

KEYS



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Service-learning in Catholic Higher Education

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# Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education

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Towards Sustainable Institutionalization of  
Service-Learning: Strategies and Lessons  
Learned at Ku Leuven

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## 11. TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SERVICE-LEARNING: STRATEGIES AND LESSONS LEARNED AT KU LEUVEN<sup>(\*)</sup>

Maike Mottart and Nicolas Standaert  
KU Leuven, Belgium

### Abstract

This case study zooms in on the implementation and institutionalization process of service-learning at KU Leuven (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/education/si/servicelearning>). The short but intense experience integrates two dynamics. Firstly, an approach has been chosen that combines bottom-up and top-down. This implies that the process always starts from the bottom up, based on the motivation and interest of teachers and educational supporters, and is supported top-down by the central leadership of the university. Second, this short experience revealed five pillars or major areas of action that can be elaborated and applied in parallel: information, training, networking, pilot projects and research. While the bottom-up versus top-down approach indicates how these processes can take shape, the five pillars represent the fields of action that must be continuously deployed to make the movement that is underway more sustainable.

The insights from academic literature in the US have gradually been incorporated into this process, but have been given their own interpretation in the local context.

### Introduction

*First, service-learning as an experiential pedagogy for higher education was virtually unknown in the academic world in Belgium around 2015—the year the first service-learning courses were introduced at various institutions.*

Three characteristics of this local context need to be highlighted in order to appreciate the suggestions for the institutionalization process as developed in this article. First, service-learning as an experiential pedagogy for higher education was virtually un-

known in the academic world in Belgium around 2015—the year the first service-learning courses were introduced at various institutions. This means not only that the process

started more or less from nothing, but also that the suggestions included below are primarily intended for similar situations. These suggestions may not be appropriate for institutionalization efforts in an academic environment where service-learning has long been known and put into practice. Second, the process as developed in this article starts from the basic premise that the key factor in sustainable institutionalization is the organization of sustainable service-learning courses. This means that the development and implementation of such courses, with the help of a service-learning team, is the primary focus of attention. Accordingly, the increase in the number of courses guides other institutional

*KU Leuven is a large institution with nearly 60,000 students in 15 faculties (departments) on 13 different locations. As a result, the institutionalization is a complex process, which needs to adapt to the specific culture of each faculty.*

aspects such as the integration of service-learning in the educational policy, teachers' training courses, participation of students and partners, etc. Third, the KU Leuven is a large institution with nearly 60,000 students in 15 faculties (departments) on 13 different

locations. As a result, the institutionalization is a complex process, which needs to adapt to the specific culture of each faculty (some of which have over 4,000 students), with a high degree of subsidiarity. This also explains the choice for service-learning courses embedded in specific study programmes, rather than a university-wide course. In other institutions, of a smaller size, the choices might be different.

#### **A. Implementation and integration: Bottom-up supported by top-down**

While various forms of experiential education already existed at KU Leuven, the concept of service-learning was still unknown before its wider introduction in the autumn of 2015. This form of education was first explored and (in pilot form) applied in the context of a stay abroad of a small study program (Chinese Studies). This project and the pedagogy were noticed by the central leadership of the university, since the basic principles of service-learning are very much in line with its educational vision that focuses on personal development. As a result, the central leadership provided small-scale financial support to further develop this project, and to make the concept more widely known in other study programs.

In order to do so, the project first started from what was already present at the "bottom." The small pilot group organized a survey that looked into existing practices that are in line with the principles of service-learning. A considerable number of responses

*A lesson learnt from this initial step became a guide throughout the entire implementation process: first start from what already exists, even if it does not correspond to the ideal definition of service-learning. The experience accumulated in existing socially engaged courses thus becomes the basis for further developments towards service-learning.*

communication via central channels, budget). A lesson learnt from this initial step became a guide throughout the entire implementation process: first start from what already exists, even if it does not correspond to the ideal definition of service-learning. The experience accumulated in existing socially engaged courses thus becomes the basis for further developments towards service-learning.

