



## Editorial

# Service-Learning and Community Engagement comes of age in the Asia-Pacific

Dr. Stephen C Chan and Professor Grace Ngai

**Service-learning as it is understood today, a structured, experiential pedagogy which integrates academic learning with meaningful community service and reflection, began to take shape in the USA in the early 1960s, spreading to numerous colleges and universities by the 1980s.**

Today, more than half of American universities and colleges practice service-learning (AAC&U, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps its proliferation is because service-learning is rooted in altruism, and altruism is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. As the classic adage *bonum diffusivum sui* succinctly describes, goodness tends to spread. In any case, service-learning has a universal appeal that extends well beyond its origins as a pedagogical approach in the USA. In Latin America, over 1,000 universities reported having

service-learning activities (CLAYSS, 2021)<sup>2</sup>, while it is estimated that up to 40% of European Universities have some form of service-learning embedded in the curriculum (EUA, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Recent Trends in General Education Design, Learning Outcomes, and Teaching Approaches. Key Findings from a Survey among Administrators at AAC&U Member Institutions." The American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2016 report. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED582012.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Social Engagement in the Higher Education Curriculum", Centro Latinoamericano de aprendizaje y servicio solidario, 2021. Retrieved on 15 July 2025. [https://test.clayss.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ENG\\_Social-Engagement\\_HE.pdf](https://test.clayss.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ENG_Social-Engagement_HE.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> "European University Association Annual Report: The Voice of Europe's Universities," 2020. Retrieved on 15 June 2025. <https://www.eua.eu/publications/reports/eua-annual-report-2020.html>



In the Asia-Pacific region, service-learning is also becoming a part of the educational landscape. We are relatively speaking a newcomer to service-learning, which may be due to the traditional examination-focused education system and the longstanding role of higher education as professional development. Having said that, we are catching up with a vengeance. In Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University's (PolyU) service-learning program has grown exponentially, from barely 70 students in 2012 when service-learning was institutionalized as an undergraduate requirement in the

University, to an annual enrolment of over 4,500 students in service-learning courses offered by different academic disciplines. Large teams are dispatched yearly to serve local and non-local communities in tangible, immediate ways such as building solar panels and prescribing eye glasses, or longer-term improvements such as education and health promotion, or advocacy projects such as environmental awareness. We see this phenomenon repeated in other parts of the Asia-Pacific, especially where service-learning is adopted by large, oftentimes state-funded institutions.

Truly, it would not be a stretch to say that service-learning and community engagement has come of age in the Asia-Pacific.

What does it mean for the Asia-Pacific to do service-learning?

*Learning is culture dependent.* Service-learning, with its affective learning outcomes that focus on students' values, attitudes and responsibilities, would be expected to be even more culture dependent than knowledge and skills learning. *The context is culture dependent.* Service-





learning, as an experiential pedagogy where much of the learning takes place in the community, is again bound to be more culture dependent than learning that takes place solely in the classroom.

*Institutional structure is also culture dependent.* This impacts the way service-learning is actualised in the institution and with the community.

With this, practices inherited from the West may or may not be as effective

in all Asia-Pacific contexts. In Asia alone, there is such diversity in culture, religion and level of development that what works for one institution may not work as well for another.

Recognising this fact made us determined from the start to make research and evaluation a central part of our service-learning pursuit in PolyU. We thus initiated the International Conference on Service-Learning

(ICSL) in 2014 to bring together academics, scholars, and students interested in developing a scholarly and evidence-based approach to service-learning. A decade later in December 2024, we convened the 5<sup>th</sup> ICSL in conjunction with the International Association for Research in Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) Asia-Pacific Community of Practice. This marked the first time that IARSLCE, the leading

professional association in this field, held a conference in this region. The 2024 conference attracted a larger and more diverse group of participants from a wide range of disciplines, a broad focus ranging from student learning to university-community engagement, and papers of greater rigor and quality.

The special issue of *Transform: The Journal for Engaged Scholarship* showcases representative presentations from the 2024 IARSLCE A-P x ICSL conference. Authors who presented papers on the conference's different thematic areas were invited to expand their abstract submissions to the conference into full papers.

