

# INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MODEL FOR STUDENT SELECTION

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## ABSTRACT

*Student selection for International Service-Learning (ISL) at Union Christian College gathers attention of faculty, researchers and Service-Learning developers, as it is a multidimensional model. Its meaning increases when there is proportionally higher number of applicants for a fewer available seats. The selection process, starting from classroom level to institution level, is based on seven-fold criteria, and have been in practice for the last three years. The evaluation is conducted to trace the student's commitment to society, attitude to community engagements, leadership quality and personal initiatives. The process of enriching writing skills and equipping for designing SL activities for the diverse communities during the selection process by the SL committee prepare the students to meet the challenges in the field. Students groomed under such a method are selected for ISL. Participant students who do not get the chance for the former are trained for in-house SL. They are appointed as student volunteers for the SL of incoming international students.*

**Key words:** *International Service-Learning, Multi-dimensional model, Student selection*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Service-Learning (SL) is based on the philosophy of students applying the acquired knowledge to the benefit of immediate community and conversely re-situating that knowledge based on the needs of that community. The community the students serve can range from those close to the students' region or locality to those that lie in far-flung regions of the globe. The opportunity to engage in SL among communities that are linguistically and culturally different from their own can be a huge challenge and yet a rare opportunity for students to broaden their mental horizons (Annette, 2003; Hartman & Kiely, 2014). Apart from providing better educational understanding, it allows for intercultural exchange, appreciation of the host country and transforms the student to become a truly global citizen (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2011). As Mezirow (1990) suggests, learners interpret and reinterpret their experience to find meaning out of learning and this can bring about a lasting transformation in them (Kiely, 2004; Nickols et al., 2013). Student exchange programs both at the national and international levels among institutions have gone a long way in facilitating this sort of an engagement and thus making the pedagogy a truly global one. Such an experience not only transforms the students but also benefits the institutions that enter into such partnerships as it has the capacity to promote civic engagement and critical reflection (Cazzell et al., 2014; McKee, 2016). They garner high appeal as only a select number of students qualify for the event and this makes it highly imperative to have a calibrated assessment model for the student selection process.

### **International Service Learning at UCC**

Union Christian College (UCC), Aluva, holds the credit of being the only college in the state of Kerala, India, to offer International Service Learning (ISL). Select students from the college get the opportunity of observing and participating in SL along with students drawn from institutions across the globe over a period of time in the host institution. The

event opens up avenues for interaction with diverse cultural groups and helps to establish an international network of student enthusiasts who are committed to goals of SL (Miller & Gonzalez, 2010). To derive the best out of such international collaborations, the selected students must manifest a set of qualities that go beyond their academic performance. It is worth noting that the student population of UCC is a highly eclectic group as it attracts students from all over the state belonging to different educational background, socio-economic status, culture and religion. The diversity ranges from students who are first generation learners to those having prior exposure to international system of education. This makes the student selection process highly challenging and the key determiner of the success of such events. Researchers in the past have identified that lack of rigorous selection procedures in any program may produce negative effects such as reducing the quality and effectiveness of the program, not meeting its desired objectives and laxity on the part of the candidates, which further results in their poor performance (Creighton & Jones, 2001).

The Service-Learning Centre (SLC) at UCC recognizing these challenges has evolved a rigorous set of assessment tools to gauge the latent potential and the suitability of the student applicants to participate in ISL. The multi-pronged approach developed over a period of time is designed to ensure transparency and objectivity at each stage of the selection process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The SLC at UCC constitutes a SL committee headed by faculty members from various departments. Apart from meeting periodically to plan and initiate SL on campus and with its partner institutes, it has the key responsibility to co-ordinate ISL for the students and to select them for exchange programs. The present selection process, in operation since 2018, was proposed by the authors of the paper. The long drawn out process that lasts for more than a month is a meticulously planned out exercise, that involves selecting suitable students from

first year (freshman) undergraduate streams that comprise close to 800 students. The parameters for selection of the candidates have been evolved based on the challenges that were faced by the present and previous committees over the years since the inception of the program. Through tried and tested means, a judicious set of practices for evaluation and assessment process was evolved that has been in operation for the last three years and has seen fairly good results especially in selecting the most suitable candidates and tracking the performance of the candidates during and after the completion of the event. Such a methodology can be relevant contribution to student assessment strategies when it comes to events such as ISL, which attracts participants with motivations other than what is requisite for the 'ideal' candidate.