*To be sustainable, service-learning must be integrated into the university's internal financing plan, and this must be structurally guaranteed.*

and even students who were fond of the concept. However, a next step required a more integrated and broader approach. Here too a bottom-up approach with top-down support took place. The initial pilot group applied for external funding, which allowed the appointment of a full-time employee. This also made it possible for the institution to solidify its commitment to this project. After all, to be sustainable, service-learning must be integrated into the university's internal financing plan, and this must be structurally guaranteed. More specifically, substantial support was provided from the Education Office and Student Affairs Office in the form of budget and (part-time) support of collaborators.

Specifically, a service-learning team or point of contact was established. This central coordination is structurally embedded in the Education Office (under the Vice-President of Education), but has also from the start been linked to the Student Affairs Office (under

followed via a snowball effect, which enabled the compilation of a collection of existing practices. Subsequently, an information session on the pedagogy of service-learning was organized and the sharing of existing practices, projects and ideas took place. This bottom-up movement was made possible in part by the support of the central university leadership (backing, communication via central channels, budget).

The question then arose whether and how to expand the project. The various initiatives that had already been taken had created a kind of "network" of teachers, educational supporters

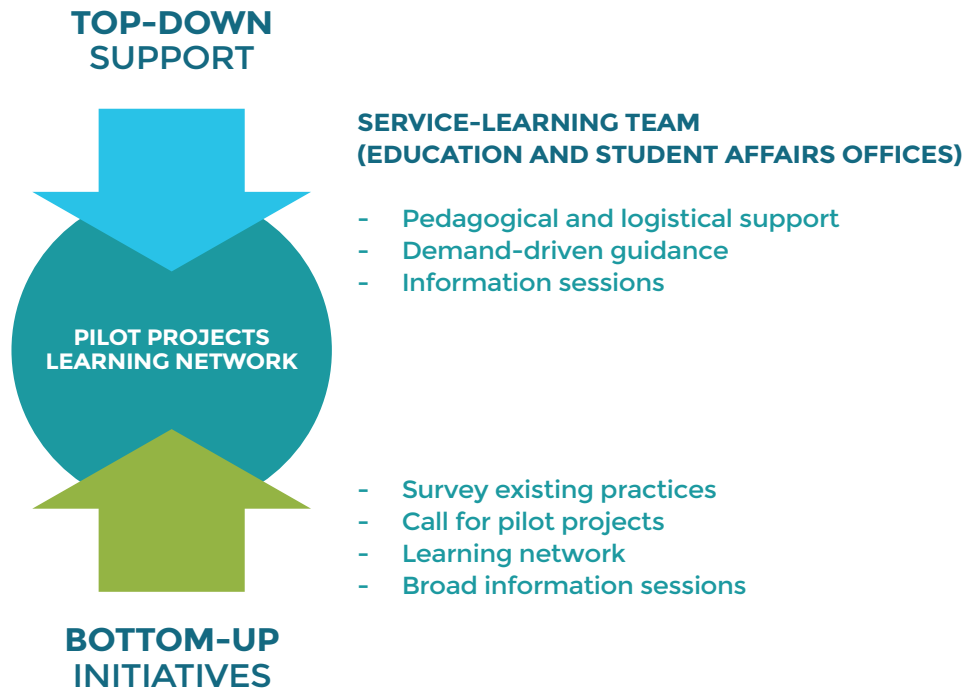
*For the development of courses, it was again decided to work mainly bottom-up: only with and for those who themselves are eager to engage in service-learning, rather than a top-down decision that every faculty should offer a service-learning course.*

to work mainly bottom-up: only with and for those who themselves are eager to engage in service-learning, rather than a top-down decision that every faculty should offer a service-learning course.

