

V IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Strategies for Enhancing Soft Skills through Academic Service-Learning: Implementation with Businesses in Benin

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Introduction

The African continent has a predominantly young population, and its universities produce millions of graduates each year. A persistent concern is that despite their academic successes, many African graduates face unemployment or underemployment. Their access to the modern labour market is hindered, and they are prevented from reaching their potential (Guàrdia et al., 2021). Research suggests that this issue does not always stem from a lack of knowledge or intelligence, but rather from a significant gap between the skills acquired at university and those required by today's employers. In particular, there is a serious gap in soft skills among graduates in the region (Okolie et al., 2019). Prior research defines soft skills, that is, employability skills, as a set of skills, abilities, or character traits that complement an individual's hard skills in the workplace. Soft skills encompass various abilities, including adaptability, communication, problem-solving, negotiation, self-confidence, critical thinking, independent working, project management, working under pressure, and leadership (Tumuti et al., 2013). These skills connect graduates to effective application in the real world and enable them to navigate various work settings and thrive amid uncertainty (Okolie et al., 2020).

Research on employability in the Benin Republic by Ahodekon and Kponou (2019) reveals that these essential practical competencies are often lacking among graduates' skill sets. Employers consistently complain that graduates in Benin, despite having a strong theoretical foundation, struggle with the vital employability skills needed to compete and succeed in contemporary employment settings. This situation results from many universities in Benin still focusing on traditional, lecture-based models, involving theoretical content and memorisation (Attenoukon, 2011) rather than experiential learning or a project-based approach. In other words, despite numerous efforts, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Benin still face significant challenges in developing relevant curricula incorporating employability skills (Ahodekon & Kponou, 2019). Consequently, graduates complete their university degrees with impressive credentials but limited hands-on experience and soft skills that are increasingly essential in today's globalised, technology-oriented economy, leaving them unprepared to meet modern employers' demands (Mutalemwa et al., 2020). As Rakowska and De Juana-Espinosa (2021) noted, the current world is experiencing various changes and new skill demands that require shifts and adaptations from higher education institutions (HEIs). Unfortunately, universities in Benin still face challenges in adapting to this trend, which contributes to high unemployment and underemployment rates. Yet, this issue is not impossible to overcome. Scholars, educators, and policymakers are increasingly recognising the urgent need to revise curricula worldwide, particularly in Africa, to

expand beyond traditional approaches and adopt innovative teaching methods that promote soft skills (Rakowska & De Juana-Espinosa, 2021), thus fostering overall student growth.

One dynamic approach gaining traction is academic service-learning (ASL). Academic service-learning is an innovative teaching method whereby students engage in service activities with the business community, with structured time for intensive reflection (Heffernan, 2001). By being connected to the business community, and thus to potential employers, academic service-learning is poised to fill the skills gap by immersing students in real-life challenges, necessitating that they communicate, collaborate, address business-related problems, and adapt to new situations (Black, 2002). Through guided reflection and mentorship, students not only develop the skills needed for employment but also a sense of responsibility and confidence to thrive in their respective careers (Tumuti et al., 2013). This approach, implemented in Benin, may therefore provide HEIs with opportunities to produce competent, qualified and highly skilled graduates who meet employers' expectations and add value to organisations. In this chapter, we address the question, "What are the key requirements for effective strategy development to implement successful academic service learning with businesses in the Benin Republic?" The chapter first provides an overview of academic service-learning pedagogy. Second, it describes the methodology used in the current study, followed by the results. Finally, the chapter presents strategies for effective and sustainable academic service-learning in the Benin Republic in the discussion section.

Academic service learning pedagogy

The academic service-learning approach has gained increasing popularity in higher education worldwide. Since its introduction by Robert Simon and William Ramsey, ASL pedagogy has been implemented in several countries, including Germany, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (Pacho, 2019). This teaching approach enhances students' learning as they engage in activities within various community environments. As the term suggests, ASL integrates both academic learning and service objectives to promote student development (Heffernan, 2001). Black (2002) defines it as an educational approach whereby students participate in organised service experiences that address community-based business needs, allowing structured time for intensive reflection on these experiences to gain a deeper understanding of theories and concepts and develop various essential skills. ASL has benefits for each stakeholder involved, including universities, faculty, students, and the business community. We will now discuss these benefits in turn for each stakeholder group.