The first two papers tackle the thematic area of *service-learning institutionalisation and models*. Writing from Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, Indigne, Go and Abenir present a descriptive case study of how service-learning was crafted into the university's core curriculum. This was achieved by merging service-learning courses on sustainable development with the National Service Training Program, a government-mandated civic education program. The authors describe the process as a "meso-level integration", a model of institutionalizing service-learning that bridges macro-level institution wide policy with micro-level classroom practices. The authors happily report that the meso-level implementation of service-learning yielded positive results in students' academic and civic outcomes.

The second paper by Crerar, Sharma and Boro is about the institutionalisation of service-learning in four faith-based colleges or universities in India, focusing on stakeholders' attitudes. Service-learning in Indian tertiary institutions found resonance in a government-sanctioned program, the National Service Scheme, inspired by none less than Mahatma Gandhi who saw the need to engage students' "head, heart and hands" in social service. Crerar, Sharma and Boro report that teacher and student stakeholders held more favorable attitudes toward institutionalising service-learning compared to administrators who were concerned about practical implications such as lack of resources and time constraints. The authors discuss threats and opportunities around institutionalising service-learning and offer recommendations for institutions considering the move.

The next two papers were developed from conference presentations about *service-learning in co-curricular education*. They present innovative examples of service-learning courses in Hong Kong and in Mainland China. Barrera and Talbot discuss their first-hand, first-time adventure of adopting service-learning into their music courses in Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Music. Recounting and reflecting about their experience and noting how their students developed a "more sensitive and informed perspective" of the

deaf community with whom they worked, Barrera and Talbot reach a conclusion that is worth highlighting: service-learning and similar educational practices which "facilitate opportunities for students to become acquainted with a new community of people and learn how to emphatically and respectfully engage with its members play a vital and irreplaceable role in promoting students' holistic growth and understanding of their roles in shaping an inclusive society."

Godoy and Geng is a practice article which discusses the purpose, development and initial outcomes of introducing a service-learning component to an existing course on the environment and sustainability at New York University Shanghai. By adding class projects where students repurposed plastic waste into useful products, Godoy and Geng witnessed how service-learning enriched the course's original educational objectives. Like Barrera and Talbot, Godoy and Geng share an encouraging conclusion, noting "a shift in the breadth and depth of student learning... The experiences and skills students exercised through service-learning exceeded what they could have gained through conventional classroom instruction alone."

*Community engagement and partnership* is the thematic area of the paper by Pink, Vandierendonck and Tredinnick, and by Tran and Kecskes. Pink, Vandierendonck

and Tredinnick discuss the fruitful partnership between the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the Order of Malta, a humanitarian organisation. Recipient of an ACU Vice Chancellor's Excellence Award, 2025, the partnership's project expanded from a single, mobile community hub to community cafes, a Read to Learn program, and a cooking program to alleviate food insecurity. What the authors argue from their experience is important: investing in research and relationship building, taking an assets-based approach, and having appropriate institutional structures contribute to successful campus-community engagement initiatives.

Tran and Keckes is exploratory research about the historical background and status of community-campus partnerships in Vietnam where service and community-engaged learning has significantly grown in recent years. The authors attribute the positive development to factors such as deeply held Confucian values in Vietnamese society, and a government requirement to include social service in the curriculum. Tran and Keckes draw out the motivations and challenges of implementing service-learning in Vietnam. They also offer suggestions to further facilitate and accelerate its spread, among other things, by focusing future research on key areas.

Finally, Lai, Lau, Pang and Chan add a necessary element to the volume

by contributing a paper about integrating modern technologies to service-learning courses. The desire to reinforce student preparation and project planning led the authors to employ digital tools in their international service-learning courses in engineering. Deploying an AI assessment system to give students rubrics-based feedback and turning Padlet, a widely used collaborative platform, into a virtual space for teacher-student and peer-to-peer feedback, the authors were able to enhance student support and guide project planning more effectively.