Top-down support and bottom-up initiatives meet each other in the pilot-projects for new service-learning courses and in the learning network that is organized around these new courses. Hereto, each year in the month of June a call is launched for pilot projects. Proposals with a simple course description and the commitment to integrate the course in the curriculum are submitted in September. If selected by the service-learning team and approved by a steering committee, the projects are guided in their development and implementation over the course of one academic year. During this time, the service-learning team offers demand-driven and individual guidance, as well as training. At the start of this year, there is a take-in meeting with the teaching staff applying for the course. The goal of this meeting is to clarify mutual expectations and to discuss necessary adjustments to bring the project in line with the service-learning core values: “serve–reflect–learn.” In the month of November, the team helps the teaching staff to prepare the learning agreement for ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), including defining the learning goals and the personal formation goals (values) for the new course. Additionally, in a special session the teaching staff of each new project is invited to explain its course objectives to the other projects and to external partners and receive feedback from them. The purpose of these first steps is the acceptance of the new course by the local teaching council (in December) and by the central education council (in January). Once this has been achieved, the service-learning team organizes different teacher training sessions (in the period from February to May). The topics of these sessions include the relationship with social partners, reflection in service-learning, and student assessment. Moreover, the team facilitates the establishment of community partnerships. The projects also receive a small financial incentive that can be used for practical assistance to establish the course or to support students with its implementation. If the whole process is completed and the course is validated, the new course starts in September of the new academic year.

the Vice-President of Student Affairs). In this way, broad coordination is possible. This team also supports the formation of a learning network and organizes information sessions to further promote the concept of service-learning. For the development of courses, it was again decided



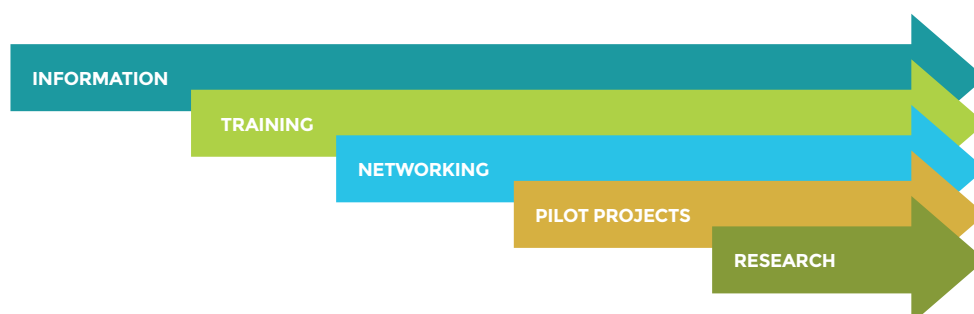


## B. Five pillars or fields of action for sustainable institutionalization

*The concrete strategies for the initial implementation and anchoring of service-learning at KU Leuven can be summarized in the following five pillars or areas of action: information, training, networking, pilot projects and research.*

The concrete strategies for the initial implementation and anchoring of service-learning at KU Leuven can be summarized in the following five pillars or areas of action: information, training, networking, pilot projects and research. The above

combination of bottom-up and top-down strategy is implemented through these five pillars. The arrows indicate that it is a continuous process and that the different aspects run in parallel. However, this parallel activity does not mean that there are no overlaps. There is a strong interaction between the different pillars, which means that they not only take place in parallel but also in tandem with each other.



## Information

*As theories about change processes often indicate, it is important to provide broad information about the content, practical implications and possibilities of a new concept. After all, people must be able to discover how they personally benefit from it, and how, through this change, they can achieve or deepen a number of their own objectives and goals.*

Service-learning is new in the Flemish educational context. That is why it is necessary that not only teachers are informed, but also students, social partners and policy makers. As theories about change processes often indicate, it is important to provide broad information about the content, practical implications and possibilities of a new concept.

After all, people must be able to discover how they personally benefit from it, and how, through this change, they can achieve or deepen a number of their own objectives and goals. Experience shows that people who are involved in education like to receive new input and also draw inspiration from it to get started. The pedagogy of service-learning provides a concept, language and method that enable them to give concrete shape to educational objectives in a comprehensive way. In addition, it gives them the opportunity to join a community where experience, practices and impacts are explored and shared.

It is therefore important to continuously offer introductions and information sessions about service-learning. This can take place in a wide range of forums: local teaching councils, student organizations, meetings for new (vice-)deans, etc. Given the size of the university under discussion, this process of information and communication is repeated continuously. It is also supported by information on a website <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/education/sl/servicelearning>, which lists the course description of all existing service-learning courses, including testimonies of participants. As the diagram above indicates, the pillar “information” is central from the beginning of the institutionalization process and will continued to be pursued throughout the entire trajectory. However, a sustainable vision aims to pursue an oil slick strategy where expertise no longer remains centralized, but spreads spontaneously. The aim is therefore to further expand and disseminate service-learning expertise through a “learning network” and the development of materials (both online and in print).

