

# EUROPE ENGAGE

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING  
WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE



## BELGIUM NATIONAL REPORT



EUROPE ENGAGE SURVEY  
OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & SERVICE-LEARNING ACTIVITIES

2016



Funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



Report written by Guillaume Tuytschaever and Katrien De Bruyn

This report offers an independent analysis of the “*Europe Engage - Developing a Culture of Civic Engagement through Service-Learning within Higher Education in Europe*” [Reference 2014-1-ES01-KA203-004798].

This project was funded in 2014 by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The final publication only reflects the author’s view and the Agency and the European Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

*Europe Engage* logo designed by Miguel Ángel Tejedor.

Report designed by Héctor Opazo.

Typeset in Garamond.

## CONTENT

Section	Page Number
1. Introduction	4
2. Background to surveys	6
3. Limitations and opportunities of the survey	6
4. University culture and identity	7
5. Service-Learning activities	12
6. Conclusion	14



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Belgian institutes of higher education are divided into two groups: universities and university colleges. The former are more academic and research oriented, the latter more practically oriented, preparing students directly for professional and technical careers.

In Belgium, the Communities are responsible for the education. The Flemish Community is therefore responsible for education in the Dutch-speaking part of the country whilst the French Community is the competent authority for the French-speaking part of Belgium, and the German-speaking Community for education in German.

For this survey, we focussed on universities in the Flemish Community (University of Leuven, University of Antwerp, Ghent University, Universiteit Hasselt & Vrije Universiteit Brussel).

### Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The Vrije Universiteit is a Dutch-speaking university located in Brussels, Belgium. It has three campuses referred to as Etterbeek, Jette and Kaai (Anderlecht).

The university's name is sometimes abbreviated by "VUB" or translated to "Free University of Brussels". However, it is an official policy of the university not to use abbreviations or translations of its name, because of possible confusion with another university that has the same translated name: the French-speaking Université Libre de Bruxelles.

In fact, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel was formed by the splitting in 1970 of the same Université Libre de Bruxelles, which was founded in 1834 by the Flemish-Brussels lawyer Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen. He wanted to establish a university independent from state and church, where academic freedom would be prevalent. This is today still reflected in the university's motto *Scientia vincere tenebras*, or Conquering darkness by science, and in its more recent slogan *Redelijk eigenzinnig* (Dutch), or Reasonably opinionated. Accordingly, the university is pluralistic — it is open to all students on the basis of equality regardless of their ideological, political, cultural or social background — and it is managed using democratic structures, which means that all members — from students to faculty — participate in the decision-making processes.

The university is organised into 8 faculties that accomplish the three central missions of the university: education, research, and service to the community. The faculties cover a broad range of fields of knowledge including the natural sciences, classics, life sciences, social sciences, humanities, and engineering. The university provides bachelor, master, and doctoral education to about 8,000 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. It is also a strongly research-oriented institute, which has led to its top-189th position among univer-

sities worldwide. Its research articles are on average more cited than articles by any other Flemish university.

### **Ghent University**

Ghent University, abbreviated to UGent, was founded in 1817 by King William I of Orange.

Ghent University is a top 100 university and one of the major Belgian universities counting over 41,000 students and 9,000 employees.

11 faculties are composed of 117 faculty departments. These departments offer more than 230 high- quality courses in every one of their scientific disciplines, each inspired by innovative research.

UGent distinguishes itself as a socially committed and pluralistic university in a broad international perspective.

### **Universiteit Hasselt (UHasselt)**

Hasselt University was officially established in 1971 as 'Limburgs Universitair Centrum' (LUC). Over the past 40 years Hasselt University has grown into an innovative and dynamic university with 2 campuses (Diepenbeek and Hasselt) and 7 research institutes.

Until 1991 the university was, in fact, an undergraduate level university institution with two faculties: the Faculty of Medicine-Dentistry and the Faculty of Sciences (with study programmes in Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science, Chemistry and Biology). In 1991 the university expanded the reach of its curriculum by transforming the Limburg Business School (Economische Hogeschool Limburg), an independent university college which was located on the same campus in Diepenbeek, into the Faculty of Applied Economics. At the same time, Hasselt University became entitled to organize postgraduate programmes and award doctoral degrees in its three faculties.

In 2001 the Flemish and Dutch Ministers of Education signed an International Treaty by which the transnational University Limburg (tUL) was founded. Academic staff from Hasselt University and from nearby Maastricht University (in the Dutch Province of Limburg) since then jointly undertake research activities and offer degree programmes in Life Sciences and Computer Sciences.

In 2002 Hasselt University, together with Hogeschool PXL established the Limburg Association of Higher Education (AUHL). The AUHL was founded to enhance cooperation between higher education institutions in the region.

