



From Knowledge to Action: Service Learning as a Pathway to Experiential Education in Thai Universities

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Abstract

Thailand's transition toward a knowledge-based, innovation-driven economy has raised expectations for universities to produce graduates who possess not only strong academic knowledge but also practical skills and social responsibility. However, traditional lecture-based teaching methods remain dominant in many higher education institutions, often limiting students' opportunities to apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Experiential learning approaches have therefore gained increasing attention as strategies to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application. Among these approaches, service learning has emerged as a particularly valuable pedagogical model that integrates academic learning with community engagement. This paper examines the role of service learning in developing student competencies while contributing to sustainable development in the Thai context. Drawing on literature related to experiential learning theory, service learning, and higher education reform, the paper explores how service-learning initiatives help develop critical competencies such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. The study also discusses current service-learning practices in Thai universities and examines challenges related to curriculum integration, institutional support, and community partnerships. Furthermore, the paper highlights policy implications for strengthening service-learning initiatives in Thailand's higher education system. The findings suggest that service learning provides an effective approach for fostering socially responsible graduates while supporting community development and sustainable development goals.

Keywords: experiential learning, service learning, higher education, sustainable development, Thailand

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions worldwide are facing increasing pressure to prepare graduates for complex social, economic, and technological environments. In the twenty-first century, employers and policymakers expect university graduates to possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. These competencies are often described as essential "21st-century skills" that enable individuals to navigate rapidly changing professional and social contexts. In Thailand, these expectations have become particularly significant as the country transitions toward a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy. National initiatives such as Thailand 4.0 emphasize innovation, technological advancement, and human capital development as key drivers of economic growth (Puncreobutr, 2016). As a result, Thai

universities are increasingly expected to align their educational practices with national development goals while preparing students to compete in global labor markets.

Despite these expectations, many higher education institutions in Thailand continue to rely heavily on traditional lecture-based teaching methods that emphasize theoretical knowledge rather than practical application. While these approaches are effective for transmitting disciplinary content, they often provide limited opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. Consequently, concerns have been raised about the readiness of university graduates to meet employers' expectations and contribute effectively to society (World Bank, 2020). particularly regarding essential competencies such as communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and professional work attitudes (Pancharoen & Chorkaew, 2022; Wimonchong, 2021; Thatong, 2018). Studies of the Thai labor market have indicated that employers increasingly expect graduates to possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable skills, interpersonal competencies, and professional work ethics to adapt to contemporary workplace demands.

Experiential learning has emerged as an important pedagogical approach that addresses these challenges by connecting academic learning with practical experience. Experiential learning emphasizes active participation, reflection, and real-world engagement as key elements of the learning process (Kolb, 1984). Through experiential learning activities such as internships, cooperative education, project-based learning, and community engagement, students can apply theoretical knowledge while developing essential professional and social competencies.

Among these experiential learning approaches, service learning has gained increasing attention in higher education. Service learning integrates academic learning objectives with community service, enabling students to apply disciplinary knowledge to address real social issues. Unlike traditional volunteer activities, service learning involves structured reflection and intentional integration with academic coursework (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

In the Thai context, service learning is particularly relevant because universities have historically played an important role in supporting community development and social engagement. Many Thai universities organize community outreach programs, volunteer camps, and rural development initiatives that involve student participation. When these activities are integrated into academic curricula, they can offer valuable experiential learning opportunities while contributing to local development.

This paper explores the role of service learning in promoting experiential learning and sustainable development within Thai higher education. Specifically, the paper examines the theoretical foundations of service learning, its contributions to student development, and the challenges associated with its implementation. The paper also discusses policy implications for strengthening service-learning initiatives in Thai universities.

2. Discussion

1. Experiential Learning and Service Learning: Conceptual Foundations

Experiential learning theory has its roots in the works of several influential educational theorists, including John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and David Kolb. Dewey (1938) emphasized the importance of experience in education, arguing that meaningful learning occurs when students actively engage with real-world situations and reflect upon their experiences. According to Dewey, education should not be limited to the transmission of information but should instead involve active inquiry and problem-solving within authentic contexts.

Building on these ideas, Kolb (1984) developed the experiential learning model, which describes learning as a cyclical process consisting of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In this model, learners begin with a concrete experience that involves active participation in a task or activity. They

then reflect on this experience to identify patterns or insights. Through reflection, learners develop conceptual understanding that helps them interpret the experience. Finally, learners apply this new knowledge to different situations through experimentation.

Experiential learning theory suggests that knowledge is constructed through the transformation of experience rather than being passively received from instructors (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). As a result, experiential learning approaches encourage active student participation, critical reflection, and practical application.

