

# El servicio social en los programas educativos en línea

## The social service in education programs online

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### RESUMEN

#### Palabras clave

Estudiantes a distancia, servicio social, proyecto de intervención

El servicio social es parte esencial del proceso modernizador de las instituciones de educación superior nacionales e internacionales, ya que es una actividad académica para beneficio de la sociedad y mediante la cual los estudiantes universitarios consolidan su formación profesional. El servicio social para la educación superior a distancia es un desafío, principalmente porque se deben diseñar estrategias innovadoras que brinden las condiciones para vincular y articular el trabajo académico entre los cuatro actores más importantes de cualquier modelo educativo: los estudiantes, los profesores, el contexto laboral, y los planes y programas de estudio. Con base en lo anterior y considerando que los estudiantes de los programas educativos en línea de la Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas se encuentran distribuidos a lo largo de la república mexicana y en Estados Unidos, el proyecto de intervención resulta una opción viable, creativa y sistemática para que los estudiantes a distancia realicen su servicio social. Este trabajo contiene la estructura, la metodología, las líneas de acción y generación del conocimiento para la elaboración del proyecto de intervención, así como el proceso de entrega de informes del servicio social para que los estudiantes a distancia puedan cumplir en tiempo y forma con este compromiso institucional y social.

### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords

Distance students, social service, intervention project

*The social service is an essential part of modernization process of national and international Higher Education institutions, because it is an academic activity for the benefit of society and where university students consolidate their vocational training. The Social Service for distance Higher Education is a challenge, mainly because they should design innovative strategies to provide the conditions to link and coordinate academic work among the four most important actors in any model education: Students, teachers, labor context, and plans and study programs. Based on the above and considering that students in educational programs online of the UAT are distributed throughout Mexico and the United States, the Intervention Project is presented as a viable, creative and systematic option for distance students do their social service. Throughout this work it presents the structure, the work methodology, lines of action and generation of knowledge for the development of Intervention Project, as well as the delivery process reports of Social Service for distance students can fulfill in a timely manner with this institutional and social commitment.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the international framework, the role of the institutions of higher education (IHE) is enormous, complex and vital. Owing to this complexity, there have emerged various obstacles and opportunities with many implications, ranging from economic and social policies to challenges related to the changing perspectives of knowledge itself. This has clearly influenced the role and the social responsibility the universities represent in society. The IHEs possess a tremendous social commitment with the world owing to their character as centers of training, production and transmission of knowledge. They have the possibility for linking the local with the global, which gives them considerable access to the processes of change in many societies, as well as influence on them (Global University Network for Innovation, 2008).

In this context, it is opportune to realize the relationship between the university, the State, and the society, which makes evident the eminently social function of the university, which constitutes itself as an authentic factor of transformation for the context in which it is located (Martínez de Carrasquero, Mavárez, Rojas, and Carvallo, 2008).

The principal functions of the universities are: teaching, research, management, and outreach; with the latter, the university expresses its social commitment with its surroundings: “The social responsibility of the university, understood as social projection, university outreach or social service, entails a reality as an inevitable consequence of the process of teaching-learning and research, responding to the universal principle of doing good and sharing it with others” (Domínguez and Rama, 2012, p. 13).

In this framework, the social responsibility of the university represents for the universities a new form of focusing this commitment, given that it is the space linking the knowledge generated in the context of its application with local, national, and global needs (Global University Network for Innovation, 2008).

Larrán and Andrades (2013) define the social responsibility of the university as “the capacity that the university has for disseminating and putting into practice a set of principles, general and specific values, by means of four key processes: administration, education, research, and university outreach, thus responding before the university community itself and before the nation in which it is inserted” (p. 11).

In the understanding that the primordial objective of the university’s social responsibility is to promote the social utility of knowledge, thereby contributing to the social development of its environment, the IHEs have the possibility of putting in practice an act of service that makes knowledge useful for the society, by associating itself in an effective way with society through its students through the offering of social services. This

mechanism allows students to enter directly in contact with the needs of society and its institutions, and to “put at their disposition knowledge, abilities, and skills, for the solution of problems, in addition to expanding their own formative development by having fomented in them a sense of civic consciousness, one of service and contribution to society” (Narro, Martuscelli, and Barzana, 2012, p. 237).