## Training

The need for professionalization and deepening of pedagogy was indicated above. It is not only important to disseminate the basic principles, but teachers and educational sup-

*It is not only important to disseminate the basic principles, but teachers and educational supporters must also be given the opportunity to delve further into this pedagogy, and to exchange good practices around certain sub-themes (reflection, evaluation and dealing with partners).*

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These training courses are offered widely to the institution, and more specifically to the pilot projects that are supported by the team. In the first year, three training courses were organized around the following themes: reflection in service-learning; design and planning of a service-learning course; evaluation of students. The pilot projects participate in training courses in which relevant themes are discussed. These training courses offer a combination of input and joint exchange and brainstorming. The joint thinking moments or intervisions in which practices and ideas are shared form the core of a learning network where expertise is formed, shared and transmitted. Moreover, essential training content such as the introduction to the service-learning pedagogy has been developed as online courses that can be used as a supplement to the on-campus training sessions.

Other initiatives include the organization of a service-learning course offered by KU Leuven's central professionalization office, and the inclusion of service-learning in the training for new teachers. For example, service-learning appears as a regular option for educational professionalization and as a point of attention for new teachers.

## Networking

Both within and outside the university, it is important to share and strengthen new practices and ideas in collaboration with other actors. In this way, a learning network is being built within the institution, in which expertise and experiences are shared and further developed. The pilot projects are not only committed to the development of a course, but also to participation in a learning network. In addition, service-learning can be offered across different fields of study, which can create close–interdisciplinary–partnerships. Here, the role of a central point of contact or team is to bring people together and facilitate meeting and exchange.

Networks are also important to monitor quality and to reflect together about the direction of service-learning. That is why a sounding board group (resonance council) has been

set up at KU Leuven in which various groups are represented: teachers, educational supporters, students, people from civil society and other stakeholders. The aim of this council is to gain a broader view and to take a critical look from different perspectives on what is happening and what can still happen. In this way, a bridge is also formed between all parties involved, and between the central support and the various parties involved.

External networks are also necessary, including with social organizations. In the context of this institution, where work is done through a bottom-up approach based on initiatives of individual teachers (groups), contacts with the partners have often already been established by the teacher. At this point, this did not yet require an overarching point of contact from the university to social organizations. But as service-learning becomes more common, there is also a need for a single central point of contact that is easily accessible to social organizations. In this way it forms the connection between teachers looking for organizations and organizations looking for students. In this context, an online database has been set up in which possible partners can express their needs (a so-called “science-shop”).

Service-learning is a global movement with expertise, research and good practices. It is important to also be part of this worldwide network, as it enables adjustment, new insights and collaborations. In concrete terms, this means that the insights from the international literature seep into internal practices, and that internal research and experiences are shared in (international) publications, conferences and networks. This international character can also play an important role for the legitimacy and support for pedagogy within the institution.

## Pilot projects

The structural approach at this institution is to work with concrete courses (course unit) or activities within a course (course activity). In general, it is difficult to introduce a new course in a given study program, but once it is accepted, it lasts for many years.

*Five years after the start of the project, 29 pilot courses have been implemented, spread over 13 faculties of the KU Leuven. During the academic year 2020-2021, a total of 900 students participated in these courses.*

The aim of a pilot project is that a given service-learning project becomes embedded as a course or as an activity within a course. This ensures the structural embedding of service-learning and prevents service-learning from getting stuck on the periph-

ery of the academic world. Five years after the start of the project, 29 pilot courses (<https://www.kuleuven.be/english/education/sl/servicelearningatkuleuven/pilotprojects>) have been implemented, spread over 13 faculties of the KU Leuven. During the academic year 2020-2021, a total of 900 students participated in these courses. Once the COVID-19 restrictions are relaxed this number will increase significantly. The support consists of concrete pedagogical and logistical support on the one hand, and a small financial incentive on the other. Pilot projects are used as a means of implementation of service-learning for various reasons:

- By launching a call for pilot projects, it is possible to start from initiatives that already exist and to appeal to motivated people who want to start an initiative. This enables the coordinating team to identify so-called “early adopters” that test, improve and disseminate practices.