Service learning is a specific form of experiential learning that integrates academic instruction with community service. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service learning as a course-based educational experience in which students participate in organized service activities that address community needs while reflecting on these experiences to deepen their understanding of course content. It is also defined as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). Service-learning activities typically involve structured projects that connect academic learning with meaningful community engagement. Common examples include tutoring or mentoring programs in local schools, where university students support younger learners while applying pedagogical knowledge. Environmental conservation projects, such as community clean-up campaigns or sustainability awareness initiatives, are also widely implemented. In addition, students may collaborate with local organizations to conduct community needs assessments, health promotion campaigns, or digital literacy training for disadvantaged groups. Service-learning activities often include reflection components, such as journals or group discussions, enabling students to connect their community experiences with academic concepts while developing civic responsibility and professional skills.

A key characteristic that distinguishes service learning from traditional volunteering is its intentional connection with academic learning objectives. In service learning, community engagement activities are carefully designed to support specific learning outcomes. Students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences through activities such as reflective journals, group discussions, or presentations.

Research has shown that service learning can contribute to multiple dimensions of student development. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that service-learning experiences significantly enhance students’ critical thinking abilities, interpersonal skills, and civic engagement. In addition, service learning can strengthen students’ understanding of social issues and encourage a greater sense of responsibility toward their communities. Several studies conducted in Asian higher education contexts have demonstrated that service learning contributes to multiple dimensions of student development. For example, a study of university alumni in Hong Kong found that participation in service-learning programs enhanced students’ intellectual, social, civic, and cross-cultural competencies (Lin et al., 2024). In Malaysia, research by Diong, Cheah, and Siah (2025) reported that service-learning activities strengthened students’ communication skills, teamwork abilities, and social awareness. Similarly, a study in the Philippines showed that service-learning participation significantly improved students’ life skills and civic responsibility while fostering stronger engagement with community issues (Mabborang et al., 2024). In the Thai context, Chatsuthipan (2008) found that service-learning programs enhanced students’ civic responsibility, academic skills, and professional competencies. These findings collectively highlight the broad developmental benefits of service-learning initiatives in Asian higher education institutions.

Another important feature of service learning is the principle of reciprocity, which emphasizes mutual benefit between students and the communities they serve. In effective service-learning programs, learning is not one-directional; instead, both students and

community partners contribute to and benefit from the collaboration. While students gain practical experiences, professional skills, and a deeper understanding of social issues, communities receive meaningful services or resources that address local needs. Studies in Asian contexts support this reciprocal model. For example, research in Hong Kong found that community partners reported tangible benefits such as increased organizational capacity and community awareness through student service-learning projects (Ngai, 2006). Similarly, a study in Singapore demonstrated that community engagement projects allowed students to develop intercultural understanding while supporting community development initiatives (Tan, 2009).

2. Service Learning and Sustainable Development

The concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) emphasizes the role of education in promoting social responsibility, environmental awareness, and sustainable economic development. Service learning aligns closely with these objectives because it encourages students to engage with real-world challenges affecting their communities. A growing body of research highlights the strong relationship between service learning and sustainable development, particularly in promoting social responsibility, community engagement, and the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Service learning supports sustainable development by connecting academic knowledge with real-world community challenges. Through community-based projects, students contribute to addressing social, environmental, and economic issues while simultaneously developing professional competencies. According to UNESCO (2017), experiential and community-based learning approaches such as service learning play an important role in advancing education for sustainable development by encouraging students to actively engage with sustainability issues in their communities. These learning experiences help students understand complex societal challenges and develop the skills needed to contribute to sustainable solutions.

Empirical studies also demonstrate that service-learning participation enhances students' awareness of sustainability issues and strengthens their commitment to community development. Bringle and Hatcher (2011) found that service-learning programs foster civic engagement and social responsibility, which are essential components of sustainable societies. Similarly, Leal Filho et al. (2019) reported that universities implementing community-engaged learning initiatives contribute significantly to achieving the SDGs by mobilizing student knowledge and institutional resources to support local development projects. Service-learning initiatives have been used to address issues such as environmental conservation, public health education, poverty reduction, and community capacity building.

In addition, research in higher education indicates that service learning promotes long-term attitudes toward sustainability by encouraging students to critically reflect on the social and environmental impact of their actions (Eyler & Giles, 1999). By linking academic learning with community problem-solving, service learning helps develop graduates who are not only professionally competent but also socially responsible and committed to sustainable development.

