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Autonomy, competence, and relatedness: unpacking faculty motivation in service-learning

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning (SL) has gained global popularity for promoting students' civic engagement and democratic and pluralistic values and impacting faculty and communities. It relies on foundational pillars (the 4 Rs): respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflexivity. While the drivers of faculty motivation have received attention from researchers, a gap remains in understanding what sustains their motivation and engagement over time. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of a group of European scholars through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. A hybrid thematic analysis was employed to analyze the 22 semi-structured interviews collected in 14 European countries. The findings reveal that SL exerts a transformative influence on the community, students, faculty, and higher education institutions, nurturing a heightened sense of competence among faculty members. Institutionalization is a pivotal factor in sustaining and rewarding engaged faculty scholarship, enabling autonomy in academic roles, and aligning personal values with institutional endeavors. Finally, the community experience within SL fosters positive connections with colleagues and communities at local, national, and international levels. As a result, this study introduces a fifth foundational pillar, extending the existing 4 Rs model: *relatedness*. Future research directions and implications are proposed.

Introduction

Service-learning (SL) in Europe emerged in the twenty-first century, unlike other regions, such as North and South America, where it has been promoted and adopted for decades. In 2019, the European SL association (EASLHE) was created, stimulating the SL institutionalization process and generation of other national networks in many countries and fostering a sense of shared interconnectedness among European scholars (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019).

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SL is a method that combines engaged service activities with engaged teaching and research opportunities. This approach promotes students' civic engagement and democratic and pluralistic values through a productive balance of service and learning (Jacoby, 2014). In SL, students engage in experiences with the community, deploying their academic and personal competencies to address community-defined needs. The service is integrated into the curriculum, and the content of the experience has *relevance* for HEIs and communities. The students' learning derives from the experience and, foremost, the *reflection* on the meaning of the activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). *Respect* for the community's knowledge and the *reciprocity* of the established university-community partnership are, together with relevance and reflection, the pillars (four Rs) of SL (Butin, 2003).

SL is a method HEIs use worldwide to promote students' civic engagement and democratic values (Jacoby, 2014). While literature posits the effectiveness of SL in improving student learning and social development, we believe that this reason alone may not be enough to push faculty towards a paramount change, which involves additional workload and time commitment to meaningfully engage with the surrounding community (Compare et al., 2022; Mayor Paredes et al., 2023; Sandberg, 2018). Therefore, building on the Self-Determination Theory, we aim to explore faculty motivations and long-term engagement. This exploration is particularly relevant in a context where SL is still in the consolidation process, highlighting the need to identify key elements for the effective integration and longevity of SL practices.

Self-determination theory: understanding faculty's engagement

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), understanding behaviors requires considering motivation, differentiating between intrinsic motivation, driven by interest and satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, driven by external rewards (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The theory also suggests that to promote motivational persistence and sustain behavioral engagement, contextual factors (e.g., formal recognition, institutional support) are relevant and three basic psychological needs must be fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2017):

(a) *Autonomy* involves the need for individuals to have a sense of choice and volition in their actions, aligning with their values and preferences. When autonomy is fulfilled, people are intrinsically motivated and feel a higher level of self-endorsement. However, if autonomy is undermined, individuals may become more extrinsically motivated, experiencing a decrease in their sense of agency;

(b) *Competence* focuses on the desire for mastery and effectiveness in tasks and activities. When individuals perceive their efforts as leading to success, their competence is reinforced, boosting motivation and persistence. Conversely, experiences of failure can lead to decreased motivation and self-doubt;

(c) *Relatedness* emphasizes the importance of social connection and meaningful relationships with others. Positive interactions and supportive environments foster intrinsic motivation and well-being. In contrast, social isolation or lack of support can hinder intrinsic motivation, creating feelings of alienation.