### **University of Leuven**

Situated in the heart of Western Europe, KU Leuven (University of Leuven) has been a centre of learning for nearly six centuries. Today, it is Belgium's largest and highest-ranked

university and, founded in 1425, one of the oldest and most renowned universities in Europe.

As a leading European research university and co-founder of the League of European Research Universities (LERU), KU Leuven offers a wide variety of programmes in English, all supported by high-quality, innovative, interdisciplinary research.

The university caters to more than 40,000 students, of which 15.5% are international students from more than 140 countries. KU Leuven's three doctoral schools provide internationally oriented PhD tracks for more than 4,000 doctoral students.

Boasting an outstanding central location, KU Leuven offers a truly international experience, high-quality education, world-class research and cutting-edge innovation.

### University of Antwerp

The University of Antwerp has about 20 000 students, which makes it the third largest university in Flanders. 16 % of our students are international students, with 116 nationalities represented. The University of Antwerp is characterised by its high standards in education, internationally competitive research and entrepreneurial approach. We have 9 campuses spread across the city of Antwerp.

Antwerp is an intriguing city. Apart from the fact that the city is well known for its international port and for being a world centre for diamond trade, it has many excellent museums and historical monuments, as well as a great nightlife scene, fine shopping districts, and a booming commercial centre.

## 2. BACKGROUND TO SURVEY

In the first phase, we identified relevant contact persons at each university for survey distribution. Relevant contact persons were identified at the VLIR (an interuniversity board). In the second phase, the survey has been distributed to the identified contact persons from each university. Despite the distribution to all universities, only the VUB and Ghent University completed the survey.

## 3. LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE SURVEY

Since civic engagement in general and Service-Learning in particular isn't organized on a central level in Belgian universities, it's challenging to find contact persons that are relevant and disposed to complete the survey.

*Example Contact person from University of Antwerp:*

*"Thanks for that, but I 'm certainly not the right person to fill out this document at university level. There's nothing centralized. Service learning is not really happening at the central level... I will contact a number of other people but do not know if I will succeed."*

Despite this barrier, the distribution of the survey was a good opportunity to inform contact persons of the universities about Service-Learning and the project Europe Engage. The contact persons are interested to hear more about results and recommendations for the future.

#### 4. UNIVERSITY CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Only the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Ghent University completed the survey.

##### Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)

Civic engagement is formally acknowledged in the VUB through the mission statement and the vision that comprises 5 pillars, in which the first 3 are relevant considering civic engagement and Service-Learning.

*Mission statement: The Vrije Universiteit Brussel is a competitive, high-quality, socially committed and internationally-oriented university located in Brussels.*

*Vision on education:*

- 1. Students should turn into reasonably steadfast individuals*
- 2. Students are committed to a sustainable humanist society*
- 3. Students are turned into world citizens*

In formal documents (e.g. mission statement, strategic plans, school or department program descriptions and requirements, websites, grading or evaluation criteria, course syllabi) some objectives related to Service-Learning or civic engagement are addressed, such as obtaining social skills, citizenship skills, connection of reflection related to goals, ...

*Example 1:*

*Values Strategic Plan*

- 1. Critical thinking and free research*
- 2. Equal opportunities and diversity*
- 3. Openness and tolerance*
- 4. Social commitment from a non-dogmatic humanistic perspective*

*Example 2:*

*The Vrije Universiteit Brussel is a competitive, high-quality, socially committed and internationally-oriented university.*

The senior management of the university is supportive of civic engagement and Service-Learning activities. Some acknowledgements that are mentioned in particular are: Executive Science Shop (WeCom), Executive Sustainable Development in Education, Working group sustainable development in education, Promotion of volunteering on My.VUB, studentshop University Centre for Development Cooperation.

*Example 1: Promotion of volunteering on My.VUB*

*<https://my.vub.ac.be/en/volunteering>*

*A Place to Live*

*Meeting point for mothers, children and families in social vulnerable circumstances. Animation and promotion jobs.*

*GreenTeam VUB*

*Engage for ecological projects on campus with a motivated student team.*

*Serve the City Brussels*

*Global movement of volunteering. Serve needy people (homeless shelters, refugee centers, orphanages, ...) in simple ways: sports, music, arts and crafts, meals, friendship and more.*

*Example 2: Science shops*

*A Science Shop offers scientific support, in the form of research or advice, to organisations that have insufficient funds to order research or little access to scientific information. The Science Shop does no research itself, but helps to translate a question into a research topic and mediates between the organisation (the client) and the researcher.*

Efforts that are made to make staff aware of civic engagement and Service-Learning activities in the university where enable to assess.