Through service-learning projects, students may work with community organizations, local governments, or non-profit groups to address issues such as environmental conservation, education access, public health, or social inequality. These experiences allow students to apply academic knowledge while contributing to community well-being.

In the ASEAN region, universities increasingly recognize the importance of community engagement in achieving sustainable development goals. Higher education institutions can serve as platforms for collaboration between academic researchers, local communities, and

policymakers.

In Thailand, national development policies also emphasize sustainable development and community participation. The National Economic and Social Development Council has identified sustainable development as a key priority for national development strategies (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021). Universities, therefore, play an important role in supporting these objectives through research, education, and community engagement initiatives. Service learning provides an effective mechanism for integrating these objectives into higher education curricula. By engaging students in community-based projects, universities can simultaneously support student learning and contribute to sustainable local development.

3. Service Learning in Thai Higher Education

Community engagement has long been a part of student life in Thai universities. Many institutions organize volunteer activities, rural development camps, and social service projects that encourage students to contribute to society. These initiatives reflect cultural values emphasizing community cooperation and social responsibility.

In recent years, Thai universities have begun to integrate these activities more systematically into academic programs through service-learning models. The Thailand Qualifications Framework (TQF) emphasizes the development of student competencies beyond academic knowledge, including ethical responsibility and social engagement (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2017). Several universities have developed programs that incorporate service learning into coursework. For example, students in education programs may conduct teaching activities in rural schools, while environmental science students may participate in conservation projects with local communities.

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation has also encouraged universities to strengthen their engagement with communities and local industries as part of national development strategies (MHESI, 2020). These initiatives reflect growing recognition of universities' role in supporting regional development. However, the extent to which service learning is formally integrated into curricula varies across institutions. In many cases, community service activities remain extracurricular rather than being incorporated into academic courses. Strengthening the integration of service learning into formal curricula remains an important priority for Thai higher education institutions.

4. Benefits of Service Learning for Thai University Students

Service learning offers numerous benefits for students, particularly in developing professional and social competencies.

First, service learning helps students develop 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. When students work on real-world community projects, they must analyze problems, develop solutions, and communicate effectively with diverse stakeholders. These experiences encourage students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations while working in teams to achieve shared goals. Through continuous interaction with community members and project partners, students also improve their ability to negotiate ideas, manage tasks, and present solutions. Such learning environments promote active participation and foster higher-order thinking skills essential to professional and social contexts.

Second, service learning promotes civic responsibility and social awareness. By engaging with communities, students gain a deeper understanding of social issues and develop empathy toward individuals from different backgrounds. These experiences can strengthen students' sense of responsibility toward society. Direct interaction with communities allows students to recognize real social challenges such as inequality, environmental issues, and access to

education. As a result, students begin to view themselves as active contributors to society rather than passive observers. This process helps cultivate socially responsible graduates who are more willing to participate in community development and public service initiatives.

Third, service learning supports career readiness and employability. Practical experiences allow students to develop professional skills and gain exposure to potential career paths. Research indicates that experiential learning experiences can improve students' employment outcomes and workplace readiness (Kuh, 2008). Through service-learning projects, students learn how to manage responsibilities, meet project deadlines, and work within organizational structures. They also develop professional communication skills by interacting with community leaders, organizations, and project supervisors. These experiences help students build confidence, strengthen their professional identity, and better understand the expectations of the modern workplace.

In the Thai context, these benefits are particularly important because employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only technical expertise but also strong interpersonal and adaptive competencies (World Bank, 2020). Rapid economic transformation, digitalization, and Thailand's transition toward an innovation-driven economy have intensified demand for graduates who can communicate effectively, collaborate, and adapt to complex workplace environments. However, several reports have noted a gap between the skills developed through traditional university education and the competencies employers require in the labor market. Experiential learning approaches, including service learning, internships, and community-based projects, therefore play a critical role in helping Thai students develop practical skills, professional attitudes, and real-world problem-solving abilities.

5. Challenges in Implementing Service Learning in Thai Universities

Despite its benefits, implementing service learning in Thai contexts presents several challenges. One major challenge is the availability of institutional resources. Service-learning programs require coordination with community partners, supervision of student activities, and evaluation of learning outcomes. These activities often demand additional administrative support, funding, and time from faculty members and program coordinators. It is clear that effective service-learning programs require institutional commitment, including dedicated staff, financial support, and organizational structures to manage partnerships and student placements. In many universities, limited budgets and heavy teaching workloads can make it difficult to sustain large-scale service-learning initiatives.