- The pilot projects receive intensive support and a small financial incentive. In return, they become active participants in a learning network to deepen and spread their expertise. The small incentive serves as a stimulus to persuade teachers and educational supporters to make their ideas concrete and can be used for the development of the course or the support of the students who participate in it (e.g. reimbursement of transportation fees).

- Pilot projects are evaluated and form the basis for further dissemination and implementation at the university and serve as a blueprint for quality assurance and the further rollout of service-learning courses.

In view of the requirement of structural embedding in the curriculum (in the form of a course or part thereof, with an ECTS [European Credit Transfer System] sheet and on credits), the first major step for these pilot projects consists of getting the course approved within the education committee of their own department or study program. Here the role of program directors and other policy makers becomes clear. Again, it is important here that service-learning is sufficiently known within the institution, in order to avoid that those who have to make a judgment are not sufficiently familiar with service-learning and the concrete implications in its design and organization.

## Research

The need for a pillar “research” only became apparent after a while. There are various reasons for giving research a central place: adjustment and monitoring of current practices; the academic and social accountability of (the effects of) the pedagogy; and communication and exchange of results through embedding in an (international) research tradition.

Monitoring, evaluation and adjustment of existing courses help to guarantee their quality, and to filter out the lessons learned, which in turn can form the basis for guidance and new questions. Moreover, the pedagogical insights from this research are not only useful for service-learning per se, but can also be applied more broadly to education and learning in general.

*Research into what service-learning can contribute to the acceptance and deepening of the pedagogy within the institution ('internal marketing'), and also makes the pedagogy visible to a wider audience.*

Research into what service-learning can bring about—whether this concerns concrete results, impacts or effects in the longer term—can contribute to the acceptance and deepening of the pedagogy within the

institution (“internal marketing”), and also makes the pedagogy visible to a wider audience. Research questions concern not only the student (learning outcomes, reflection, citizenship formation, identity formation), but also the social partners and what arises in the interaction between student/institution and society.

Although service-learning has been researched for thirty years, it remains a relatively new domain that opens up possibilities for innovative and international (comparative) research. While the research has so far been mainly conducted in the US, there is now a demand for other parts of the world to join this research community and highlight other perspectives.

### **C. Bottom-up and top-down and the five pillars: from an “enclave strategy” to inclusivity**

In the case outlined above, there is an “enclave strategy”: service-learning is initially introduced and promoted by a limited group of people and thus expands. However, there are two possible scenarios in the next phase: either the enclave simply remains what it is, and eventually becomes isolated and marginalized within the academic world; or the initial enclave becomes a vehicle for the dissemination of expertise, good practices and inspiration within the institution. It is here that the combination of bottom-up and top-down is important: support from above is necessary for the enclave to break out of the isolated situation.

The latter is what happened at the KU Leuven. After five years, service-learning has become part of the KU Leuven’s central educational strategy. This in fact leads to a new wave:

the creation of new service-learning courses is no longer merely a bottom-up initiative, but is now actively being promoted from the center. Still, central leadership must make a number of firm commitments, without wanting to standardize or impose from above, to

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ensure its continued development. In this case, bottom-up and top-down processes took place approximately simultaneously; for the future, there is an explicit resolve to maintain a good balance and to allow the movement to grow further from below.

Throughout the entire process of implementing service-learning courses, the continuous interaction between the five pillars described above has been a very helpful guidance. They both indicate the way to go and monitor the road travelled. Moreover, they have a very practical use: in any planning activity of the service-learning team, the five pillars are always taken as a reference scheme that helps to be attentive to the five key domains and the process as a whole.

When this process is tested against other international experiences, a possible weak link stands out: the comparatively weaker presence of students and social partners. Via the system of the pilot projects, the bottom-up movement is mainly stimulated among teachers and educational supporters, while it could also be led by students and social partners. In several of the “five pillars,” attention is paid to these groups (sounding board group, broad training courses, information), but in the long term these groups must be integrated more firmly. Otherwise, service-learning risks becoming absorbed in a purely academic process nestled in the institution, despite the importance of reciprocal movement between student/institution and society to the pedagogy.

