

# **The Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education. Bringing higher education institutions in the Flanders region together on service-learning and community engagement**

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## **Abstract**

The Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education brings together higher education institutions from the Flemish region in Belgium. The network is coordinated by the University Centre Saint-Ignatius Antwerp and aims to promote and advance the service-learning pedagogy in Flemish higher education. This contribution describes the history of the network, its goals and partners involved, the activities undertaken by the network and its partner institutions, and the steps that are taken to move ahead in the further development of a Flemish service-learning network.

**Keywords:** service-learning, network, inter-university collaboration.

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# **La Xarxa Flamenca d'Aprenentatge Servei a l'Educació Superior. Reunint les institucions d'educació superior de la regió de Flandes sobre l'aprenentatge servei i el compromís comunitari**

## **Resum**

La Xarxa Flamenca per a l'Aprenentatge Servei a l'Educació Superior reuneix institucions d'educació superior de la regió flamenca de Bèlgica. La xarxa està coordinada pel centre universitari Sant Ignasi Anvers i té com a objectiu promoure i avançar la pedagogia de l'aprenentatge servei a l'educació superior flamenca. Aquesta contribució descriu la història de la xarxa, els seus objectius i socis implicats, les activitats realitzades per la xarxa i les seves institucions associades, i els passos que es fan per avançar en el desenvolupament posterior d'una xarxa flamenca d'aprenentatge servei.

**Paraules clau:** aprenentatge servei, xarxa, col·laboració interuniversitària.

# **La Red Flamenca de Aprendizaje-servicio en la Educación Superior. Reuniendo a las instituciones de educación superior de la región de Flandes en torno al aprendizaje-servicio y el compromiso comunitario**

## **Resumen**

La Red Flamenca de Aprendizaje-servicio en la Educación Superior reúne a instituciones de educación superior de la región flamenca de Bélgica. La red está coordinada por el Centro Universitario San Ignacio de Amberes y tiene como objetivo promover y hacer avanzar la pedagogía del aprendizaje-servicio en la educación superior flamenca. Esta contribución describe la historia de la red, sus objetivos y socios involucrados, las actividades llevadas a cabo por la red y sus instituciones asociadas, y los pasos que se están dando para avanzar en el desarrollo de una red flamenca de aprendizaje-servicio.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje-servicio, red, colaboración interuniversitaria.

## 1. Introduction

For higher education institutions, it is important to show not only what they are good at, but also what they are good for. More and more, higher education institutions are looking for opportunities to take on social responsibility and educate students to become responsible and active citizens. This is no different for higher education institutions in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium (Service-learning werkgroep Vlaanderen, 2019).

With this aspiration in mind, Flemish higher education institutions joined forces in the creation of the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education. The network originated in November 2019, extending its action radius to today. In this contribution, we describe the history of the network, its current activities and the steps taken to move forward.

## 2. The growth of the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education

### 2.1. Steps towards a service-learning network

The seed for the creation of the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education was planted during the Flemish study day *Student and Society in Connection: Learn-Reflect-Engage*, organized by UCSIA, at the initiative of Maaïke Mottart and Nicolas Standaert (KU Leuven), and in collaboration with University of Antwerp, Ghent University, and the Education Department of the Flemish Government in December 2016. The study day gave rise to multiple new service-learning initiatives in several higher education institutions in Flanders. During this study day, vice rectors of the Flemish Universities launched a call to action for institutionalization of service-learning in Flemish higher education. As a follow-up to this call, the original initiators organized a policy-meeting with vice-presidents and educational directors of the Flemish higher education institutions on 11 December 2018. They approved further steps for interuniversity collaboration and, as a result, a Flemish working group on service-learning was created with higher education teachers and teaching support staff from different institutions.

As a first concrete step to promote service-learning within the Flemish region, the Flemish service-learning working group decided to organize a pre-conference day on service-learning in Flanders, in conjunction with the second European Conference on Service-Learning in Higher Education *Learn to Engage-Engage to Learn*, hosted by UCSIA on 21 and 22 September 2019. With over 235 participants, both conferences turned out to be a great success. A follow-up meeting for the Flemish institutions was organized in November 2019, with several attendees expressing their desire to continue collaborating and networking, and to embed the service-learning pedagogy in the Flemish context. Thus, the Flemish Network

for Service-Learning in Higher Education was born (Vlaams Netwerk voor Service-Learning in het Hoger Onderwijs, 2021).

