University Experiences and Civic-mindedness: What shapes ‘A Broader Mind’?
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This document sets out the rationale and preliminary plan for a PhD project at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. The PhD project is part of A Broader Mind for Students, a program at VU that offers students the opportunity “to develop more broadly, from an academic, personal and social perspective: to equip students to be successful and play a meaningful part in this world” (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2020). A Broader Mind for Students consists of (1) an extracurricular course; (2) a range of Community Service Learning activities embedded in different programs; and (3) a longitudinal research program, tracking the development of students at VU. The PhD project is part of the research program.

Background
In the early 20th century, Durkheim (1922) described the function of education as two-fold: socialization of shared values, and formation of skills that make citizens productive in a highly specialized economy. Dewey (1916) assigned universities a particular role in preparing students to become responsible leaders in mature democracies. A century later, universities are rediscovering their role as actors in democracy. The renewed interest in building civic-mindedness at universities comes at a time of crisis. For years, universities were incentivized by governments to increase enrolment numbers at the lowest possible cost. Universities realize that a successful student is more than a graduate with good prospects on the labor market (OCW, 2015). During their time at university, students go through all kinds of experiences. Life as a student is not just about learning research and practical skills, but also about forming relationships, gaining social skills, open debate, and the ability to get new perspectives and reflect on social and ethical issues. Student life can have a lasting influence not only on labor market success, but also on world views and civic attitudes.

To facilitate the broader development of students, universities increasingly offer new, often interdisciplinary programs. Universities aim to prepare students both for the labor market and to play a meaningful role in future societies. It is important to know how educational programs and social activities shape students’ attitudes towards the world and their role therein. A Broader Mind for Students was created at VU Amsterdam in 2017 to enable students to develop themselves more broadly: personally and socially, with an open mind to themselves, each other, and to social issues. Since the inception of ABMfS, the board of the university has supported scientific research to monitor the effects of the program.

Research questions
This PhD project aims to answer the following research question: How do academic and social experiences at the university shape students’ civic-mindedness? Civic-mindedness is a broad concept which includes knowledge, communication skills, civic efficacy and behavioral intentions to contribute to society (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004; Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011; Weber et al., 2004).
There is a great lack of knowledge on the impact of community service learning and educational experiences among students in higher education in the Netherlands. Previous research has documented anecdotal evidence on specific courses (pilots) and perceptions of educators. Academic literature, primarily from the US, describes how service learning, community service learning, experiential learning and citizenship education can be designed to enhance learning and civic outcomes. Educational programs can be specifically designed to promote the “civic-minded graduate” (Bringle et al., 2011).

There is, however, evidence from both the Netherlands as well as from abroad that supports the possibility that CSL activities can improve student outcomes, including civic-mindedness. In the Netherlands, a study on the effects of community service among students in secondary education (Bekkers, Spenkelink, Ooms & Immerzeel, 2009) has shown that program design choices can affect civic-mindedness, in conjunction with student characteristics and characteristics of group processes. Specifically, students who engaged in CSL activities in groups (rather than alone) and who participated in community service at higher levels of education developed more civic-mindedness. The effects of reflection activities were complex, and varied with school and student characteristics.

Community service learning and broader educational experiences have been studied extensively in the US, where a large number of higher education institutions have been working to integrate community service and learning since the 1990s. Research on student outcomes of these programs (for reviews, see Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2007; Novak, Markey, & Ellen, 2007; Hatcher, Bringle & Hahn, 2017) identifies three ways in which these activities can improve student outcomes:

1. First, through CSL activities, students get involved in social issues, grassroots initiatives and nonprofit organizations, become aware and study these issues, and engage with the causes that these organizations and initiatives seek to advance. Several studies in the US indicate that students at lower baseline levels of civic mindedness benefit most strongly from CSL activities (Metz & Youniss, 2005; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Studies in other countries like Canada (Meinhard & Foster 2000) and the Netherlands (Bekkers et al., 2010), however, show that students with higher base line scores on civic-mindedness progressed more strongly.

2. Second, through CSL activities students strengthen their professional skills and orient themselves on occupational choices and the labor market (Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011). They learn and strengthen skills that employers value, and that receive too little attention in regular academic courses.

3. Third, CSL activities can motivate students to complete their education (Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010). Especially if students see the societal value of their education through CSL activities, they will be encouraged to perform well and graduate on time.

A limitation of previous studies dedicated to the supposed beneficial effects of such educational experiences, is that they are cross-sectional. The little research available using longitudinal data shows that positive correlations between participation in non-mandatory courses and civic attitudes are mostly due to selection effects (Bekkers et al., 2010; Meyer, Neumayr, & Rameder, 2019). There is a need for more evidence that disentangles causation from selection.

No study to date has investigated the effects of CSL on positive outcomes for students in higher education institution with a quantitative empirical design that allows for causal inference. The study we propose will bring evidence to the table that allows educators to determine the effects of different choices in the design of CSL activities.
Data: the A Broader Mind Longitudinal Survey

The project will make use of data from the A Broader Mind Longitudinal Survey (ABMLS; see Van Niekerk et al., 2019). The ABMLS is a new survey that is fielded every year among a sample of students at VU Amsterdam, aiming to develop a panel in which students are followed over time with regards to their personal, academic, civic and professional development. The data are matched with data from VU Student Analytics, which includes information on gender, place of birth, previous education, course enrollment and academic results (Bakker, Tolen, & Paffen, 2017). The longitudinal nature of this extensive dataset makes it highly suitable to examine how educational and social experiences are associated with changes in civic attitudes.

The PhD candidate will contribute to the collection of data in the ABMLS, by co-designing the questions on the survey, programming the questionnaires, and organizing activities to enhance involvement and retention of participants over time. The PhD candidate will analyze the ABMLS data for the empirical studies in the project.

Project plan

The PhD project consists of four parts.

1. Civic-mindedness as an outcome of university programs. To what extent do universities nowadays succeed in creating more civic-minded citizens? How do universities influence the civic-mindedness of students? Which specific educational and social factors most strongly contribute to students’ civic-mindedness? These are the more general questions the answers to which lay the foundations for the following empirical studies.

2. Development of Civic-mindedness. This study explores “civic-mindedness” as a multi-dimensional concept. Relying on the ABMLS, we examine differences in aspects of civic-mindedness between groups (e.g. by study program, gender, place of birth, and religious affiliation), and describe how civic-mindedness changes over the years.

3. Civic Effects of the A Broader Mind Course. While the A Broader Mind Course aims to contribute to students’ perceptions of themselves and their roles in society, it may attract primarily students who are already civic-minded. In this study, we examine how students self-select into the non-mandatory A Broader Mind Course, and how their civic attitudes develop during the course.

4. Course materials and their outcomes. A relatively general and short course like A Broader Mind may benefit overall civic-mindedness, but how do specific educational experiences lead to the development of specific attitudes on the topics that are discussed? Do students learn more about the topics they have discussed, increase their civic efficacy in this area, or instead become more cynical about what they can do to solve societal problems?

Taken together, the four parts form the core of a dissertation.

Supervision

The PhD project takes 4 years, starting September 1, 2020. The promotor is prof. dr. René Bekkers, who leads the A Broader Mind research team. Co-supervisor is dr. Arjen de Wit, who is a postdoc on the project. The PhD Candidate will be part of the Center for Philanthropic Studies within the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences.
References