***Stage 1:***

The selection process for the ISL begins around February every year. Though technically students from across disciplines are eligible to apply for the program, students from second (sophomore) and third years are not included as it interferes with their regular academic calendar and they stand to lose a year. So the ideal belt is the freshman students, as they are already into their second semester when the applications are invited and are fairly well-adjusted to the campus and its culture. The students also get sufficient time to involve in the college activities and build strong links with various clubs and associations on campus. Moreover, after the completion of the program the student gets ample time to impart some of the learning experiences and reflections to SL on campus and can even serve as student resource person on campus during the next two years. Every year at the beginning, a meeting is conjoined to discuss the *modus operandi* and chart out the schedule for conducting the selection process, starting right from the date of sending out the brochures to various departments, to planning out the various stages of the selection process. During this stage the committee recaps on the previous year's strategies, based on the recorded documents, goes

through criteria of selection and assesses the merits and demerits of them once again before finalizing it. One of the crucial questions that come up during this stage is the number of participants to be permitted from each department. This is a major concern considering every batch, every year has a varied strength of students. The criteria of student ratio for the last three years have been 1:15 approximately. Once the criteria of selection, student ratio and deadlines are set, the next step involves circulating the invitation to all departments on campus. There are two core groups to whom the message needs to be conveyed. Firstly, the department heads and class teachers of the first-year students and secondly, the student community. The former is mostly done through first hand visit to departments by the select committee members and criteria for the current year is conveyed and discussed with the department head and class teacher. The college also has official online and offline platform where the announcement is made for the benefit of the entire college teaching community. The students are informed about the program through official announcement system by the head of the institution and through class teachers. A date is set for interested candidates from each department to hand in their names to their respective class teachers. During this stage the students are allowed to consult the SLC for queries and discussions. The number of applicants is usually very high since many apply for the program guided by varied set of interests rather than what the program mandates. The first level screening takes place at this stage, where class teachers based on their interaction with students in the course of last and current semesters assess the eligibility of the candidates for stage two of the selection process. For this purpose, the class teacher relies on the first criterion in the Rubric (Rubric for student selection is attached in Appendix A), to filter the potential candidates for the next level. During this stage of screening process, the onus falls upon the class teacher to identify the potential candidates for stage two. In the event of more than the stipulated number of

eligible applicants from a single department, the committee allows them the discretion to recommend those additional names for the next level of the selection process.

***Stage 2:***

Once the list of applicants from the class teachers of every department reaches the SLC, the processes of the second level are set in motion. From this stage onwards the assessment of the student group is solely upon the SL committee. As first part of the stage two process, the eligible applicants are invited for an Orientation Class organized by Service-Learning Centre, UCC. The session, conducted by the Director of Service-Learning, UCC along with the other SL faculties, is aimed to explain to the participants in more detail the nature of the program and how the students need to prepare themselves for the selection process. One of the key highlights of the orientation is the presentation by the students who attended the previous year's exchange program. This not only gives a fairly good idea as to what is expected of the participants, but also communicates the challenges they have to meet in the event of their selection. The meeting concludes with handing out of a set of forms, which includes the Student Profile Sheet, Questionnaire and Essays.

Though the assessment at this level does not eliminate the students, they are marked on the basis of the matter they have submitted. Once the students have submitted the proforma, they are asked to prepare a presentation based on the data provided, adding further information and valid proofs to the claims they have made. The last level of stage 2 is presentation by the students. On a given day, each student makes a presentation for 15 minutes before the SL evaluation team. To ensure the transparency of the process a faculty outside the committee is invited as a guest in the selection panel. The presentation is evaluated on the basis on criteria 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 in the rubric. Based on the combined assessment of the written document and presentation, students are shortlisted for the final stage of the selection process.

### ***Stage 3:***

During the third and final stage, each shortlisted candidate is given a week's time to design a SL project to be implemented on campus. With the involvement of the full quorum of SLC and an external evaluator, student evaluation is conducted based on criterion 6 in the rubric. Once this round is complete and marking is done, the committee members come together to evaluate each of the shortlisted candidates based on their performance so far. The candidates are ranked based on the scores, following which, they are invited for a personal interview with the head of the institution and the SL evaluation team as a formal procedure.