Research has focused on the motivational drivers of faculty engagement. Awareness of student outcomes, improved student learning and development, and cross-institutional

networks have been identified as drivers of faculty engagement (Cooper, 2014; Hou & Wilder, 2015). Additionally, a sense of accomplishment, inspiration, self-efficacy, personal growth, satisfaction, and improved relationships with students and the community were found relevant (King et al., 2019; Mayor Paredes et al., 2023).

Despite examining these motivations, a crucial question remains unanswered: why do faculty members sustain their engagement in SL over time?

SDT can offer a useful conceptual lens to answer this question. In this study, we used the three conceptual pillars of SDT for this scope. The competence dimension was conceptualized as the long-term effects (i.e., impact) produced within service-learning, whereas engaged scholarship was considered an affirmation of the scholars' autonomy. Finally, relatedness was identified as being built through the community experience of SL scholars.

Competence: impact

When individuals achieve positive outcomes through their actions, it reflects a degree of acquired competence. Therefore, the connection between impact and competence is proposed, as impact shows capability and mastery features.

Research indicates that SL increases faculty engagement and competence in teaching and responsible citizenship, connecting knowledge to practice, enhancing scholarship and leadership, and renewing opportunities for research and professional recognition (Darby & Willingham, 2022; Mayor Paredes et al., 2023; Sandberg, 2018). Other studies highlight the possibility of gaining autonomy in aligning personal experiences and commitment to a social cause to students' learning in real-world settings (O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009) and fostering deeper connections and relationships with students, being more involved in educators' and learners' communities (Pribbenow, 2005).

Autonomy: engaged scholarship

The engaged scholarship expands the faculty's role beyond traditional knowledge production, encouraging them to collaborate with various stakeholders as active agents of change (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). In this sense, engaged scholarship entails agency and autonomy, as agentive entities are expected to engage in self-directed actions guided by their existing knowledge and intentions. Beaulieu et al.'s (2018) recent scoping review identified five principles of engaged scholarship: providing high-quality scholarship, establishing university–community partnerships based on reciprocity, integrating problem-focused perspectives in identifying community needs, crossing disciplinary boundaries, and democratizing knowledge production. The review also emphasized two core values: active citizenship and social justice. Active citizenship involves faculty acknowledging social accountability and civic responsibility to engage with relevant societal issues. Social justice emphasizes defending equity and civic democracy by including marginalized populations in research and action (Beaulieu et al., 2018).

Engaged scholarship was considered an exercise of autonomy in meaningful research and action, which allows scholars to be good stewards of knowledge and resources (Watson-Thompson, 2015). Active engagement with the community aligns scholarly pursuits with real-world issues, enabling them to focus on problems resonating with

their values and interests. This can foster a higher level of self-endorsement and intrinsic motivation.

Relatedness: community experience

According to the community experience framework (Boyd & Nowell, 2017), individuals perceive their community experience through two independent yet related dimensions: resource and responsibility. The resource dimension (Sense of Community, SOC) encompasses a sense of belonging, identification with the group, interdependence, and mutual commitment, reflecting the need for relatedness – feeling connected and valued by others in the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Positive interactions and supportive environments in the community foster intrinsic motivation and well-being, fulfilling the psychological need for social connection.

Simultaneously, the responsibility dimension (Sense of Community Responsibility, SOC-R) involves feeling personally responsible for the community's well-being, caring for others, and fostering a sense of shared purpose (Boyd & Nowell, 2017). Contributing to the community's well-being enhances individuals' sense of belonging and relatedness with others. Consequently, relatedness grows on community experience. Outside the SL research field, existing studies on SOC and SOC-R have remarked on the role of community experiences in employees' engagement and well-being, civic and political participation, and prosocial behaviors (cf. Compare et al., 2021).

Aims

Building on the presented literature and theoretical underpinning of the SDT, this study explores the factors sustaining faculty members' motivational persistence and sustained behaviors. The recent history of SL in Europe, characterized by varying degrees of formal recognition, adds complexity to faculty engagement. By leveraging the three conceptual pillars of SDT, we also aim to identify contextual factors that can support further development of SL initiatives within the European academic framework. Three research questions are posited:

> RQ1: How does service-learning contribute to faculty's perceived competence, offering experiences of mastery, effectiveness, and transformative impact?
>
> RQ2: How does service-learning enhance faculty engagement in scholarship through autonomous, self-directed actions aligned with their knowledge and values?
>
> RQ3: How does the community experience in service-learning impact engagement and contribute to relatedness through social connections and meaningful relationships?