According to the Global University Network for Innovation (2008), social service is one way for students to apply the knowledge acquired during their academic education in attention to concrete problems, particularly among the most excluded sectors of the society. Additionally, it affirms that the initiatives of social service, in general, refer to an obligatory, unremunerated activity that students must complete during or just after their higher education studies as a requirement for graduation.

It is important to mention that there are differences among Latin American countries which have some type of university social service, in terms the objectives, practices, and experiences with which they are implemented. Some IHEs give emphasis to the practice’s utility in the development of future professionals’ capabilities, while others seek to utilize the social service experience as a means of augmenting their students’ comprehension of problems that are specific to our societies. In some of the most ambitious proposals, the IHEs seek to promote student activities of solidarity in attending to local needs, and to thereby both improve the quality of learning and provide training for responsible participatory citizenship (Global University Network for Innovation, 2008).

In Mexico, social service is an activity that must be undertaken by students at the high school and university level as part of their requirements for graduation. Article 24, section II of the General Law of Education sets forth that: “Those benefiting directly from educational services shall offer social service, in the cases and terms determined by the corresponding regulatory provisions. In these, the performance of social service shall be foreseen as a requirement prior to the granting of academic grades or titles” (Chamber of Deputies of the Honorable Congress of the Union, 2016, p.13). For its part, the Law of Education for the State of Tamaulipas, in Article 42, states: “Those benefiting directly from educational services shall perform social service, in the cases and terms determined by the corresponding regulatory provisions. Social service constitutes a prior requirement for obtaining a title” (Congress of the State of Tamaulipas, 2016, p. 18).

In this way, higher education becomes a crucial factor in the social and economic development of any nation, regardless of the disparities that may be found in the regions of which it consists. Despite such differences, social service in higher education represents a wonderful opportunity to try to solve the concrete problems of communities and to contribute to the

integral formation of those providing the service (Sánchez and Mungaray, 2000).

Therefore, university-level social service presents an important opportunity for nourishing the social development of the nation and, at the same time, for stimulating the academic preparedness of the students. Notwithstanding the different approaches that have been brought to bear throughout history in attempts to improve the offering of social services, the Council on Public Universities and Analogous Institutions (CUPIA), in its National Outreach Program for Culture and Services, approved at its VI ordinary session, establishes that Mexico still has some problems which ought to be analyzed with the goal of offering alternative solutions. They include:

- Isolation of social service, which is practiced more as a bureaucratic activity than an academic one, leading to a lack of integration with the substantive functions of the IHEs.
- The fact that an important part of the activity is realized in social sectors that are not prioritized results in the fact that their nature, goals and objectives are unknown.
- Lack of programs of evaluation adequate to the magnitude of the activity, which has led to a lack of clarity regarding the social, professional, and academic impact generated in benefit of the community, of government agencies, and of the IHEs.
- The dearth of information available for the service providers, which has impeded better integration and professional formation of students (CUPIA, 1995, p. 28).

Based on the abovementioned observations, and in consideration of the need for giving meaning to and effectively exercising the eminently social function that social service ought to have, the IHEs must reevaluate their function as an essential axis linking students and the society at large (Narro, Martuscelli, and Barzana, 2012). In this regard, what is required are proposals that contribute to the professional formation of students by instilling in them an ethical perspective and a sense of social commitment as the basis of their academic and professional activity. The Autonomous University of Tamaulipas (UAT) proposes the project of intervention as a viable, creative, and innovative option for students enrolled in distance learning programs to be able to fully complete this social and institutional commitment.

## **SOCIAL SERVICE IN DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS**

The performance of social service in higher education presents different problems that must be attended to with innovative proposals and mechanisms which permit a renewal of its essence and value in benefiting

both society and the students themselves. This being said, IHEs that offer education at a distance programs have the obligation to design and develop innovative proposals which offer options for the performance of social service. These alternatives ought to be flexible and adaptable to the rhythms of study and other personal commitments of distance learning students, principally those related to work and family obligations.