Benefits for universities

One of the most significant advantages of ASL for universities in general, and particularly for African universities, is the valuable opportunity this model provides to enhance their curricula by incorporating experiential learning elements that link theoretical knowledge with practical application (Pacho, 2019). Indeed, by collaborating with local organisations or small and medium enterprises (SMEs), universities demonstrate a high commitment to social responsibility and their missions to

deliver high-quality, relevant education that equips students for 21st-century real-world challenges (Black, 2002). This enhances their reputations as engaged, innovative, and student-centred institutions (Black, 2002). It may also lead to increased public support (Guimón, 2013), enhanced media visibility, and a competitive edge in the higher education landscape, which appeals to students interested in meaningful and hands-on learning experiences. In addition, service-learning provides a direct avenue for African universities to fulfil their often neglected third mission (Gbadamosi, 2018) by fostering strong partnerships with their surrounding communities, thereby breaking down existing barriers. This relationship-building fosters mutual trust and sustainable partnerships that can also lead to joint research opportunities, funding proposals, and cooperative projects (Guimón, 2013). By fulfilling such social responsibility through ASL, African universities may attract external funding. International organisations, private foundations, and corporate social responsibility initiatives often prioritise community engagement efforts when distributing grants. Well-implemented ASL programs can demonstrate a significant impact on the community, quantifiable outcomes, and sustainable partnerships (Vizenor et al., 2017), which all strengthen their chances of securing grants. In some instances, community engagement projects may also attract support from regional development or global service organisations (Tumuti et al., 2013), enabling African universities, which often face financial constraints, to diversify their funding possibilities. Moreover, ASL may allow universities to assume a crucial role in local and regional economic development by offering small and medium enterprises access to academic resources, students' innovative ideas and educators' expertise (Simola, 2009). Besides these operational advantages, ASL may serve as a pathway for broader institutional changes (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). By integrating ASL into their curriculum and institutional culture, universities in Africa are progressing towards sustainable and international educational standards (Pacho, 2019), thereby aligning with international trends that emphasise the role of universities in promoting innovative solutions to global challenges to ensure a sustainable future. Institutions that consciously and effectively leverage ASL establish themselves as leaders in 21st-century higher education, thereby securing a strategic advantage in a global educational landscape that increasingly prioritises outcomes.

Benefits for faculty

Just like universities, faculty members who engage in ASL with businesses benefit significantly from the project. One of the valuable advantages of their involvement is the opportunity this approach provides educators to design practical-oriented courses. Through their direct engagement with local businesses, educators gain first-hand knowledge and practical insights from the private sector to inform their teaching (Benício et al., 2020), allowing them to design more relevant and employability-oriented courses and develop essential skills among students. In addition, ASL improves instructors' relationships with surrounding businesses (Smith, 2021), which could expand their networks and lead to significant business opportunities for them (Benício et al., 2020). Moreover, this interaction provides them with opportunities for scientific publications and offers a chance to present their experiences at national and international conferences, thereby leading to significant academic advancement, professional development and recognition.

Benefits for students

ASL participation enhances students academically, personally, socially, and professionally (Black, 2002). From an academic perspective, ASL connect classroom practices to the complexities of the real world, while creating a solid foundation for students' learning (Heffernan, 2001). Specifically, ASL allows students to apply theories to real business issues and establish meaningful connections between theories, facts and service experiences (Black, 2002). This further enhances their understanding of the course content and related concepts, enabling them to secure high grades during examinations. Besides the academic aspect, ASL allows students personal and social growth by enhancing their motivation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and confidence while engaging with the business community (Pena, 2020; Tumuti et al., 2013). Moreover, it fosters their ability to work with individuals of different ages and backgrounds and enhances their ethical development (Black, 2002). From a professional standpoint, participating in ASL enhances students' employability by equipping them with essential soft skills required for effective employment in the modern job landscape (Smith, 2021). As mentioned by Black (2002), when students engage in ASL with businesses, they gain a valuable opportunity to immerse themselves in a corporate environment, enhancing their adaptability to this setting and its realities. In addition to the above outcomes, ASL enables them to navigate the complexities of a corporate environment and its related challenges while reflecting on these challenges to provide innovative solutions. This process allows them to develop essential skills such as creativity, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities—skills that increasingly attract the interest of employers (Tumuti et al., 2013). By providing innovative solutions to real business issues, students accumulate significant professional experience that can enhance their resumes and give them a competitive advantage during recruitment (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, ASL, through collaboration, improves students' ability to work in teams with peers and professionals alike (Simola, 2009). This interaction strengthens their professional networks, potentially leading to opportunities for internships, mentoring, or even job placements. It seems clear from the above that ASL can be a powerful tool to promote students' full development.

