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Fostering creative and critical learning on University Social Responsibility – the ESSA project revisited

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Despite being a trendy concept, university social responsibility (USR) is at the center of discussions about the role and the goals of the modern university (Zgaga, 2009). It involves concerns around the education of “public-minded alumni” (Chase, 1023, p. 520), as well as the need to be inclusive of diversity in terms of both disciplines and students. It incorporates a vision of what universities can do to improve communities through teaching and research. It implies respecting fair and ethical standards within its walls and interacting with other organizations and the broader community. It includes an actual commitment to social and environmental sustainability that goes beyond words and permeates its practices. It means promoting equity, advocating for human rights, and creating conditions for its staff and students' physical, mental, and psychological health and well-being (Amorim et al., 2015). As such, USR is not merely a superficial and reputational tool but is at the core of what a university (really) is (Menezes, Coelho & Amorim, 2018).

The ESSA project was an Erasmus+ project involving a partnership between the University of Edinburgh, Kaunas University of Technology, and the University of Porto together with the respective students' associations, the National Union of Students in the UK, and the European Student Union. The goal was to create open educational resources for trainers and students in Social Responsibility Audits; students from the three participating universities attended a program led by trainers and then participated in a one-week intensive, immersive, and cross-national audit of a university. The design of the process is depicted in Figure 1. The process started with the development of an ecological and situated model of USR, based on previous work developed by part of the team in a previous Erasmus+ project, EU-USR (Menezes, Coelho & Amorim, 2018). This underpinned the development of a training course for trainers, with participants from the three universities (staff and teachers) attending a one-week training at the University of Porto (Coelho et al., 2019). Then, each university recruited students who attended a one-week training delivered in a blended mode on Social Responsibility Auditing. Finally, a selected group of 6–7 students implemented a real Social Responsibility Audit in one of the participating universities – thus, turning the campus into a real living lab where the students had the opportunity (i) to conduct an audit in a real-life context, and (ii) to reflect on their experiences guided by an e-portfolio, where they collected evidence

and considered what it meant to be a participant in the project. As such, the ESSA training was implemented under the principles of service learning. As we stated elsewhere:

“Although ESSA is not a completely typical service-learning project, in particular when it comes to working “in and with communities,” it is important to keep in mind that universities are (also) communities, and ESSA student auditors worked in and with universities to improve their social responsibility, with goals of civic learning being at the core of both individual students' and organizational learning” (Coelho & Menezes, 2021, p. 3).



Figure 1. ESSA project design.

In this presentation, we will discuss the significant achievements of the project, namely: the creation of a community of people and institutions committed to USR as a broad, transversal, and central goal of HEI; the development of a learning perspective that is experiential, situated and based on real-world; the emphasis on students' empowerment and intercultural competence, based on a high-level challenge that demands high levels of engagement, from the students but also the university; and the actual change in individuals and institutions.

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