Material and methods

Instruments and procedure

A draft of the interview guide was built and discussed with an SL expert (i.e., the director of an American SL department with more than 20 years of experience). Upon agreement, the first author shared it with the other collaborators.

For data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate scholars' perceived impact of SL on their HEIs, motivations for SL, and community experiences.

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bologna [Prot. N. 0284759 05/11/2021]. Interviews were conducted from May 2022 to July 2022. Participants were recruited through an open call disseminated through the EASLHE (www.easlhe.eu) associates' mailing list. Hence, fourteen participants were enrolled. Eight additional participants were recruited through participants' and authors' contacts to reach data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Inclusion criteria were (1) being involved in SL experiences as instructors or academic supervisors (i.e., being faculty or a scholar), and (2) being involved in SL activities for at least three academic years. Due to the physical distance, most interviews (i.e., 82%, $n = 18$) were conducted through technological platforms (i.e., Zoom), and four were conducted face-to-face. Interviews (approximately 45 min) were conducted in Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and English.

Two co-authors conducted most of the interviews ($n = 16$), while two collaborators conducted the rest. Collaborators received the first author's training on the interview guide.

Participants

The participants were 22 scholars employed in 18 different higher education institutions across Europe (81.8%, $n = 18$ public, 18.2%, $n = 4$ private Catholic institutions). The majority were cisgender women ($n = 15$, 68.2%), and the rest were cisgender men ($n = 7$, 31.8%). Age ranged between 37 and 68 years ($M_{age} = 50.5$; $SD = 7$). Participants' mean experience with SL was around eight years ($SD = 5.2$). Half of the scholars had four to ten years of experience (50%, $n = 11$), 27.3% had three years ($n = 6$), and 22.7% had more than ten years ($n = 5$). Table 1 reports additional participants' characteristics.

Data analysis

Consent for interviews' recording and transcription verbatim was collected. Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish interviews were translated into English to allow all authors to access

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Country of work					
	N	%		N	%
Austria	1	4.5	Lithuania	1	4.5
Belgium	2	9.1	Portugal	2	9.1
Croatia	1	4.5	Romania	1	4.5
Finland	1	4.5	Slovakia	1	4.5
Germany	2	9.1	Spain	4	18.2
Ireland	2	9.1	The Netherlands	1	4.5
Italy	2	9.1	UK	1	4.5
Academic field			Scholar's position		
	N	%		N	%
Applied science	9	40.9	Tenured professor	13	59.1
Social science	6	27.3	Assistant professor	3	13.6
Humanities	4	18.2	Researcher	5	22.7
Natural science	1	4.5	Educational consultant	1	4.5
Multidisciplinary	2	9.1			

the content of the data. The two co-authors who conducted the analysis were familiar with all languages and used the English translation to disambiguate the meaning of the excerpts when needed.

The corpus of the interviews was entered into the QSR NVivo 10 data management software, and a comprehensive process of data coding and identifying themes was carried out.

A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding was used to develop the themes in the thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach combined the deductive a priori template of codes outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999) with the data-driven inductive approach of Boyatzis (1998) and was found to be suitable for data analysis because of its balance between inductive and deductive coding. To interpret the text, a codebook was created based on the interview guide and theoretical framework. This codebook enabled the identification of four main themes in the data: (1) motivations for participating and promoting SL experiences, (2) the perceived transformative impact of their SL courses on the community, students, faculty, and HEIs, (3) the commitment to changing contexts and practices, and (4) multiple community experiences.