In the context of such considerations, it is worthwhile analyzing some of the innovative initiatives regarding social service made by pioneering IHEs involved in distance education:

- UDGVirtual, in its Title Granting Regulations of the Virtual University of the University of Guadalajara, puts at the disposal of alumnae who are initiating the process to request the granting of their academic titles the option of doing so through the “Social Service Report.” This report provides information from performers of social service as a means of explaining what knowledge, acquired during their academic formation, was applied in the performance of their social service, as well as an accounting of whatever new work-related knowledge they may have acquired while performing their social service. In the process of putting together this report, results are compiled from both social service performers and the places in which they carry out their social service work (UDGVirtual, 2016).
- The National Open and At-a-Distance University of Mexico, in its Scholastic Regulations (the latest reform approved by the university council), has determined that social service is curricular, and is to be accredited at the bachelor’s degree level by the elaboration of a final project. It also stipulates that the evaluation of these projects shall be carried out together by both the online educator assigned by the university and by whoever is responsible for overseeing the performance of the students’ work at the institution, business, or governmental agency at which the social service is realized (UnADM, 2015).
- The UAT, in the case of its online education program students, has incorporated the option of an intervention project for the performance of social service, which folds in social service with the academic curriculum by means of its Research Seminars I and II, enabling online students to enter into action and not only fully complete their social service commitment but also so that their work in the social and productive sectors advances them toward attaining their degrees, in accordance with the options included in the Regulations for High School and Undergraduate University Students (UAT, 2014c).

In the following section, we analyze the general characteristics of the model of distance education at the UAT, as well as the methodology of the

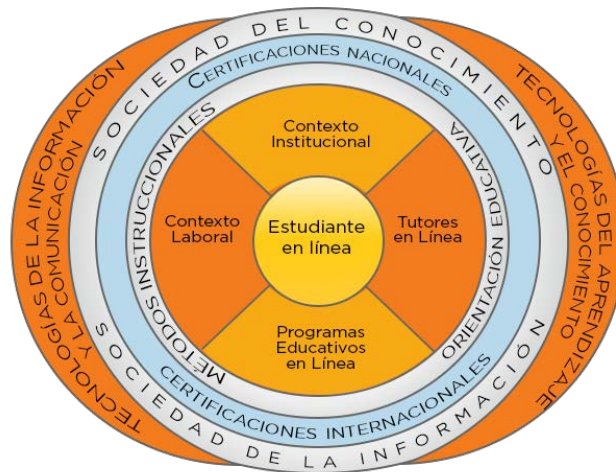
intervention project and its corresponding aspects of the application and generation of knowledge.

## THE DISTANCE EDUCATION MODEL AT THE AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF TAMAULIPAS (UAT)

The online education programs at the UAT are designed on a foundation of its model of distance education, put together with a constructivist vision and focused on meaningful learning. In this way, all the actors involved revolve around the online student, and conditions are established for the reconstructing and self-management of new knowledge and experience through independent and collaborative learning, as well as processes for the administration of critical and creative thought. According to this model, the online student is conceived of as

an individual, generally mature, with a personal history full of experiences, knowledge, capabilities, habits, attitudes, behaviors, and interests that derive from his or her own process of formation. For this reason, the ideal is that Distance Education adapt itself to the needs, characteristics, and personal interests of the students, as well as to their available time, space, motivations, rhythms and styles of learning, for which reason the curriculum to be covered ought to be flexible and adaptable to these circumstances (Amaya and Navarro, 2015, p. 116).

In Figure 1 we present the actors who participate in the distance education model of the UAT, and the levels of influence of each of them with respect to the principal actor (the online student).



**Figure 1.** Distance education model of the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas. Source: UAT (2015).

Students learn to search for information, classify it, select it, construct new knowledge and share it through learning and knowledge technologies (LKT) and information and communication technologies (ICT).

Always maintaining a high level of interactivity, not only with their online tutor and the online program's didactic materials but also with their online classmates, students engaging in these activities will further develop their abilities and skills in problem solving, communication, collaboration, and self-direction (Amaya and Navarro, 2015, p. 120).