Another challenge involves curriculum integration. Many academic programs have structured curricula that leave limited flexibility for field-based learning activities. Faculty members may face difficulties balancing theoretical content with experiential learning components within the limited instructional time available. Accreditation requirements and standardized course structures may further restrict opportunities to incorporate community-based projects into existing courses. Experiential learning research emphasizes that successful integration requires clear learning outcomes, structured reflection activities, and careful alignment between community engagement and academic objectives (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Without proper curriculum design, service-learning activities may become peripheral rather than integral to academic learning.

Faculty readiness also represents a challenge. Some instructors may lack experience in designing service-learning projects or facilitating reflective learning processes. Effective service learning requires educators to adopt student-centered teaching approaches and guide students in connecting their experiences with academic knowledge. However, many faculty members are more familiar with traditional lecture-based instruction and may feel uncertain about implementing experiential learning methods. Professional development programs and institutional support are therefore essential to help instructors design meaningful service-

learning activities and develop appropriate assessment methods (Kuh, 2008).

Finally, sustaining partnerships with community organizations requires ongoing communication and coordination. Without strong partnerships, service-learning programs may struggle to maintain meaningful engagement with communities. Community organizations may have limited time and resources to supervise student activities or coordinate projects with universities. As a result, maintaining long-term partnerships requires mutual trust, clear expectations, and continuous collaboration. It is important to note that sustainable service-learning programs depend on reciprocal relationships in which universities and community partners share responsibilities and benefits from the collaboration.

3. Implications

To strengthen service learning in Thai universities, several policy and institutional strategies should be considered, drawing on successful international practices while adapting them to the Thai context.

First, universities should integrate service learning into academic curricula rather than treating it as an extracurricular activity. In the United States, institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania and Stanford University have successfully embedded service learning into credit-bearing courses, ensuring that community engagement contributes directly to academic learning outcomes. Similarly, Thai universities can align service-learning projects with the Thailand Qualifications Framework (TQF) so that community-based activities support competencies such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. For example, students in business or tourism programs could collaborate with community enterprises (OTOP groups) to improve marketing strategies or digital promotion, linking academic learning with local economic development.

Second, universities should establish community engagement or service-learning centers to coordinate partnerships with external organizations. A notable international example is the National University of Singapore's Office of Service Learning, which acts as a central hub connecting students, faculty, and community partners. Similar centers in Thai universities could collaborate with Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAOs), local schools, and NGOs to identify community needs and design long-term student projects. Such centers would help maintain sustainable partnerships and ensure that service-learning initiatives contribute meaningfully to local development.

Third, faculty development is essential for effective service-learning implementation. In Australia, universities such as Deakin University provide structured professional development programs that train faculty members to design experiential learning courses and evaluate reflective learning outcomes. Thai universities could adopt similar models by offering workshops and training programs that help instructors integrate service-learning activities into their teaching. Additionally, recognizing community-engaged teaching as part of faculty performance evaluation would encourage instructors to adopt these approaches more actively.

Finally, at the policy level, government agencies can play a significant role in promoting service learning. For instance, Singapore's government-supported university-community engagement initiatives encourage students to work with communities on social innovation projects that address local challenges. In Thailand, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) could support similar initiatives by providing funding for university-community collaboration projects. These programs could align service-learning activities with national development priorities such as the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economy, allowing students to contribute to sustainable tourism, environmental conservation, and community enterprise development. By learning from successful international models and adapting them to local conditions, Thai universities can develop service-learning programs that enhance student learning while contributing to community development.

4. Conclusion

Service learning represents a powerful experiential learning approach that connects academic knowledge with meaningful community engagement. Through participation in structured service-learning projects, students apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts while developing essential competencies, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and civic responsibility. These learning experiences not only enhance students' academic development but also foster a deeper understanding of social issues and community needs.

In the Thai context, service learning is particularly relevant as the country moves toward an innovation-driven and sustainable development model. National policies emphasizing human capital development, community empowerment, and sustainable growth highlight the importance of graduates who possess both professional expertise and strong social awareness. Service-learning initiatives, therefore, provide a practical mechanism through which universities can contribute to national priorities by connecting student learning with local development efforts.

However, for service learning to achieve its full potential, systematic institutional support is required. Universities must integrate service learning into curricula, invest in faculty development, and establish sustainable partnerships with community organizations. At the same time, supportive national policies and collaborative frameworks between universities, local governments, and civil society organizations are essential for expanding service-learning opportunities.

Ultimately, strengthening service-learning initiatives can enable Thai universities to play a more active role in community development while preparing graduates who are not only academically competent but also socially responsible, adaptable, and capable of addressing complex challenges in an increasingly interconnected world.

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