Benefits for the community-based businesses

Although the outcomes of ASL for community-based businesses have not received sufficient attention from scholars, several studies found that businesses benefit from fresh ideas and innovative solutions provided by students to address their challenges. According to a study conducted by Vizenor et al. (2017), almost all of the companies involved in their ASL project with students implement some of the recommendations or solutions offered by students, with some reporting the innovative and novel aspects of these recommendations to their business. This suggests that ASL initiatives can provide small businesses or agencies with access to contemporary research and customised solutions that they might be unable to afford otherwise due to financial constraints (Benício et al., 2020). Simola (2009) further emphasises this point, noting that small business owners participating in ASL projects receive tailored, on-site services and strategic evaluations that deliver insights into their businesses. Such contributions may hold significant value for small firms that lack the financial resources to engage external consultants or specialised personnel (Vizenor et al., 2017), particularly in the African context.

In addition to this outcome, ASL enhances business efficiency. In South Africa, companies reported their use of students' deliverables for strategic actions, showing that students provide not merely recommendations but considerable assistance to businesses in effectively implementing the generated ideas, resulting in significant efficiency improvements (Duffett et al., 2023). This, in turn, enhances their reputation in their communities (Benício et al., 2020). Moreover, beyond its operational outcomes, ASL fosters effective and sustainable collaboration between businesses and universities (Pacho, 2019). In the African context, where such collaboration is strictly limited, ASL may provide an avenue for significant knowledge exchange, research and development, and joint curriculum development (Guimón, 2013). By engaging directly with instructors and students, business owners progressively integrate universities' resources, thus reinforcing their positions as vital local stakeholders for economic development. Furthermore, ASL can play a significant role in the professionalisation and ethical development of businesses. By engaging in ASL, businesses often benefit from contemporary insights on business ethics and best practices, influencing their decision-making processes and own practices, leading to substantial professionalisation and improvement in ethical standards (Smith, 2021).

Overall, ASL is not a one-way educational tool, but a mutually beneficial teaching strategy that empowers all constituencies, including universities, faculty, students and the community-based businesses (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Through effective collaboration and access to community engagement opportunities, private sector exposure, networking opportunities, real-world problem solving, innovative business ideas and support, stakeholders gain valuable resources and insights that drive significant growth. As ASL continues to evolve, its potential in enhancing development, resilience and sustainability is increasingly apparent, and African universities might adopt this into their curricula.

Methodology

The current research was conducted using a quantitative approach. An open-ended survey questionnaire was designed to collect data on the requirements for effective strategy development for the implementation of academic service-learning with businesses in the Benin context. To increase the validity and reliability of the instrument, we pilot-tested the questionnaire with a group of PhD students, and their feedback resulted in an adjustment and modification of the survey.

The researcher conducted the data collection during the summer of 2022 with a total of 150 teaching faculty drawn from four different universities using purposive sampling. 197 responses were collected as requirements for effective strategy development, and the data were afterwards analysed using code-based analysis following Jackson and Trochim (2002). Code-based analysis involves a four-step analysis through which initial data are summarised into categories or themes to draw specific conclusions (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). The first step involves the coding of the data. Second, the various codes were merged and categorised. Thereafter, the researcher in the third step put the various categorised data into themes, thus identifying five themes which include stakeholders' willingness, institutional support, faculty competencies, stakeholders' awareness, and government support. Finally, the researcher established a frequency distribution for each identified theme using Excel.

Results

The analysis of the data resulted in five main themes. The frequency distribution results are presented in Table 20.1.

Table 20.1. Frequency distribution of the themes that represent requirements for strategy design

Themes	Quotations	Frequency	Percentage
Stakeholders' Awareness	<i>"It must have an awareness program for the actors, and this should be on the need and benefits of collaboration and also the benefits of the project, that's the only way to enhance their interest."</i>	20	10%
Stakeholders Willingness	<i>"This project to be successful requires the willingness of the stakeholders since they represent the main actors."</i>	69	35%
Institutional Support	<i>"The project necessitates support from the university to the teaching staff to facilitate success, and also for their motivation."</i>	78	40%
Faculty Competencies	<i>"Ensure that faculty have the competencies for the project."</i>	12	6%
Government Support	<i>"The support of the government as an initiator to ensure, through governmental policy, an effective collaboration in the country will be the main factor for the success."</i>	18	9%
Total		197	100%

Source: Survey Data (2022)

Discussion: Strategic Framework for ASL Implementation with Businesses in the Benin Context

Implementing ASL with businesses in the African context, particularly in the Benin Republic, requires multifaceted strategies. These strategies must address key themes involving stakeholders' awareness, stakeholders' willingness, institutional support, faculty competencies and government support. The current discussion section presents the strategies developed based on the above five themes that emerged from the data, which respondents perceived as requirements for effective and sustainable ASL with businesses in the country.

