and painted more than 500 square metres of halls, operation blocks, rooms, waiting rooms, etc., is the best confirmation of the initially defined hypothesis. Although they were obliged to spend 3 hours and 45 minutes for realisation of the »Visual culture course«, students spent much more time conducting activities and their results significantly exceeded the initial plan defined by the curricula. Besides gaining practical skills and competence, they had the challenge to work as a part of a group and to intervene in the same space on the same wall with students with different styles of painting which means that they had to communicate and negotiate among themselves, to present ideas to each other, to make compromises and solve conflicts. At the same time, the realisation of activities in a stressful atmosphere, surrounded by sick children, parents who are under stress, medical personnel who are in a hurry and very often under stress too, additionally help them to improve their communication, organisational and soft skills.

At the same time, realisation of activities in such an atmosphere contributed to the development of empathy and sense of specific target groups which need some kind of help and support which made them students more creative, enthusiastic, take initiative, etc., which, in turn, was confirmed not only by the self-evaluation process of the students, but also by the estimation of their professor. According to the results of the survey, the group of students who took part on the course at the Children's hospital achieved much better results in this segment than the group who attended traditional classes. So, apart from painting much more than was initially planned, students proposed many other activities such as creative workshops for children in hospital, workshops for parents, etc., which was strongly supported by their professor and management of the Faculty as well as by management of the Children's Hospital and staff. Instead of passive receivers of knowledge, they became the active creators and participants of their own learning process and the professor's role changed significantly – his/her role was not to teach less, but rather to guide, advise, control and lead more.



**Picture 1.** Final phase of painting murals (source: private archive)

It is important to mention that after the realisation of such an activity, students were recognised by the public as well – a lot of media outlets published the news



about the realisation of this activity, while students were handed thanks by Mayor of Capital city Podgorica, director of the Clinical centre, some private companies, etc.

## **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

The concept of »service learning« was a completely new concept in the Montenegrin higher education system and it was expected that during its introduction in the curricula a lot of challenges would be faced. The most important ones referring to strict academic rules regarding the realisation of the learning process which is expected to be organised in the classroom; support and approval of University management for the realisation of the activities mentioned; approval from Hospital management to intervene in their space, etc. But, although all these challenges needed time and a lot of effort in order to be met successfully, the most difficult challenge that had to be faced referred to the resistance of teaching staff to take a part in the project - mostly due to the fear of the introduction of new methods and techniques in the learning process; changes in the role of professors and students; distrust of the students and their ability to carry out such a huge project, etc.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although the initial phase in the process of introduction of the concept of service learning was not easy at all and despite the fact that we faced a lot of challenges from many different points of view (conceptual, organisational, etc.), the fact is that it has significantly improved the quality of the higher education system in Montenegro. Although in the realisation of this initial phase, a lot of challenges were faced, according to the results of the survey there were a considerable number of benefits - students showed a higher level of knowledge, skills and competence; they were better prepared for modern labour market needs, as well as demonstrating improved soft, organisational and leadership skills. Apart from that, students participated actively in the learning process, they took the role of creators, leaders, communicators, etc. They improved their social and cultural competence, and developed well at a higher level of empathy.

Because of all this, it was decided to introduce the concept of »service learning« as a regular part of the curricula in the Faculty of visual arts and to try to set up new standards in the higher education system in Montenegro. Bearing in mind the fact that the introduction of this concept is a process that should be continuously improved, it is clear that this is just the beginning and that a lot of work has to be carried out in the future. But, at the same time, this initial step strongly motivated students and teaching staff, as well as personnel in the management

structure of the university, to move forward in the same direction and continue with the realisation of similar activities in the future.

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## UVOĐENJE KONCEPTA »DRUŠTVENO KORISNOG UČENJA« U VISOKOOBRAZOVNI SUSTAV CRNE GORE

### SAŽETAK

U eri globalizacije poslovanja, ubrzanih procesa internacionalizacije i digitalizacije, visokoobrazovni sustavi se suočavaju s brojnim izazovima, a institucije visokog obrazovanja širom svijeta razvijaju strategije i taktike koje će im omogućiti stvaranje konkurentnog obrazovnog sustava koji će odgovoriti potrebama suvremenog tržišta rada. U takvim uvjetima, posebno važnu ulogu imaju odgojni ciljevi koje je definirao UNESCO, a koji su sadržani u krilatici »Učim da znam, učim da radim, učim da budem (aktivan član društva) i učim živjeti u zajednici.« Stoga ne čudi da mnoge obrazovne politike širom svijeta posvećuju veliku pozornost konceptu »društveno korisnog učenja« i njegovom uvođenju u nastavne planove i programe. Ovaj rad predstavlja proces uvođenja ovog koncepta u kurikulum Fakulteta vizualnih umjetnosti Univerziteta Mediteran kao primjer dobre prakse procesa unapređenja kvaliteta visokog obrazovanja.

**Ključne riječi:** »društveno korisno učenje«, visokoobrazovni sustav, Crna Gora, praksa, iskustva.



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