Inductive analysis was also integrated to allow themes to emerge from the data without losing additional meaning. This process involved recognizing and encoding excerpts and then identifying and developing themes through an iterative and reflexive process. This additional analysis identified one more theme: (5) degrees of institutionalization, which refers to the presence or absence of institutionalization within participants' HEIs. This hybrid approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the themes in the data and ensured that all relevant information was considered.

Results

Motivation

Exploring initial academics' motivations was key to further investigating their motivational persistence and sustained behaviors. Participants mainly reported intrinsic motivations, with some exceptions of extrinsic contextual motivations connected to having been approached by international projects or organizations (CLAYSS and the Europe Engage Erasmus + project's consortium) or commissioned by their HEIs. Among intrinsic motivations, consistency with personal values and academic disciplines was reported. SL outreach activities have been connected to community health, while its attention to empowerment and critical thinking to the feminist approach. Moreover, empathy development and social justice orientation were linked to the educational and community psychology fields.

> When you teach community psychology, you cannot ignore value, social justice, and the importance of working with the community. SL felt very coherent with this. (ITA_2)

Other motivations are related to the willingness to engage with the local communities in urban and rural settings. Participants reported how the partnerships with the community and the work and research on real-world needs are helpful '*to demonstrate to the wider society that the university can make a significant contribution*' (UK_1).

Another relevant motivation is translating academic competencies into civic competencies, training students to be good future professionals and active and aware citizens, embracing community partners' coeducational role.

> SL is a way for students to learn valuable things. I cannot teach these things, but the community can. (LT_1)

Perceived transformative impact

Participants defined different levels of impact on different actors. By transformative impact, we mean an impact that influences and empowers contexts and actors, enabling change and gaining mastery through SL processes. This theme is composed of the (a) community level, (b) student level, (c) faculty level, and (d) HEI level.

(a) *Transformative Impact – Community Level*

Hosting students is a way for community organizations to have additional resources to implement activities, receive innovative ideas to design new services, and get the chance to define community needs while students are deploying their professional and personal competencies. This exchange with the students motivates community partners to take an educational role in the students' training. The partnership with the university supports community organizations' reputational capital growth, becoming more active on social media and accessing research funds to address community needs. Moreover, SL is a way to '*empower community groups to take control of the research agenda*' (IRE_1), recognize community needs, and transfer academic knowledge through experience. This new knowledge can help partners to change their self-representation as organizations.

> For a volunteer organization, having a database of the members' list can change its representation as an organization. More structured and organized using students' proposed tools and practices that are adopted and internalized. (ITA_1)

SL also directly impacts the users of the community organization and NGOs. Through the activities, students can answer users' relational needs and '*improve their quality of life*' (PT_1).

> We got 1000 names on the blood cancer register by doing this publicity campaign project. Somebody was found to be a stem cell match, so somebody survived leukemia through the stem cells of a student. (UK_1)

Participants also remarked that to pursue positive and transformative impacts, community partners need to 'define their challenge in a very clear way and be committed to the SL project as well, having someone responsible for it. When we approach them, '*most community organizations are not used to doing this*' (DE_1).

(b) *Transformative Impact – Student Level*

SL impact on students was divided into four sections.

1. *Personal competencies*, improved problem-solving, empathy, flexibility, critical thinking, and communication skills.

2. *Social competencies*, teamwork, and positive attitudes towards the community.
3. *Civic and democratic competencies*, significant increment of a sense of civic responsibility, reduced stereotypes about disadvantaged or underserved communities, active citizenship, understanding '*that technical problems are also social questions*' (BE_2), and '*learning about social justice, democracy, and social exclusion. SL is a new approach for them to become socially sensitive journalists, not just article writing machines*' (LT_1).
4. *Academic competencies*, better ability to translate academic learning into practice, identify their professional passions, understand future roles as practitioners, change perspectives on learning and gain mastery over knowledge, and learn to self-evaluate their work.

Participants reported that through the engagement, students create new networks, learn to change contexts with their civic commitment, and '*feel empowered in helping solve real problems in the community*' (PT_1), realizing that '*they do hold power within themselves to contribute*' (HR_1). In some experiences, students decide to remain in the community contexts and develop their careers within community organizations or NGOs with long-term commitments.