## 2.2. Considerations in the creation of the network

Although Belgium is a small country (11.697.000 inhabitants), two separate education systems are in place: the Flemish and Walloon education system. These education systems are location and language bound: the Flemish education system is in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking, northern region of Belgium (inhabited by 60% of the Belgian population), the Walloon education system is based in Wallonia, the French-speaking, southern region (inhabited by 40% of the Belgian population). Both education systems have distinct differences, such as separate educational calendars, different educational plans and grading, and, of course, a different language of instruction (Dutch and French). Because of the separate education systems and the difference in language, it was decided to focus the network solely on the Flemish, Dutch-speaking area. Although the network aims to cooperate with universities in Wallonia (with existing collaborations with UCLouvain, University of Namur and University of Liège), these institutions are not directly involved in the network.

The Flemish higher education system distinguishes between universities, focusing on academic education and research, and universities of applied sciences and university-colleges, with an emphasis on professional education. The Flemish government finances all higher education institutions in Flanders (including the private or free universities). Due to this, higher education is highly democratic: tuition fees are cheap in comparison to other European countries. Though, despite the government funding, the education system allows a high degree of independence and individuality for higher education institutions. Within a set of generic guidelines provided by the Flemish government, higher education institutions can shape their curriculum as they see fit. This has led to different interpretations and ways of implementing the service-learning pedagogy, resulting in a rich diversity of service-learning and community engagement initiatives within the Flemish higher education arena. This richness shows the versatility of the service-learning pedagogy and its ability to be adopted in different contexts. Therefore, the Flemish service-learning network wants to treasure the diversity within the network, allowing each partner institution to implement the pedagogy as they see fit within their own context. Following this rationale, it was decided to create an informal learning network, rather than a formalized organization. Partner institutions can decide on their own level of involvement and can keep their own vision and principles regarding the service-learning pedagogy.

UCSIA was selected as coordinator for the Flemish service-learning network. As an institution navigating within the higher education and research arena, but not a teaching or research institute itself, UCSIA can provide the Flemish network with

independence and neutrality, allowing the participating higher education institutions to develop the service-learning pedagogy within the context of their own institution, while at the same time aiming to create a common ground within Flemish higher education. UCSIA is also closely involved with the activities of the European Association for Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE), making it possible to connect the work of the Flemish network to the international service-learning movement.

A final consideration taken into account in the creation of a Flemish service-learning network, was the lack of maturity of the service-learning pedagogy in Flanders. The service-learning pedagogy has only just started to bloom within the Flemish education system. Although some actions are being taken at secondary school level, most initiatives currently remain within higher education institutions. As a first network on service-learning in Flanders, it was therefore decided to focus solely on service-learning at higher education level.

### **3. The Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education: who are we and what do we do?**

#### **3.1. Goals and partners**

The Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education is a partnership of higher education institutions within the Flemish region in Belgium. The network aims to promote and advance the service-learning pedagogy in Flemish higher education. To do so, the network undertakes actions in three areas:

1. **Visibility:** The Flemish service-learning network aims to make the service-learning pedagogy visible and recognizable. It strives for knowledge exchange and dissemination through conferences, study days, seminars, publications, etc., and promotes the development of service-learning practices in the Flemish higher education institutions.
2. **Creation of a learning network:** The Flemish service-learning network develops and promotes training activities for the implementation of the service-learning pedagogy. The network offers workshops, opportunities for knowledge exchange, and it provides a digital platform for the exchange of training materials, practice examples, toolboxes, etc. to assist higher education teachers in the development of their service-learning practices.
3. **Research support:** The Flemish service-learning network wants to contribute to an efficient exchange of research results for quality improvement of the service-learning pedagogy. It encourages joint research projects and contributes to the development of policy recommendations and initiatives.

The Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education is coordinated by UCSIA. 14 higher education institutions are involved in the network:

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- University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp (15.100 students)
- Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (13.200 students)
- Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts (6.000 students)
- Free University of Brussels (15.600 students)
- Hogent University of Applied Sciences and Arts (16.800 students)
- Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts (13.400 students)
- KU Leuven (49.600 students)
- Odisee University of Applied Sciences (11.000 students)
- Thomas More University of Applied Sciences (18.000 students)
- University of Antwerp (18.000 students)
- University College Leuven-Limburg (14.000 students)
- Ghent University (42.700 students)
- University of Hasselt (3.800 students)
- Vives University of Applied Sciences (15.000 students)

### 3.2. Networking and training opportunities for Flemish higher education teachers and staff

The Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education was established in November 2019. Only shortly after its establishment, COVID-19 hit society, forcing higher education institutions to focus on distance education. This created far from fertile soil for the development of a new service-learning network, focusing on a pedagogy grounded in personal encounter and engagement. Meetings with partner institutions were put on hold, networking opportunities ceased, and the emergence of new service-learning initiatives in Flanders came to an abrupt halt.

Yet, despite the difficult starting position, the Flemish service-learning network pushed through and organized its first activities to bring teachers from Flemish higher institutions together to exchange knowledge and experiences. To make a virtue of necessity, the network organized a first webinar on 'the opportunities and challenges of online service-learning' on 10 September 2020, to support service-learning teachers in the transition to digital teaching. The Flemish network also decided to get involved in the Erasmus+ project *Service-learning as a pedagogy to promote inclusion, diversity and digital empowerment. SLIDE (2022-2024)*, a three-year collaboration with other European universities and service-learning networks, focusing on e-service-learning innovation.

A second webinar on service-learning and diversity in metropolitan areas was organized on 4 March 2021, followed by a first in-person networking event later that year, on 9 November 2021. The networking event *Service-learning for sustainability*, organized by the Flemish service-learning network in collaboration with Vives University of Applied Sciences, brought together teachers and educational staff from higher education institutions all over Flanders.



Since this first networking event, two more networking events took place. These annual events are organized by the Flemish service-learning network, in collaboration with a partner institution of the network, which provides the venue, accommodation and logistical support for the event. The networking events represent an opportunity for Flemish higher education teachers and educational staff to come together and exchange knowledge and good practices, and to strengthen the connections between the Flemish higher education institutions.

The second edition of the networking event with topic *Service-learning in and with the neighbourhood* took place on 25 November 2022, in collaboration with Artevelde University of Applied Sciences. On 14 and 15 September 2023, the network organized a two-day service-learning summer school *Deep diving in service-learning* in collaboration with KU Leuven and with the support of the Flemish Government, and the Uniservitate Project. The summer school had an international component: several workshops and sessions were organized in English, allowing for participation of English-speaking colleagues and international participants, including colleagues from the Belgian Walloon region. A fourth edition of the networking event will be organized on 21 February 2025 in Brussels, with collaboration of the Odisee University of Applied Sciences. Topic of this event will be *Co-creation in service-learning*.

Next to the annual networking events, the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education organizes seminars and workshops for beginning and experienced teachers involved in service-learning. These sessions are focused around different clusters:

- Service-learning basics: The Flemish service-learning network offers workshops on the basics of service-learning for teachers unfamiliar with the pedagogy. The workshops focus on the main principles, goals and values of service-learning and how to apply these in different teaching contexts. A first 'service-learning basics' workshop was organized during the service-learning summer school in September 2023. An introductory presentation on the service-learning pedagogy was given, followed by an interactive session in which teachers thought about how these service-learning principles could be applied within their own teaching practice.
- Discipline-focused workshops: Service-learning is very diverse and practices from different disciplines can sometimes be difficult to compare. The Flemish service-learning network brings together teachers of the same discipline from different institutions to talk about their experiences with service-learning and to exchange good practices from their own discipline, to learn from one-another and to strengthen the service-learning pedagogy within the discipline. For example, on 8 September 2022, a workshop was organized for Flemish teacher educators to exchange experiences on service-learning for student-teachers. Each teacher participating in the



activity presented how service-learning is implemented within the teacher training programme at their institution. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and compare their own practices to these of their colleagues, and together they discussed how to further develop the service-learning pedagogy within teacher training in Flanders.

