Article

Purpose in Life in Higher Education: Is There a Role for Service-Learning?

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Abstract: The current study analyzed university students' purpose in life in the context of service-learning (SL) courses developed in a university in Portugal. Briefly, 112 graduation and master students, from different areas, involved in 15 SL courses (82 female; 73.2%; age ranging from 18 to 51; $M = 23$; $SD = 6.51$) participated in this study. Questionnaires included an open-ended question about students' purpose in life. Four closed-ended questions were included to understand student's perceptions of change in their purpose in life arising from the SL courses and other perceptions about their SL course. Qualitative data were analyzed via content analysis with NVivo. Results indicated that students' purpose in life ranged from social-related goals, such as helping or caring for others, to personal-related goals, including personal growth and well-being. Most of the students (71.4%) reported that their purpose in life changed moderately or a lot after participating in a SL course. Findings are discussed in light of the literature, identifying implications for the development of SL courses in higher education, considering the contribution of this pedagogic methodology to the definition and reconfiguration of young people's purpose in life.

Keywords: service-learning; higher education; purpose in life; university students; students' perceptions

1. Introduction

Service-learning (SL) integrates student participation in a service activity that fulfils a community issue with curricular learning, allowing students to apply what they have learned in the classroom context to serve the community [1]. It requires establishing partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities which the students are part of [2]. A well-designed SL course should incorporate the following quality indicators: it must be based on real community issues; there must be direct contact and active

involvement of community partners in the design, implementation, and assessment of the course; achievable and specific objectives for the community-engaged activities are established with the community partner; experiential learning; active participation of students throughout the process; systematic, structured, and regular reflection by the students; reciprocity in the relationship, acquisition of knowledge, and benefits between universities and community partners; and, finally, the sustainability of the partnership [3,4].

SL serves as an effective educational approach that enhances academic learning, civic engagement, and personal development [3]. Extensive research has documented its positive outcomes, encompassing increased emotional growth, motivation, self-efficacy, and commitment to learning [5–9]. SL also fosters a greater awareness of personal values and global issues, inspiring students to contribute to positive change [9]. Furthermore, it has been linked to improved reasoning skills, moral sensitivity, civic responsibility, and heightened social justice awareness [2]. Recent studies have highlighted its multifaceted impact, including the development of a sense of responsibility, a recognition of opportunities to help those in need, and a commitment to continued community engagement [7]. A study with university students from different countries (Slovakia, Croatia, and Romania) highlighted the intrinsic connection between course content and practical application, illustrating the academic and personal development opportunities that SL courses can offer [8].

1.1. Purpose in Life

The literature has shown the importance of understanding university students' interior and subjective life, although less studied, namely in the context of higher education [10], and of finding ways of helping students to deal with questions about meaning and purpose in life [11,12].

Based on Astin and Astin (2010) [13], studying and reflecting on the impact of higher education on the development and education of students can be linked to their spiritual journeys. This can lead to exploring how their spiritual life impacts their academic life, personal development, and general well-being. Thus, understanding the concepts of spirituality and purpose in life is essential to deepen an understanding of and comprehension of holist student development in higher education. Several definitions of spirituality can be found in the literature. We identified two dimensions of this concept: a horizontal dimension, which corresponds to the existential component and encompasses purpose in life, peace, and life satisfaction; and a vertical one, which refers to a religious dimension [14]. In this study, we adopted the horizontal perspective. In this way, spirituality can be seen as a multifaceted quality that concerns the interior of individuals and the subjective component of their lives. It includes the values that each individual prizes most, the beliefs related to the purpose that is foreseen in life, and the sense of connection with oneself, with others, and with the world [13]. This definition is also supported by Lindholm and Astin (2006) [12]. They stated that spirituality involves the internal process of seeking authenticity, genuineness, and integrity, and highlighting the search for a greater sense of connection with oneself and with one's peers. Spirituality also encompasses the ability to be open to explore a relationship with a higher power that transcends existence and human knowledge [12]. Several authors have devoted themselves to the study of spirituality, denoting that spiritual well-being is positively correlated with perceived social support, satisfaction with life, mindfulness, and compassion for one-self [15,16].