Theme 1: Stakeholders' awareness: Fostering understanding and engagement

Stakeholders' awareness has emerged as a requirement for effective ASL with businesses in the Benin Republic. Indeed, introducing a new teaching method requires significant awareness for it to be

accepted. Awareness serves as the foundation and starting point of the intended innovation. Therefore, effectively engaging in the ASL approach begins with raising awareness among stakeholders, including faculty, students, and community-based businesses, about the nature of ASL, its objectives, and its values. In numerous African countries, university-business collaboration is limited, and there is an urgent need to break the barriers between higher education institutions and the business community they serve by promoting awareness of the benefits of university-business collaboration. Many universities initiating ASL have made significant efforts in raising stakeholder awareness about the benefits of the approach, such as enriching student learning while addressing the needs of community-based businesses. For instance, in the USA, Montana State University - Bozeman has committed to raising student awareness of the objectives of their ASL and its short- and long-term impacts on their development and society at large (Lamb et al., 1998). Likewise, in South Africa, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, in initiating its ASL project, has increased awareness among small businesses regarding the importance of academic collaborations and the ASL approach, demonstrating how students' competencies can directly support local businesses in enhancing their performance (Vizenor et al., 2017). These various ASL initiatives illustrate that any awareness-raising campaign on ASL should emphasise the reciprocal aspect of the approach to promote understanding and the mutual benefits it provides to stakeholders. Therefore, fostering such an awareness program for stakeholders in Benin is crucial and may take various forms.

First, universities could engage in monthly awareness programs conducted through a series of discussions with faculty, the business community, and student campaigns for student awareness programs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). For this purpose, universities may begin discussions with each stakeholder by justifying the rationale for the change in teaching methods and the need for university-business collaboration. Emphasise concerns related to graduates' unemployment and their lack of employability skills while presenting ASL as an innovative solution to bridge the gap in the current teaching approach. Second, universities should publicise and discuss ASL pedagogy with stakeholders, highlighting the specificity of the approach, its differences from other teaching methods, its importance, and expected outcomes for faculty, students, and the business community. Third, universities may provide successful examples of ASL projects and how they can be implemented. Fourth, emphasise the requirements from each stakeholder for effective adoption and successful implementation of the approach. Fifth, to further inform stakeholders, universities should distribute flyers and leverage any available internal communication channels to disseminate information on ASL (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

Theme 2: Stakeholders' willingness: Enhancing commitment, engagement and trust

Strategy

Relying solely on awareness-raising programmes to facilitate the adoption and success of an innovation is insufficient: it is crucial to enhance stakeholders' willingness towards the intended innovation. Beyond awareness, the effective engagement of stakeholders and their willingness to actively participate in the ASL program are paramount for its effectiveness and success. Willingness to ASL is often influenced by the project's perceived value, the benefits for stakeholders, training on the approach,

and trust. In some cases, effective communication can also significantly affect willingness to engage in ASL initiatives. A study by Heffernan (2001) demonstrated how willingness can prevent resistance and enable ASL effectiveness. Universities in Benin can facilitate this by initiating a willingness campaign for effective ASL implementation in the country. This may focus on three aspects: emphasising ASL outcomes for each stakeholder, providing training or development for educators on the approach, and ensuring resources and support from universities for successful implementation.

Emphasis on service-learning outcomes

First, universities should emphasise how implementing ASL can enhance the teaching careers of faculty and support their scientific advancement. Second, they should highlight the partnership and networking opportunities with businesses that ASL implementation offers to faculty and students. Third, universities should stress the chance for students to develop the necessary competencies for their employment (soft skills) and the hands-on experience they can gain through ASL engagement. Additionally, they should point out how participating in ASL can facilitate students' access to the international labour market. Fourth, they must underline the potential for businesses to benefit from university resources and assistance to improve their operations and performance. It is also important to highlight how their involvement in ASL with universities allows them, as potential employers, to contribute to the development of future employees. Fifth, universities must reassure businesses of the project's seriousness, enhance trust, and also emphasise the commitment from the institutional level to ensure students' ongoing commitment and engagement throughout the implementation.

Underlining the training for faculty on the approach

Engaging in ASL requires competencies and experience from faculty, and universities must reassure stakeholders, especially faculty and businesses, about the development or training of educators on the approach for successful implementation.