- Expert seminars: In these seminars, the network brings together experts from the partner institutions on a specific topic. The aim of these seminars is strategic collaboration, striving for policy impact.

An expert seminar was organized on service-learning institutionalization through university collaboration. A presentation given by Bojana Culum Ilic (University of Rijeka, Croatia) was the starting point for a discussion about opportunities for collaboration within Flanders to advance service-learning institutionalization. The seminar took place on 29 November 2023 and resulted in a list of action points for the Flemish service-learning network to facilitate collaboration and to reinforce policy impact.

### 3.3. A digital platform for knowledge exchange and Flanders-focused resources

There is plenty of information and knowledge available on the service-learning pedagogy. Yet teachers often get lost in this labyrinth of information. In addition to this, service-learning is a contextualized pedagogy. Teachers often have a hard time finding information that is relevant and applicable to their own teaching practice.

In response to this need, the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education set up the website [www.servicelearningvlaanderen.be](http://www.servicelearningvlaanderen.be). The website gives visibility to the network and serves as a transfer point to the expertise and institution-specific information of the partner institutions in the network. Teachers exploring the website are easily directed to information applicable to their own institution. To assist Flemish teachers in their search for relevant information, the Flemish Network also acts as a digital platform that brings together research, projects, practices and tools on service-learning from and within the Flemish context:

- Publications: The website gives an overview of books, journal articles, and media items that were published by authors belonging to the institutions involved in the Flemish service-learning network.
- Tools: The website provides a list of digital teaching and learning materials, both for teachers and students, that were created by authors affiliated with the institutions involved in the Flemish service-learning network. It also collects webinars and recordings of lectures organized by the network.
- Projects: The website gives an overview of the current and past research and education projects involving partners of the Flemish service-learning network.

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- Good practices: Each month, a blog post is created by one of the network's partner institutions, highlighting one of the service-learning practices in their institution. The blog is a 'show-and-tell' item, giving teachers from the partner institutions in the network the opportunity to show the work that they are doing, but it is also a valued resource: the blog is a repository of stories, inspiring teachers that are looking for Flemish examples and good practices to shape their own service-learning courses.

#### **4. Looking ahead: future perspectives for a maturing network**

There is no doubt that the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education has taken several steps forward in becoming a professionalized network. Although COVID-19 resulted in a slow start, the network has taken the road straight ahead towards the institutionalization of service-learning in Flemish higher education. One particular of this will be the publication of the book *Service-learning in higher education – society as a powerful learning environment*, the first Dutch reference book on the service-learning pedagogy. The book is a collaboration of authors involved in the Flemish service-learning network and contains examples of service-learning practices from all partner institutions in the network. The book will be published in February 2025.

While we are consolidating and strengthening the current practices of the network, we eagerly look ahead to new ambitions for the future. To continue our work in promoting service-learning in Flemish higher education, it is crucial to connect all Flemish higher education institutions. Our ambition is therefore to include the remaining Flemish higher education institutions that are currently not yet involved in the network. Being a network with all Flemish higher education institutions would increase our impact and make our voice louder to policy makers.

During the past years, the network was strongly focused on creating and consolidating a service-learning learning network, creating connections mainly within the higher education institutions themselves. In the years to come, we would like to expand our network to include community partners, policy makers and students. Besides supporting training and promotion of the pedagogy, the network also wants to further explore opportunities to support partner institutions in developing research collaborations and generating policy impact.

In November 2024, the Flemish Network for Service-Learning in Higher Education celebrates its fifth anniversary. We have taken important steps towards the promotion and development of service-learning in Flemish higher education, and continue to do so, also linking our work to international projects and networks such as the European Association for Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE), the alliances of European universities, and the worldwide Uniservitate-network. We

look forward to the work ahead and continue to contribute to strengthening the third mission of higher education institutions in Flanders through service-learning.

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