### **RESULTS**

The data of student selection process over the last three years (2018, 2019 & 2020) was analyzed and distinct features of student participation were identified. Continuous evaluation of the student statistics and performances are recorded for the sake of study purposes and development of the SLC. The collection of the data and its processing at every stage was done by the authors and consent was sought from participant students for using the data for research and development.

#### **Statistics of Student Participation in SL Selection**

Of the thirteen undergraduate programs spread across four different streams, there are two programs in Language (English and Malayalam), two in Social Sciences (History and Economics), eight in Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Botany, Zoology, Psychology, Biological Techniques and Specimen Preparation and Computer Science) and two Commerce programs (B.Com Computer Application and B.Com. Finance and Taxation). Table 1 evidently indicates the basic background and status of students. Twenty-eight students from thirteen programs participated with the highest representation from science stream during the first year under study and there was consistent rise in the participation from second year onwards. Students from Above Poverty Line (APL-as per Indian Public

Distribution System under the National Food Security Act) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) applied for the selection. It is recorded that there is a higher student representation from APL group than BPL group and it is also recorded that BPL students who applied for SL mostly belonged to aided programs.

**Table 1**

***Statistics of Student Background and Frequency of Queries***

Year	Stream	No. of students proposed by class teacher	Queries	No. of students from APL background	No. of students from BPL background
Year 1	Language	4	3	3	1
	Social Science	5	6	4	1
	Science	17	37	15	2
	Commerce	0	0	0	0
Year 2	Language	6	27	3	3
	Social Science	7	26	5	2
	Science	20	102	18	2
	Commerce	4	14	4	0
Year 3	Language	7	47	3	4
	Social Science	8	40	3	5
	Science	22	126	15	7
	Commerce	6	32	6	0

Scores obtained for student responses to various criteria (2-7) are considered for evaluation. Year wise results of students getting different grades (A, B, C, D) in three consecutive years are as follows. Year 1-3; grade A – 28.57%, 32.26% and 47.33%: Year 1-3: grade B – 42.85%, 29.03% and 33.33%: Year 1-3: grade C– 14.29%, 22.58% and 08.33% : Year 1-3: grade D – 14.29%, 12.9% and 11.11% respectively (Table 2).



**Table 2*****Year wise Performance of students getting Grades A- D in three consecutive years***

Year	Stream	No. of students who submitted data sheet	No. of A grade Responses	No. of B grade responses	No. of C grade responses	No. of D grade responses
Year 1	Language	4	1	2	1	0
	Social Science	5	1	2	0	2
	Science	12	4	5	2	1
	Commerce	0	0	0	0	0
Year 2	Language	5	2	2	1	0
	Social Science	7	3	2	1	1
	Science	15	4	4	4	3
	Commerce	4	1	1	1	1
Year 3	Language	6	2	2	1	1
	Social Science	8	5	1	1	1
	Science	16	8	7	0	1
	Commerce	6	2	2	1	1

Based on the data presented in table 2, one can fairly assess the character of student, commitment, attitude, previous knowledge, insight to social issues, personal capacities and leadership qualities.

**DISCUSSION**

ISL acquires immense significance in the sphere of higher education precisely because it's a pedagogy that promotes civic engagement and global citizenship. This is achieved through an amalgamation of the aspects of SL, studying abroad and international education (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2011). The multi-dimensional model of student selection was designed to arrive at an accurate assessment of the level of competence of the student, in a fair and judicious manner and to ensure that the students selected would rise up to meet the objectives of ISL.

An analysis of the results obtained using the selection model, provides several valuable insights about student participation. A comparison of the responses obtained during the last three years of student selection process reveals that there was a decrease in strength of the initial number of students proposed for the selection process by class teachers to that of the consecutive level of selection (vide Tables 1 & 2). The dropping-out of students was mostly noted from the science stream as they harbor an anxiety of losing out on their examinations (theory and practical) during their absence from the institution and consider it as a risk. At the same time, it could be observed that there was a gradual increase in the overall number of student responses from year one to year three. The permeation of SL on campus through partnerships with neighboring institutions and communities over the last few years, alongside the interaction with students from foreign institutions who arrive on campus for ISL has contributed to this enhanced interest in exchange programs. During the initial days of ISL in UCC, very few students from the BPL category would apply for exchange programs. This was partly due to the general perception that ISL was an elite event and only students with prior exposure to international education system were likely to qualify for the program. The increase in number of student responses from BPL category during year 3 compared to previous years is not only gratifying change as far the committee is concerned but it also underscores strength of its assessment model as being inclusive and objective (Fig. 1).