## Conclusion

The KU Leuven and other Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences have given the signal to shift the local development of service-learning up a gear, and to take the step towards institutional anchoring. In doing so, they respond to a “momentum” in which everyone is pulling in the same direction: how can (higher) education be more involved in society, in a way that is meaningful for all involved? The institutionalization of service-learning within higher education is a major step in that direction, whereby service-learning no longer falls

solely on the shoulders of the enthusiastic group that is now involved. This anchoring brings with it many challenges, both in terms of actors, action points and objectives.

Firstly, a broad involvement of different groups is needed: teaching staff, students, social partners, wider society. It is important that these are addressed, involved and formed at their own pace. However, institutionalization does not mean that everyone must be involved immediately. Any educational reform also evokes (justified) resistance. That is why it is better to take a step-by-step approach that starts with motivated teachers and students. Concrete pilot projects allow educational institutions to start from what already exists or is being pursued at the base. This must be combined with strong support and commitment at a central level.

Second, a coordinated approach of different action domains is required: it is not only about the introduction of service-learning subjects in the curriculum, but also about raising further awareness of the concept, training and professionalization, the formation of a learning network and research into existing practices and their effects. A solid knowledge center that bundles expertise, offers support to the various parties involved, and guides the entire process is desirable (in the long term).

Third, there must be a clear long-term perspective. This assumes that there is a broad consensus about what service-learning is and what it aims to do, and that these objectives and this shared definition are being monitored (quality assurance). It is important that service-learning is given a place within the curriculum, and that it therefore settles into fully-fledged subjects. Those who commit themselves to this must be recognized, because for the teaching staff, as well as for the students and the social partners, this means a commitment and investment: they not only give their time and energy, but are also vulnerable: students engage themselves outside the safe walls of the classroom, teachers give up much of the control specific to the auditorium, social partners open both their own organization and the target group for which they work to outsiders.

In summary, service-learning is not intended to become yet another short-term educational innovation, but to embed itself within the institutions in a sustainable way. We should therefore not only speak of institutionalization, but even of a service-learning culture. Service-learning “culture” refers to a broader vision of the institution towards socially engaged research and education, in which students expect to do service-learning in their training, and teachers and partners do not experience barriers in interacting on this topic. In September 2020, a university-wide KU Leuven Engage project, which embraces efforts towards sustainability, global engagement, diversity, social impact, community engagement, etc., has been set up for this purpose <https://www.kuleuven.be/engage/English/index.html>.



Hopefully, institutions in Belgium and elsewhere can draw inspiration from the handles and approaches that emerged in this article, to anchor service-learning institutionally each in their own way and to make grow a service-learning “culture.”

(\*) *This article is a revised and updated version of the second part of an article originally published in Dutch: M. Mottart, “Institutionele inbedding van service-learning: Enkele handvaten voor een duurzame verankering”, Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en -beleid (2017: 3), pp. 182-194. The first part of the article introduced the major publications on the acquired and documented experiences of implementation of service-learning in the US (with bibliography). The second part, that is translated and revised here, brings together the lessons learned from the local context of Service-Learning at KU Leuven that may inspire other experiences.*



In support of the Global Compact on Education

*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

***“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”***

*Pope Francis*

## **4** Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education

This work aims to discover and highlight all the wealth within the perspectives of the different actors participating in the institutionalization processes of service-learning in Higher Education. Through the description of various global cases of service-learning institutionalization, the book presents reflections, actions and experiences that outline conceptual elements and key features, seeking to contribute to the great global debate on how and to which purpose processes allowing for the integration of service-learning into the identity and culture of Higher Education institutions are launched and developed.

We introduce this fourth volume of the Uniservitate collection with the firm intention of allowing readers to experience, through its pages, a journey across the different continents and cultures, exploring stories as diverse as the contexts and actors behind them, and to take on the challenges and dreams that we believe the book suggests, with a forward-looking approach, for those interested in a Higher Education that is more engaged with the world in which it unfolds its actions.

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