The department of educational policy and the department of student policy were mentioned as potential organizational structures to co-ordinate civic engagement and Service-Lear-

ning activity. But they're not dedicated exclusively to civic engagement and Service-Learning activities

### Ghent University

Civic engagement is formally acknowledged in Ghent University's strategy and policy through Mission statement, Strategic plan, Vision statement, Inclusion on website, University marketing materials, Public lectures, A centralized university office or center for service-learning or civic engagement, Training for faculty, Requirement for some majors/disciplines/programmes, Sustainability Report, Integration in educational policy and in education quality assessment & Diversity and Gender policy.

*Example 1: Ghent University emphasises civic engagement in its mission statement as following:*

*"Ghent University profiles itself as a civic engaged and pluralistic university [...]"*

*"Ghent University wants to position education and research in a broader civic context and to take steps in order to interact with the community."*

*Example 2: Strategic plan*

*In 2012 Ghent University wrote down a new strategic plan: "Ghent University, a creative community for a changing world". One of the strategic goals is formulated as: "Ghent University wants its students to become world citizens, who take up responsibility for their education and who take up an active, critical and independent role in a changing society."*

*The educational concept of Service-Learning was launched to turn this strategic goal into concrete action and 'Community Service Learning' became a project of the strategic plan (2012-2014).*

*Example 3: Inclusion on website*

*Ghent University created a webpage 'Student&CivicEngagement' on the central website of Ghent University. The webpage contains information about the project, good practices, a CSL-tool and checklist in order to support teaching staff in developing a CSL-course. The website also encourages 'civic engagement' initiatives beyond the curriculum of students.*

In formal documents (e.g. mission statement, strategic plans, school or department program descriptions and requirements, websites, grading or evaluation criteria, course syllabi) some

objectives related to Service-Learning or civic engagement are addressed, such as learning social skills, learning good citizenship skills, connection of reflection related to goals, ...

*Example 1: Learning social skills – learning good-citizenship skills – students' engagement in university*

*The 'Ghent University Competence Model' recognizes 'civic competence' as an area of competences, which increases the opportunity to implement Service Learning into courses. The 'Ghent University competence model' indicates how a university curriculum can be expressed in terms of competences by providing concrete examples.*

*Example 2: Students' engagement in communities outside the university*

*Each year the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, organizes a COPC week (Community Oriented Primary Care) for an interdisciplinary group of students. The students make a diagnosis of health and social problems in a disadvantaged community in Ghent. Based on this community-diagnoses, students create a realistic intervention proposal. Local community health centers and other community actors in this community can use these results for later interventions.*

*Example 3: Students' general academic achievement*

*The university's Diversity and Gender policy unit executes several projects to improve academic and social integration of disadvantaged student groups and aims for structural integration of these projects into the educational policy of the university. As a pedagogical approach Service-Learning offers the opportunity to integrate these initiatives into student curricula.*

*Example 4: Connection/reflection related to students' life goals outside career/work - Connection/reflection related to students' future plans - Connection/reflection related to students' future decisions*

*Civic responsibility in education is also integrated in the educational concept of Ghent University:*

*Students and graduates of Ghent University are expected to deal with uncertain situations, to adapt new principles and methods and to think critical in order to contribute to the development and renewal of society.*

*Learning in authentic knowledge environments (e.g. internships) is promoted as it is considered to be not only an effective teaching method for domains with very rapidly changing content, but it also provides more opportunities for lifelong learning, due to the same knowledge sources as the research or professional environment where students will work later.*

The senior management of the university provides some support of civic engagement and Service-Learning activities.

*Example 1:*

*In 2012 the Strategic Plan Steering Committee, consisting of senior management members, has developed a vision and strategic goals for the university's future. In 2012 Ghent University wrote down a new strategic plan: "Ghent University, a creative community for a changing world". One of the strategic goals is formulated as: "Ghent University wants its students to become world citizens, who take up responsibility for their education and who take up an active, critical and independent role in a changing society."*

*The educational concept of Service-Learning was launched to turn this strategic goal into concrete action and 'Service-Learning' became a project of the strategic plan (2012-2014).*

*Example 2:*

*The University Management Board provided financial resources in order to execute the project 'Service-Learning'. Funding was extended to continue the project.*

Some efforts are made to make staff aware of civic engagement and Service-Learning activities in Ghent University.