Participants also highlighted that it could be challenging for students to process the experiences and '*want to move out of certain projects because the topics were too hard for them to digest*' (HR_1). Efforts should be constantly made to prevent experience pitfalls: e.g., students adopting stereotypical positioning.

> We also see that SL may reinforce stereotypes and inequalities. I think that students also have stereotypes, and the experience does not introduce change. (BE_2)

(c) *Transformative Impact – Faculty Level*

Participants claimed that SL had an impact on their role as faculty and on the effectiveness of their teaching activity. One of the impacts referred to the collaboration with colleagues.

> Usually, you do your seminars and do not collaborate with your colleagues in teaching. In SL, you have bigger projects where different disciplines come together and collaborate. (DE_1)

SL also allows flexibility, freedom, or creativity in designing courses and activities. It helps to change perspective on the academic content, integrating civic learning, and on the students, '*paying more attention to diversity. Sometimes, as educators, we only focus on learning objectives, leaving the human dimension of the teaching process behind*' (RO_1).

Through SL, scholars can improve their competence profile and a deeper understanding of society while providing a high-quality scholarship. SL also represented a space for faculty to feel competent, advance their careers, and gain visibility in HEI contexts.

> SL made me visible in my HEI and promoted me a lot. I have become the department director, and now I am the director of my campus branch. This would not have been possible without SL since my HEI values community engagement and social responsibility activities like SL. (ES_1)

Finally, participants identified some challenges in introducing SL in their courses, like the lack of structural flexibility in adapting the traditional course to include SL and the fact that

> as a professor, you cannot foresee what will happen. When you teach traditional courses, you know from the beginning what will happen. All parameters are controlled; students will feel emotionally and psychologically safe without uncertainty or anxiety. However, using SL gives you less control. (LT_1)

(d) *Transformative Impact – HEI level*

According to participants' experience, SL impacts HEIs in four dimensions.

1. *Utilitarian impact.* SL provides access to funds from established partnerships with the local communities and EU funds to hire researchers strengthening the HEIs' resources. Moreover, SL is a flagship, showcasing the third mission, and generates networks with the students' potential employers.
2. *Third mission fulfillment.* SL is recognized as a powerful experience to reflect better the engagement accomplished by the HEIs as a strategy to attain the university's third mission.
3. *Institutional recognition.* Through SL, HEIs are recognized as international institutions, gaining higher visibility in their territory and growing their reputational capital as innovative institutions. We received several awards for Teaching Innovation, one in sustainability and another for SL because we have been included in one of the 100 best SL activities in the country. (ES_1)
4. *Community recognition.* Participants believe '*HEIs cannot be detached from the community*' (IRE_2). Through SL, HEIs establish positive connections with local stakeholders and become empowering institutions, activating, and consolidating networks beyond SL projects. My HEI is trying to build its identity and brand itself as an engaged university, and I think our community is getting the idea. People think writing an email asking us to join projects is customary. We want to be part of the community and do things with it, not for it. (HR_1)

Commitment to change contexts and practices

Participants expressed how SL can change contexts, HEIs, and students' future and represent a commitment to an engaged scholarly profile aligned with the third mission and personal values. By participants' account, it is urgent to acknowledge that engagement is not

> out of the goodness of one's personality. It is a civic duty. Older generations believed that the State does stuff for us; these times are gone. We must undo this learning and remind people that it is up to you, as a community member. (IRE_2)

To do this, the curricula content needs to change and embrace new learning, like the civic competencies, that can prepare and train students to take responsibility, become agents of change, and become '*compassionate leaders that can transform the world*' (ES_3). Students can transfer knowledge to the community through this practice and foster change. In the meantime, HEIs can better understand society and answer and reflect on its actual

needs. Thus, society can be transformed by the university–community partnership in contexts that are open to change.