The importance of designing academic strategies that allow for the articulation of the different actors who make up the UAT's distance education model is evident. In this sense, the intervention project integrates the academic activity of the four principal actors who interact in an initial spectrum with the online student—the online education programs, the labor context, the institutional context, and the online tutors—with the benefit of producing a finished product that offers competitive advantages not only to the online student but also to the institution, organization or business where the student realizes his or her social service.

In accordance with Article 2, Chapter I of the Social Service Regulation of the UAT,

social service constitutes one of the most important elements in the humanistic and professional formation of the student and has as its goal the creation in the student of a consciousness of social solidarity that contributes to the elevation of the quality of life and the conservation of the environment in both the state and the nation, through the application of the knowledge and skills proper to the career course being undertaken (UAT, 2014b, p. 29).

In a similar sense, strategic point 4.3.5 of the Institutional Development Plan for 2014-2017 of the UAT, indicates the following line of action: "To assure that social service contributes to the study and solution of social problems in the community, as well as to the integral and academic formation of the students" (UAT, 2014a, p. 57).

Additionally, Article 2, Chapter I of the Social Service Regulation of the UAT mentions that "social service shall have as its priority contributing to the academic and professional formation of the student and the solution of the basic needs of socially underserved groups" (UAT, 2014b, p. 29).

## **THE INTERVENTION PROJECT**

Considering the profile of the distance education students, in addition to the fact that they are distributed across both the Mexican republic and in the United States, the UAT implemented the option of the intervention project, principally because it is viable, and its application implies an improvement of or solution to a social problem over any factors that might affect their functioning properly (Reboloso, Fernández, and Cantón, 2008).

An intervention project is defined as "an ensemble of activities that are proposed to be realized in a coordinated manner, with the goal of producing specific goods or services capable of satisfying needs or

resolving problems” (Castillo and Cabrerizo, 2011, p. 39). It affords the distance learning student the possibility of engaging in transformative action, with the intent of addressing needs that have been identified through a plan of action that responds to them, within a theoretical framework that would sustain any project proposal:

*An intervention project* bases itself in an investigational methodology to establish the foundation for its importance and viability, but does not in itself constitute a research project, owing to the fact that the fulfilment of the objectives of the *intervention project* are understood in the sense of it being a transformative action; while it may eventually constitute a return to the intervening experts in terms of an increase in their own practical knowledge, this will not be, however, its guiding logic at the moment of intervention (Callejo and Rojas, 2006, p. 140).

For the elaboration of the intervention project, the Office of Distance Education of the UAT established guidelines for the application and generation of knowledge by which the distance learning students can develop their intervention projects, which will be articulated in accordance with the profile categories of graduation and professional. In this article we work with the lines of application and generation of knowledge related to the bachelor’s degree programs in Knowledge Generation Technologies, the first online career program offered by the UAT.

In the following section we present the structure of the document for the intervention project, which integrates elements of the proposed elaboration of a terminal project of the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo (UAEH, 2014). We complement it and adapt it to our own institutional needs and requirements:

Cover

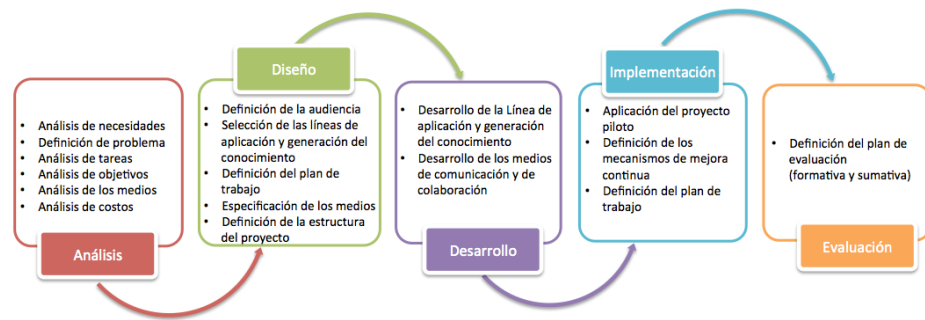
Synopsis

Presentation

- I. Situational Analysis
- II. Description of Problem
- III. Antecedents to Problem
- IV. Justification
- V. Objectives
  - a. General Objective
  - b. Specific Objective
- VI. Theoretical Framework
- VII. Methodology
- VIII. Chronogram of Activities
- IX. Resources
- X. Strategies for Implementation
- XI. Strategies for Evaluation
- XII. Conclusions and Recommendations
- XIII. Bibliographical References

Appendices

It is important to mention that one of the improvements that has been incorporated into the structure of the document of this intervention project is the section dealing with procedures and activities having to do with methodology, given that it will follow the ADDIE institutional model, utilized for the instructional design of this type of project. The model is comprised of five stages: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (Yukavetsky, 2003). In Figure 2 we offer details of the stages.