The effectiveness of the model becomes further evident when we do a comparative analysis of the grades scored by the students in the three years since the implementation of the current model.

On comparing the overall performance of participants across year 1, 2 and 3, we find an evident rise in the A grade ratings obtained by participants from year 1 to year 3 (Fig.2).

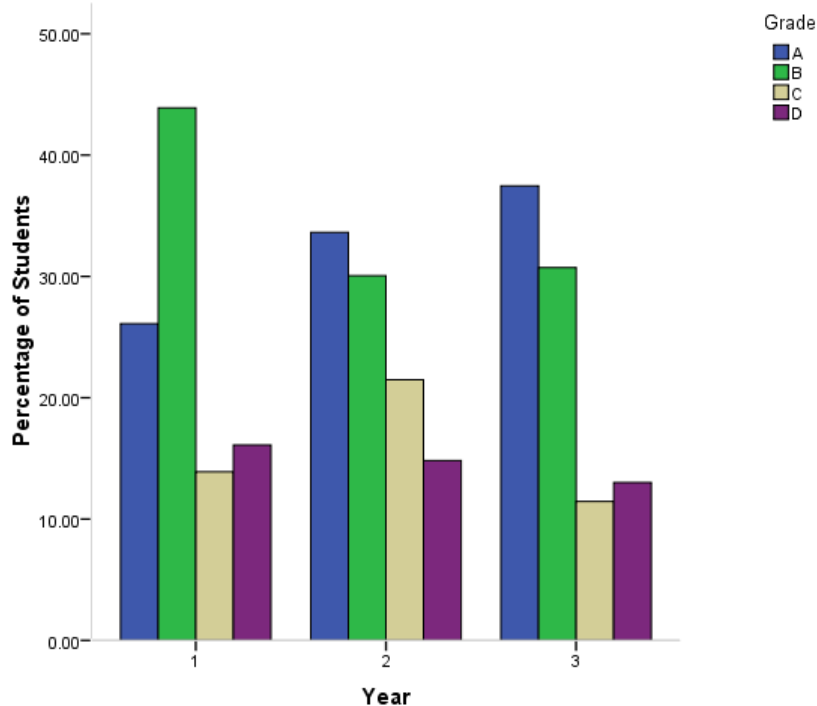


Fig. 2. Percentage of students secured grades A, B, C, and D in 3 consecutive years

Researchers in the past have indicated the effectiveness of the use of rubrics in student performance (Boston, 2002; Cooper & Gargan, 2009; Brookhart, & Chen, 2015). By delineating the criteria with specific set of descriptions related to each level of performance in the rubric, the committee was able to succinctly communicate to the participants in precise terms what was expected of them. This not only minimized the blind spots in the assessment model but assured a clear-sighted involvement on the part of the students as well. This also contributed to students scoring higher grades.

The rubric developed for the purpose of student selection for ISL could be considered as reliable measure from the perspective of the evaluators as well. It was found that there was around 75 to 80% agreement and lesser disagreement among members of the selection

committee regarding the grades assigned to candidates based on the criteria. This ensures sufficient inter-scorer reliability of the criteria proposed (Anastasi & Urbina, 2006).

It was also observed that the participants after the completion of their ISL were found to contribute much better than their counterparts from previous years to the overall development of the college and the community at large, and were found to take new SL initiatives on the campus and assume leadership positions in planning and executing programs organized by the SLC of the institution. Researchers in the past have identified such transformation in students engaged in ISL-based internship (Larsen & Gough, 2013; Niehaus & Crain, 2013). The greater involvement and positive change observed in these students could be suggestive of predictive validity of the given criteria for student selection. Students who participated in ISL were found to develop a mindset to take up further initiatives in service of the community. In fact, they were found to evolve into trendsetters or ambassadors in the field, capable of motivating other students to take similar SL initiatives.