We are honored to include in the volume a review by Prof. Robert Hollister, a pioneer in the engaged university movement, of our recently published book about PolyU's service-learning journey. What Prof. Hollister comments about the book is also true about the papers included in this special issue: each in its own way contributes to "countering the critique that university engagement programs diminish academic quality, demonstrating to the contrary that civic responsibility programs actually can be a route to higher quality education." We are confident that readers will find in this special issue "inspiration and guidance" from contributing authors' studies, experiences and insights for advancing service-learning and community engagement research and practice.

## *Dr. Stephen C Chan*

*Dr Stephen Chan Chi Fai was born and raised in Hong Kong. After receiving his Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering from The University of Rochester in the United States in 1987, he successively engaged in research and worked at Neo-Visuals Inc in Toronto and the National Research Council of Canada in Ottawa. He joined the Department of Computing at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) in 1993, where he mainly taught information technology-related subjects. His research interests include data mining, human-computer interaction, and service-learning.*

*Dr Chan had been the Founding Head of the Office of Service-Learning (subsequently renamed Service-Learning and Leadership Office) at PolyU from 2011 to 2020. The Office is responsible for coordinating and supporting the development of service-learning subjects and the launch of new projects, and now more than 70 service-learning subjects are offered to more than 4,500 students every academic year. Since 2006, he has established and led more than 30 service-learning projects in Hong Kong, the Chinese Mainland, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, Rwanda, Kyrgyzstan, India, South Africa and Tanzania. Among them, for the service-learning project in Rwanda that lasted several years, Dr Chan and his team*



*established small solar charging stations in local rural areas, benefiting 800 households and greatly improving the lives of villagers.*

*Dr Chan was awarded the 2006-2007 Faculty of Engineering Award (Team) in Teaching by PolyU, and 2007-2008 The President's Awards in Services (Team) by PolyU, and together with Dr Grace Ngai, won the University Grants Committee Teaching Award (General Faculty Members/Teams category) in 2016 in recognition of their excellent teaching performance and achievements in service-learning.*

*He has also had extensive scholarly outputs on service-learning research and practices and has provided professional training and consulting services to universities in many countries outside of PolyU. He is a board member of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) and is committed to promoting close collaboration between different institutions in the Asia-Pacific region in the field of service-learning.*

## *Professor Grace Ngai*

*Prof. Grace Ngai graduated from Brown University (Sc.B) and Johns Hopkins University (MSE, PhD) in the United States. Since starting her career at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, she has successfully pioneered a number of teaching initiatives, one of the most prominent being service-learning. Together with her team, she proposed one of the first service-learning subjects at PolyU. This subject, which integrates service to the community with technology and computing, has brought students on service projects in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Africa, and Rwanda. Many of these projects were held during the COVID-19 pandemic when traditional face-to-face teaching and travel was not possible, and innovative means had to be devised to allow students to keep learning and serving.*

*Prof. Ngai and the Service-Learning and Leadership Office have been instrumental in supporting and promoting PolyU's service-learning initiative. She was the founding coordinator of the Sub-committee on Service-Learning Subjects, which oversees the approval and offering of all service-learning subjects, and the co-facilitator of the Community of Practice in Service-learning. Through numerous teaching and learning development projects, they*

*have initiated many professional development programmes that engage faculty through workshops, seminars, and research salons on topics in offering, assessing, and conducting scholarly work in service-learning.*

*PolyU's service-learning programme has expanded over the years. From 6 subjects and 200 students in 2012, as of 2024, PolyU has over 60 regularly offered subjects catering to over 4,500 students yearly. As a result of her work, her team was the recipient of the Hong Kong University Grants Committee Teaching Award in 2016, and PolyU's service-learning programme was awarded the "Teaching and Learning Strategy of the Year" by the Times Higher Education Awards Asia 2022. She leads PolyU's signature service-learning project, "Habitat Green", which received the Silver Award in the Sustainability Education Action category at the prestigious QS Reimagine Education Awards 2024. Her latest publication, *Academic Excellence with Civic Responsibility: The First Decade of Service-Learning at PolyU*, was widely accepted as she examines the challenges and opportunities along the journey of advancing PolyU's service-learning institutionalization efforts.*