Underlining the support and resources from the university

Engaging with and sustaining a new teaching approach requires significant resources from universities, including material, financial, logistical resources, and training on the approach (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Universities should reassure stakeholders about the substantial resources and support that will be available for the project's success. They may emphasise their commitment through the institutionalisation of the approach. Moreover, there must be a focus on the communication channels and various activities that will be established to assist faculty with issues related to ASL implementation.

Theme 3: Institutional support

ASL implementation and success require significant commitment and support from the institutional level. This involves various aspects, such as institutionalising the approach within universities. Research on the ASL project at Mountains of the Moon University in Uganda has demonstrated

how institutional support, involving clear policies and resources, can facilitate the success of an ASL initiative (Nanyanzi et al., 2021). To enable such success in the Benin context, universities may engage in different activities. This implies establishing the necessary collaborations with business community partners for the effective implementation of the approach and ensuring the institutionalisation of ASL within the university to enable its sustainability (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Moreover, universities should ensure effective internal administrative organisation for the successful implementation of the approach and establish an ASL office or centre within the university to support faculty in shifting from their current teaching approaches and provide guidance in the ASL implementation process. Furthermore, universities in Benin should enhance faculty competencies for ASL implementation through training to ensure the success of the approach. They should provide the necessary logistics, such as a school bus or car, to facilitate mobility and support faculty by offering a budget that enables their participation in various conferences on ASL to share their service-learning experiences with their peers (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Universities may also provide financial support for faculty (incentives, financial motivation, etc.) to encourage their commitment and engagement in ASL.

Theme 4: Strengthen faculty Competencies for ASL implementation: Training and Professional Development

Faculty members assume a crucial role as facilitators and mentors in ASL projects. Their competencies need involve not only disciplinary knowledge but also essential skills in community engagement, project management, and reflective teaching practices. Therefore, training and professional development initiatives are imperative to equip faculty with these competencies, thereby enabling them to manage real-world projects effectively. In the African context, numerous studies have highlighted the lack of competencies among faculty to effectively integrate real-world practices into the curriculum and stress the need for educators' training and professional development. For instance, a study by Gbadamosi (2018) showed how educators in Nigeria expressed their needs for training and development to enhance their understanding of the ASL approach and their abilities to effectively implement and succeed in such pedagogy. This highlights the importance of providing training and professional development opportunities to faculty in Benin, to enhance their skills and abilities to design relevant and impactful service-learning projects. Universities in Benin can strengthen faculty competencies for successful ASL through workshops and seminars on the approach. The training must include an introduction to the approach to facilitate their understanding of each step and the required tasks for the implementation (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). Moreover, faculty should be introduced to possible methods of assessment of the projects and their outcomes. Universities can also provide faculty during the training with knowledge and guidelines for successful reflection activities during ASL implementation. Furthermore, during the training faculty can be organised into working groups and engaged in the development of a prototype ASL course (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Theme 5: Government support for universities

Government support is crucial for legitimising ASL, especially in the Benin Republic, where tertiary education institutions depend on the Higher Education Ministry. Government support for effective and sustainable ASL can take the form of funding, or that of favourable policies that encourage collaboration between universities and businesses. Elsewhere, in South Africa, policies that encourage collaboration and community engagement in higher education have been beneficial to advance service-learning initiatives. The government in Benin may replicate this by taking political decisions that foster university-business partnerships. In addition, the government may engage in a public business awareness program to enhance stakeholders' willingness or organise a round table that leads to effective and consistent university-business partnerships in the country. Moreover, policymakers may support universities through funding and resources for ASL adoption, faculty training, and by recognising ASL as a teaching approach that should be implemented within universities. The government can also organise annual follow-up activities, which may be coordinated by the Ministry of Higher Education Institutions to ensure ASL effectiveness and success across universities in the region. Furthermore, policymakers can align service-learning with national development priorities to enable its sustainability and ensure that this methodology contributes to national objectives. Together, all these themes may provide a strategic framework for universities to position ASL as a transformative teaching approach in the country.

Conclusion

The implementation of academic service-learning with businesses in the African context, especially in the Benin Republic, requires a strategic framework that emphasises the unique challenges and opportunities of the country. This chapter, therefore, provides a contribution to the field of service-learning by presenting strategies for effective service-learning implementation with community-based businesses in the African context. The research suggests that service-learning in Benin requires stakeholders' awareness, institutional support, faculty competencies, stakeholders' willingness, and government support. Although service-learning involves many considerable aspects or factors for its success, these key elements and the developed strategies may serve as a guide or a good starting point for its effectiveness in Benin universities. In terms of the limitations of the study, we do not implement these various strategies to ensure their utility in ASL implementation. Future research may keep this in mind and implement the strategies to attest to its effectiveness for service-learning implementation and success.

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