**Figure 2.** Stages in the elaboration of the intervention project (ADDIE model).

The lines of application and generation of knowledge corresponding to the bachelor's degree program in Knowledge Generation Technologies are:

Line 1. Construct study plans and programs, as well as the continual formation for the training and specialization of personnel in the handling of ICT. Consists of designing the study plans and programs based on instructional methods, oriented to offering answers to the needs of training personnel who will work in the institution, organization or business:

Design or updating of educational plans and programs for the elementary, high school, and university levels.

- Design of innovative pedagogical strategies such as Flipped Classroom, which permit the diversification of options for learning and seek to make more effective the sessions of traditional or required assistance classes.

Line 2. Intervene in the strengthening and improvement of the educational processes by means of LKT. Consists of constructing projects related to the design and innovative practices favoring and perfecting the processes of teaching and learning with the help of ICT:

Design innovative educational models that incorporate the use and integration of the technological tools of Google Drive or Microsoft OneDrive, available in the cloud, to assist with the learning of students.

- Design of innovative pedagogical strategies such as Flipped Classroom, which allow diversification of learning options and seek to increase the efficiency of traditional or required assistance classes.

Line 3. Promote products or services by means of digital marketing. Consists of designing strategies of digital marketing for the promotion of the institution's, organization's or business' products and services, based on international standards of usability and accessibility:

- Construction of a web page on free sites available on the cloud and linked to Google's search engine optimization (SEO) system.
- Implementation of strategies for the promotion and diffusion of products and services over the social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

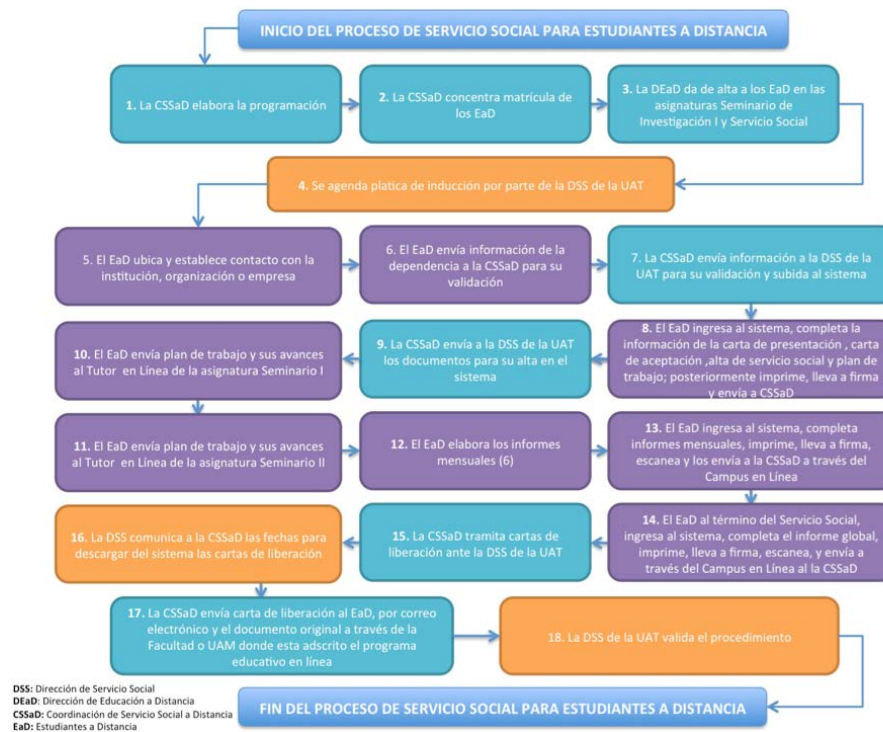
Line 4. Create virtual environments of learning to diversify the options available for learning, communication, and collaboration. Consists of designing digital contents and resources, starting out from an instructional design for distance education with the support of systems of distance education:

- Construction of *b-learning* (blended or "mixed-mode" learning) educational projects, to diversify the options for learning, communication, and collaboration with the help of learning management systems (LMS), web-conference systems or mobile learning.
- Construction of online or *e-learning* educational projects to diversify the options for learning, communication, and collaboration with the help of LMS, web-conference systems or mobile learning.