The decision to evolve a multi-dimensional model for the student selection process was based on the challenges faced in the course of the years since the inception of the ISL at UCC. One major challenge was to accommodate higher number of aspirants for a program that has very limited number of seats. This warranted an initial screening process so that only those who cleared the preliminary stage were considered for higher level assessment. Given the multiple variables (such as attitude, communication skills, presentation skills, social commitments, approach to service and team player) and large number of applicants, the selection process had to be designed with multiple stages using a wide range of tools (written documents, presentation and project designing) with each stage acting as a filtering exercise. Conducting the whole selection process in the most transparent way was yet another challenge, given the high level of competency of the student applicants and high expectations from the departments that recommended the names of the students. It was understood that

only the best students among the genuinely interested lot would come through the final stages of the selection process. The committee was deeply concerned about the students not selected and emphasized on retaining them as potential candidates for future ventures related to SL. This was an exercise that was undertaken in the post-selection phase. The recording and documentation of the entire selection process was also to be done regularly and systematically. The present multidimensional model was found to address these challenges most effectively.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The paper proposes a multidimensional model for student selection in the context of ISL. Having put the model into practice for last three years and analyzed the outcomes based on the acquired data, it can be proposed as an effective model at an institutional level that caters to a diverse student population and in scenarios with higher number of applicants for a far fewer number of seats. Having said that, the model is equally conducive for a higher number of student selection. Participation of students from varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds can be considered as the most welcoming characteristic and indicative of the model's high level of inclusivity. Introduction of rubric for student selection produced a positive impact as evident from the student progression. The authors' efforts on developing clearly defined criteria with distinct markers for student performance have contributed to the model's objective and unambiguous traits. Dependability, reliability and reproducibility of the model make it highly conducive for institutions that find it challenging to conduct a fair and judicious selection process for ISL.

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**RUBRIC FOR ISL STUDENT SELECTION**

**APPENDIX A**

<b>Sl.No</b>	<b>CRITERIA</b>	<b>QUESTIONS/AREAS GRADED</b>	<b>GRADE A</b>	<b>GRADE B</b>	<b>GRADE C</b>	<b>GRADE D</b>
1.	Academic Performance in Semester 1 & 2 of UG program	1. Internal Assessment 2. Class performance	1. Above 90% 2. Very active participation in class	1. Above 80% 2. Fairly active participation in class	1. Above 70% 2. Occasionally participates in class	Does not meet the minimum requirements.
2.	Insights on ISL	Why do you want to participate in ISL?	Good clarity on the concept of SL and the objectives of the ISL and potential role as part of it.	Fair clarity on the concept of SL and the objectives of the ISL and potential role as part of it.	Marginal clarity on the concept of SL and the objectives of the ISL and potential role as part of it.	Does not meet the minimum requirements.
3.	Service-Oriented Initiatives	Narrate the best SL experience you have had? Service oriented initiatives you have undertaken.	Has participated and provided leadership for service-oriented activities in school/college, community and on individual basis.	Has engaged in service-oriented activities in school/college and community.	Has some experience of service-oriented activities.	Does not meet the minimum requirements.
4.	Contribution to the Parent Institution	What will be your contribution to UCC after the completion of the program?	Good clarity on the needs of the college community and identifies the potential area of contribution with specific goals and plan of action.	Fair clarity on the needs of the college community and identifies the potential area of contribution with specific goals and plan of action.	Marginal clarity on the needs of the college community with some understanding of what could be done.	Does not meet the minimum requirements.
5.	SL and Personal Growth	What qualities do you feel you need to develop to be a better person? What are the qualities of good leadership that you have?	Good clarity on how SL activities can contribute to personal growth and leadership skills. Good understanding of the role of individual in the community.	Fair clarity on how SL activities can contribute to personal growth and leadership skills. Fair understanding of the role of individual in the community.	Marginal clarity on how SL activities can contribute to personal growth and leadership skills. Vague understanding of the role of individual in the community	Does not meet the minimum requirements.
6.	Designing a SL program for UCC	The students design projects related to Environment, Health and Hygiene, Natural Disasters, Learning	Has a good vision and perspective with all the essential components of SL. The project is highly sustainable and feasible.	Has fair understanding of SL and a few essential components. Moderately sustainable and feasible.	Marginal understanding of SL with bare minimum components. Marginally sustainable and feasible.	Does not meet the minimum requirements.
7.	Awards & Recognitions	To assess the proficiency of the students.	Co-Curricular & Extra-curricular ---International, National, State Level	Co-curricular & Extracurricular --- National, State Level	Co-curricular & Extracurricular -- State Level	Does not meet the minimum requirements.