> We sent this message to the community of being open and ready to collaborate, participate, and co-create with them. (HR_1)

Participants reported how SL could change communities over time, building a culture of ownership among students who decide to implement new services (e.g., a community oral health service) and staying connected to the HEIs after graduation as practitioners and site supervisors of the SL experiences.

Multiple community experiences

Participants reported an interconnection to SL's professional national, European, and international networks, presented as '*a family you can share your ideas and values with. You have your city, your Nation, then Europe, and the rest of the world*' (AU_1). This connection helps participants feel pride in being part of a movement within HEIs that promotes social change and feel recognized as a community that is rewarded and celebrated.

> It makes me proud that my university is committed to SL and that I am participating and belonging to this movement. (ES_3)

Participants feel like members and leaders of this scholars' community, which make them feel 'not alone and empowered to share with other scholars around the world the will to do more than just teaching' (RO_1). In some cases, no national SL networks existed. Thus, participants had to connect with the US, Latin American, and other EU realities. Understanding the community dimension's relevance pushed one participant to generate a new National SL network.

> I was invited to the European Association for SL, and I suddenly felt like I was part of something in Europe … then, I met some people from the UK, and we created a little network here. From that point on, I have felt part of a community. (UK_1)

Besides the scholars' community, SL fostered participants' responsibility for their local communities and deepened their awareness of social dynamics.

> SL made me feel more like a community member, engaged in wanting to do something more. I now see people with disabilities, the elderly, and homeless people with different eyes. […] We should be more aware of our civic responsibility and many stereotypes and prejudices. (ES_1)

Degrees of institutionalization

Participants identified different levels of SL institutionalizations in their HEIs as a relevant contextual factor for SL further development and sustainability. In some HEIs, SL is a well-established experience proposed by specific faculties or ad hoc centers that offer SL as a multidisciplinary course, in other HEIs SL is a new thing, limited to the effort of some individuals suggesting contextual differences.

Indeed, institutionalization is made possible by the bottom-up efforts of individual movements and/or by the institutional sustainment of rectors and vice-rectors.

> The vice-rector of education is a big fan of SL, and she wanted to create this space for SL in a specific center because she thought it was important not to be connected to only one faculty. (BE_1)

Over time, SL experiences could be upscaled thanks to the SL inclusion in institutional strategic documents and recognition as a practice to fulfill the third mission. International recognition by the institutional system has been reported to be influential in fostering SL within HEIs.

> Last week [May 2022], I was at the UNESCO World Conference of Higher Education in Barcelona. Some of the official UNESCO papers and some presentations were on SL. The traditional system is starting to recognize SL, which is powerful. (DE_1)

Some HEIs established SL departments in Germany, while for other countries, like Italy and Finland, the process of institutionalization is at an early stage, even though many HEIs recognize SL as a valuable experience.

Participants also identified challenges related to the lack of formal and stable recognition ensuring the SL maintenance and funding over time. When institutional resources are scarce, SL is left for the efforts and commitment of single academics. Hence, some professors are reluctant to engage in SL for its complexity and additional responsibility toward the community. The lack of resources and institutionalization policies have a cascade effect on administrative processes in adapting the traditional courses or defining new insurance agreements.

> If I were to send the students on placement, that would be an issue for the university regarding insurance. It should be essential because when I send someone, they need to be protected, you know? This is my duty of care. (IRE_2)

Discussion

This study explored the factors sustaining faculty members' engagement in SL within the European context. Unlike existing literature focused on North and South America, where SL has a longer history, European scholars' motivations remain underexplored. Leveraging the SDT's pillars – autonomy, competence, relatedness – we brought together diverse perspectives of European academics to understand motivational persistence and sustained engagement and identify essential factors for SL sustainability.

On the first research question (RQ1), findings reinforce the perception that SL can have multiple impacts, offering experiences of mastery and effectiveness to the different actors involved in SL: the community, students, faculty, and HEIs. The recognition of an impact on community partners, students, and HEIs proved to be instrumental in validating, reinforcing, and sustaining the competence of faculty members.