## THE PROCESS OF DISTANCE SOCIAL SERVICE

Students matriculated in online educational programs in the UAT are also required to perform social service in order to graduate. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the processes for offering them proper conditions and having them be able to realize this obligation without undue delay. It is important to mention that the distance education students are located in different regions of the country, and there are also some who are physically challenged, others who work or who have family obligations, such as single mothers or housewives; in addition, we have international students and some who are Mexican nationals but live in the USA.

In Figure 3 we show graphically the process of social service for distance learning students.



**Figure 3.** Process of social service for distance learning students.

The process begins with the programming of the Office of Social Service of the UAT in relation to the dates of submission of reports from the distance learning students; in the next step, the students' records are concentrated for the purpose of consulting their credits and signing them up for the Integral Social Service System. At the same time, the students are permitted access to the materials of Social Service and the Research Seminar I, available in the online campus of the UAT to help orient themselves to the process.

Afterwards, an introductory talk is offered by the Office of Social Service, through a session of web-conference, in which there is discussion of topics such as the importance of social service, access to the system, filling out forms, key points of the UAT's Social Service Regulation, and the characteristics of the different agencies in which the students can perform their social service. With the above information, the distance learning student identifies the agency, which is validated by the Office of Distance Education and the Office of Social Service, for the registration of the student in the system.

During the six months that social service lasts, the students file monthly reports that include information about the knowledge and experiences emanating both from their academic activities in Research Seminars I and II and from their work activities in the agencies where they are performing their social service.

After the distance learning students complete the 480 hours of required social service, they submit a final report of their intervention project, which is presented to the agency in which they have performed their social service work. For its part, the Office of Distance Education requests from the Office of Social Service the documentation proving the student has been freed from this requirement, for the distance learning students who have satisfactorily concluded the process; the certifications are extended through the departmental office or the multidisciplinary academic unit in which the online education program is inscribed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The most important function of higher education at a distance is that of increasing the coverage with equality, inclusiveness, and quality, and offering students the conditions so that they can, based on their own availability in terms of time and rhythm of studies, continue with their professional training. One should not lose sight of the fact that the IHEs ought to contribute to the growth of the coverage with quality, inclusiveness, and equality, based on innovative, flexible, and efficacious educational models that would abolish the frontiers of space and time to bring educational opportunities to vulnerable students or distant provinces, those who live at great remove from the developed urban centers, poor communities, rural populations, working people, housewives, and the disabled.

An intervention project offers the conditions for being carried out from the office, from home, or from any place where distance learning students are located, according to their availability in space and time, given that the only requirement is a couple of visits to the agency (institution, organization or business) where the students will perform their social service during each of the project's stages (analysis, design, development, and implementation).

At each stage, the distance learning students have the support and assistance of the person responsible for social service at a distance, as well as from researchers who are experts in their field; that is to say, an institutional effort has been made to articulate the curriculum of professional training with social service through the material in Research Seminar I (period 7) and Research Seminar II (period 8), which will offer distance learning students the theoretical and procedural knowledge for successfully bringing to completion their social service.

Finally, it is important to mention that the UAT, in Article 79, Chapter II of the Regulations for High School and Undergraduate University Students, offers the option of the briefer, less ponderous *tesina* ("mini-thesis") as an option for receiving the bachelor's degree. With this, the final report and the product derived from the intervention project enable distance learning students to move forward and conclude their professional formation by selecting the shorter written form, specifically

the category of “Recuperation of Professional Experience” (contextualized narration of some project or presentation of accomplished work) as their option for completing the thesis requirement and being granted their academic degree.



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