*Example 1: Identifying good practices of CSL@Ghent University*

*In 2014 a survey was designed to identify good practices of Service-Learning at Ghent University. The survey was distributed among teaching staff.*

*Practices meeting all criteria of Service-Learning were identified and published on a website: [www.ugent.be/communityservicelearning](http://www.ugent.be/communityservicelearning) (only available in Dutch).*

*Video's of 3 excellent good practices of Service-Learning were made. ([www.ugent.be/communityservicelearning](http://www.ugent.be/communityservicelearning))*

*Example 2: Setting up a service point 'Student& Civic Engagement'*

*A contact and service point for students, staff and external social organizations to promote and to support civic engagement was set up. Initiatives on voluntary bases as well as curriculum based initiatives are taken into account. A website is already constructed: <http://www.ugent.be/diversiteitengender/nl/student-en-maatschappelijk-engagement/overstudent-en-maatschappelijk-engagement.htm> (only in Dutch)*

*Example 3: Dissemination of project results*

*In May 2014 a SL-event was organized to disseminate project results and to raise awareness on civic engagement in relation to educational goals and programs. Dr. Juliet Millican from Brighton University was invited as international key note speaker. Dr. Millican manages both the student community engagement and the international research and development programmes within the Community University Partnership Program (Cupp). We also organized a workshop on the SL-tool for teaching staff, another workshop on implementing the course 'coaching and diversity' in several faculties and finally a workshop about SL-policy recommendations.*

At the moment there are no organizational structures exclusively dedicated to co-ordinate civic engagement and Service-Learning activities. However, within the strategic project 'Community Service Learning' opportunities are created for future development of organizational structures. Within the project plan, an information point 'Student&CivicEngagement' was established, which has the potential to become a 'Community Service Centre'.

## 5. SERVICE-LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Service-Learning activities are infrequently incorporated into bachelors and masters curricula programs. Some examples from Ghent University are:

### Cocreation

- Bachelor of Science in Industrial Sciences: Industrial Design
- Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy

During the course 'Cocreation', Students Industrial design and Occupational Therapy work together in co-design teams for a period of twelve weeks. They design supportive tools and

resources adjusted to an end user with a specific disability. The students interact with the client to find solutions starting from experienced needs and wishes.

### **Community-oriented primary healthcare**

- Master of Science in Sociology
- Master of Science in Social Work
- Master of Science in Health Education and- promotion

Each year the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, organizes a COPC week (Community Oriented Primary Care) for an interdisciplinary group of students. The students make a diagnosis of health and social problems in a disadvantaged community in Ghent. Based on this community-diagnoses, students create a realistic intervention proposal. Local community health centers and other community actors in this community can use these results for later interventions.

### **Coaching and guidance**

- Master of science in educational studies

In the course 'Coaching and guidance' master students educational sciences coach disadvantaged students from secondary school in self-regulated learning.

### **Strategic management**

- Postgraduate Studies in Social Profit and Public Management

During the course 'Strategic management' students make a SWOT-analysis in a public or social profit organization. The central questions are: What are the opportunities and threats? What are the strengths and weaknesses? On the basis of this analysis it is possible to identify strategic issues and, stimulate changes and / or improvements.

### **Health and society**

- Master of Science in Dentistry

During the course 'Health and society' students dentistry perform, in collaboration with local social organizations, a specific oral health project based on the needs of vulnerable groups in a community. The students gather information about the community and the

relation with oral health. Based on this information, the students organize an intervention in this community.

### **Orthopedagogical coaching and consultation**

- Master of Science in Orthopedagogical Sciences

During the course ‘Orthopedagogical coaching and consultation’, students coach young people / adults in a difficult situation (eg newcomers, refugees, persons with disabilities ...) in collaboration with partners in the orthopedagogical field. For example, a student coaches a young woman with a physical limitation in using public transport and supports her in social and sports activities.

### **Coaching and diversity**

- University wide optional course

During the course ‘Coaching and diversity’ students attain theoretical knowledge on diversity issues and coaching techniques. Students practice their knowledge and skills by engaging themselves being a mentor of a first year student (from a minority or disadvantaged group). At last, students learn to critically reflect on their experiences, learning processes and their civic engagement.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Awareness and knowledge about the educational concept of Service-Learning at Flemish universities is growing. Some good practices of Service-Learning appear or already exist, mostly based on individual initiatives from educational staff. However, the term “Service-Learning” is used inconsistently to describe a variety of experiential learning activities and internships. On one hand, we notice that the term Service-Learning is used for several educational experiences, that don’t comply to the criteria Service-Learning comprises. On the other hand, we identified good practices of Service-Learning, that are not labelled such as. Few educators know what Service-Learning is or understand how Service-Learning is different from voluntary based community service, internships, or other experiential learning activities.

With regard to institutionalisation, we notice that almost all Flemish universities emphasize civic responsibility of students and staff in their mission statement and (educational) vision. But it’s not always clear how this is being translated into educational policy and practice.

At last and on a structural base, universities miss campus-wide coordinating entities (e.g. Service-Learning Centre) that are exclusively devoted to support and assist various entities in the implementation, advancement and institutionalisation of Service-Learning.