Impacts on the community are multifarious and include additional resources, renewed practices, and a coeducational role in the students' training (Compare et al., 2022; Salam et al., 2019). These impacts can contribute to an experience of competence

for faculty engaged in SL, to the extent that they are transformative and yield SL as an empowerment strategy for change in communities. Faculty identify at least a triple declination of competence experienced because of community impact: responding to the organization's needs, showing, and embodying a different way of being a university (close and relevant for the community), offering concrete help and solutions for the organizations' beneficiaries. These experiences are less relevant in traditional teaching.

Impacts on students, as confirmed in the EU context, align with results reported in the international literature on personal, social, civic, democratic, and academic competencies (Celio et al., 2011; Compare & Albanesi, 2022, 2023; Salam et al., 2019), adding specificities such as identifying professional passions and gaining mastery over knowledge and learning processes through self-evaluation. Participants experience the effectiveness of both providing traditional and disciplinary skills to students, but also civic and social skills, making the students themselves agents of change (Sze-Yeung Lai & Chi-leung Hui, 2021). Scholars recognize that if they do not see this transformative impact (through the reflective activities with students), they feel less competent (students have not learned).

As for faculty, four types of transformative impact on academic life and capacity to deal with societal challenges were identified: (1) changing curricula (e.g., introducing civic competencies and emphasizing metacognitive processes), (2) changing teaching methodologies, (3) changing roles in the educational process (e.g., introducing coeducation, agency for change, supporting empowerment), and (4) socially responsive and civically engaged education. It becomes clear from the account of faculties that these impacts satisfy relatedness needs (results are achieved with the community and processes are collaborative), autonomy (they perceive themselves as an agent of change and enablers of others – students and community – agentic capacity), and contribute to experiencing competence.

Concerning the impact on HEIs, SL provides access to funds and connections with students' future employers, consolidating the HEIs' third mission and providing institutional and community recognition. The impact on HEIs gives a sense of contribution to the institution, making coherence between faculty personal values (civic engagement and active citizenship) and university's mission visible, and reinforces sense of belonging.

For RQ2, the findings demonstrate that engaged scholarship serves as a key process that fulfils the psychological need for autonomy and recognition of oneself as an agent of change. Institutionalization, an index of contextual relevance, can also contribute, as it can sustain initial and continuous motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The motivation to effect transformative change is knowledge-based, requiring changes in curricula, training, and the relationship with the community and different stakeholders. It is underpinned by intentionality in pursuing a values-oriented direction.

Indeed, scholars are intrinsically motivated to join SL because of the changes it entails in the dynamics of knowledge construction and production (Knudsen et al., 2021). Alongside motivations concerning teaching and learning practices, value motivations also emerge. Brandt et al. (2018) claim that the third mission regards (and institutionalizes) a renewed collaboration framework between different stakeholders (researchers, policymakers, and practitioners) that allows for a renewal of the educational agenda. Participants overtly name this collaboration 'coeducation' and

emphasize the centrality of learning in the renewal of educational projects, acknowledging SL's expansion of HEIs' course objectives to incorporate civic and citizenship competencies, including cross-disciplinary critical reflection and substantive knowledge (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

For European scholars, institutionalization represents a valuable contextual factor that underpins the fulfillment of the three psychological needs identified by the SDT. When accomplished at its highest level, faculty experience a sense of agency, autonomy, and competence, especially if institutionalization has been achieved through a bottom-up process. Recognition of SL as a key element in HEIs' mission also contributes to a sense of belonging, assuming that the values and practices of SL are shared by the entire academic community.

They also agree with the claim that SL sustainability relies on its institutionalization (Borkoski & Prosser, 2020). However, findings reveal that SL institutionalization is in its early European implementation efforts. The lack of institutionalization leads to reduced informal recognition, influenced by traditional views of HEIs as knowledge production sites, where activities like SL are considered additional or misplaced. Institutionalization helps buffer against marginalization and denial of SL expertise and professionalism (Matthews & Wilder, 2018).

Despite not being acknowledged as a foundational pillar of SL (RQ3), relatedness appears essential in SL scholars' experience. Findings reveal that community experience (SOC and SOC-R; Boyd & Nowell, 2017) at the institutional and local level is intertwined with SL. Firstly, relatedness results from a specific and community-oriented approach to knowledge construction based on a different relationship of academia with the local community. This relationship is underpinned by scholars' sense of responsibility toward the local communities. Secondly, it develops across national, European, and international SL networks of scholars who share connections, values, and experiences. When the SL institutionalization process is absent, belonging to a national or a cross-national community of interest and practice acts as a buffer against the detrimental effects of the lack of formal recognition. This makes the community experience a resource where multiple and nested belongingness do not compete but act as resource multipliers. Lastly, from a theoretical perspective, SOC entails a power dimension (i.e., influence). Findings show how scholars' influence is unfolded as the feeling of making a difference, the capacity to identify transformational impacts, and sustaining the development of more competent and empowered communities. Therefore, a community experience that builds on and is nurtured by relatedness is necessary for scholars engaged in SL (Boyd & Nowell, 2017; Compare et al., 2023).

Given its relevance, we propose integrating a fifth R, *relatedness*, in the four Rs (respect, relevance, reflexivity, and reciprocity; Butin, 2003). Relatedness sustains and fosters SL institutional, organizational, and community processes. It situates SL within a multilevel, ecological perspective, recognizing the complex and reciprocal relationships among individuals, HEIs, organizations, and communities as essential for maintaining and nurturing participants' engagement with SL. The sharing of SL's values, practices, and visions within and across contexts and networks is a ubiquitous process that assumes different meanings, such as a coping strategy to address challenges or a transformative asset to facilitate institutional recognition, depending on the level of institutionalization and stability of the university–community partnership.

Conclusion and future research direction

SDT was a valuable framework in our study to explore how SL can sustain the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By meeting these needs, SL can foster faculty motivation and maintain their level of engagement over time.

Moreover, the findings provided valuable insights into identifying contextual factors for SL further development in a context where SL is still in the consolidation process.

The findings reinforce that institutionalization is a contextual asset in sustaining SL over time (Borkoski & Prosser, 2020). Having administrative and institutional support, as well as the flexibility to adapt and integrate the academic curriculum with innovative teaching experiences, is key in allowing faculty members to feel a connection between personal values and civic experiences they have in the community into their work as academics.

Nevertheless, institutionalization is not the sole contributing contextual factor. A relational dimension of exchange and reciprocal influence, at both the university and European levels, can foster scholars' endeavors in SL. Exchanges at the group level could highlight the role scholars can play concerning the local community, leveraging civic attitudes and values. Moreover, it could reshape the narrative around negative or ineffective SL experiences, normalizing unsuccessful stories and using them as a source of knowledge rather than a personal failure.

We are aware of the study's limitations, such as recruiting a relatively small number of participants to reach data saturation. Moreover, we relied on the EASLHE network; this helped us reach participants but automatically prevented the inclusion of potential participants from other HEIs or countries not connected to the European association. Despite limitations, this study advances our understanding of engaged scholarship as a space for cultivating intrinsic motivations, work, civic engagement, and social commitment. Implementing engaged scholarship activities can benefit HEIs with committed employees, socially responsible students, and empowered local communities.

Future studies should adopt mixed-method approaches, including quantitative measures, and incorporate a comparison group of scholars committed to activities related to the third mission besides SL. This would clarify the uniqueness and specificity of the reported findings. Efforts should focus on deepening faculty behaviors, guiding the development of strategies to promote active participation and ensure alignment with their civic commitment. Further research could implement the adoption of solid theoretical frameworks to investigate SL processes. Lastly, assembling new knowledge would help identify potential patterns unique to the European context or related to the evolving role of SL in the transformative changes affecting HEIs worldwide.

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Disclosure statement

Availability of data and material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval

All aspects of this study were scrutinized and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bologna. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

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