Upon exploring the dimension of spirituality in higher education, we presumed that a considerable number of university students are committed to the process of exploring existential questions of purpose and meaning and have high expectations that academic experiences will promote their personal and inner growth [13]. Universities can have an influence on the spiritual development of students [13,17]. When higher education institutions actively encourage students to explore meaning and purpose issues, as well as to engage in discussions about religion and spirituality, students tend to show more growth in their spirituality [13]. Moreover, students' spirituality tends to change over the first three years of college, which may result from the confrontation with new and diverse people,

cultures, and ideas [11,13]. In the study of Astin and Astin (2010) [13], students reported that teachers generally did not respond to their spiritual quest and that they were unlikely to engage with them in exploring and discussing the "big questions". Conversely, the results from Lindholm and Astin (2006) [12] claimed that some universities were actively committed to the issues of spirituality, as perceived by the teachers. The inclusion of the spiritual dimension plays a role in fostering a holistic understanding of students' purpose in life.

A purpose integrates four dimensions, namely (a) personal meaningfulness ("this is important to me"); (b) intention ("I'm going to pursue this aim into the future", connects the future with the present); (c) engagement ("I'm going to act on and not just dream about it"); and (d) beyond-the-self impact ("my actions aim to help others or society") [17–19]. These dimensions do not necessarily develop at the same time and their development is not the same for all people [17]. Nevertheless, it is during adolescence and early adulthood that several of these dimensions begin to work together [20]. However, some people cannot discern what their purpose in life is, which may contribute to the development of difficulties in interpersonal relationships and depressive and psychosomatic symptoms, as well as to adopting disruptive practices and behaviors [21]. On the other hand, devising a purpose in life during youth can lead to prosocial behaviors and higher levels of self-esteem, personal achievement, and moral commitment, although the process of questing for a purpose can cause some anxiety [20,21]. In addition, people with a greater sense of purpose showed better physical health (e.g., greater satisfaction with their health status in general; a decreased risk of illness); healthier behaviors (e.g., more physical activity; healthier sleep); and better psychosocial health (e.g., greater satisfaction with life; more frequent contact with friends) [22].

A case study [23] analyzed the life goals of 151 Finnish university students attending a social work program. These students completed the youth purpose around the world survey and the life goals questionnaire. Most of them expressed self-focused goals, as well as goals of happiness and self-actualization. In addition to goals focused on the self, this sample of social work students presented life goals focused on family and others close to them, with some emphasis on the goal of helping others. Hedonistic and health (physical and mental) goals also obtained high scores. On the other hand, economic goals were considered moderately important. These students were not particularly interested in wealth, but in achieving a stable and reasonable quality of life. Political goals did not seem to have a major role for these students either.

1.2. Purpose in Life and Service-Learning

Given the benefits of devising a purpose in life, identifying how to create the necessary conditions for its development is important to the development of programs and courses in higher education. SL can be considered one of the few educational experiences that can address all dimensions of purpose in life identified by Damon (2008) [18] because it presupposes an involvement with and beyond the impact on the self, can stimulate the attribution of emotional meaning, and is based on the premise of making the world a better place [24]. As stated in Moran (2018) [24], using interactive practices to promote the development of purpose can facilitate emotional development around purpose, in addition to promoting cognitive development. SL can be considered an example of an interactive practice, and the relationship between community service and purpose development can be bidirectional [17].

A study conducted by Moran and Garcia (2019) [19], in which 780 students from two different universities and 74 SL courses participated, showed that a sense of purpose, searching for purpose, intrinsic motivation and helping identity were positively correlated with expected positive emotions before the service was performed. This study also found a significantly positive correlation between having a previous experience of volunteering and/or SL and expected positive emotions. In addition, students who already had the experience of SL demonstrated higher levels of intrinsic motivation to enter a course with

a SL structure. Conversely, sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation were negatively associated with expected negative emotions.

A study conducted by Opazo et al. (2018) [9] analyzed whether or not and how SL changed the purpose in life of 299 university students, who were studying to be teachers, at a school in Madrid. Of the 299 participating students, 53 reported that their purpose in life had changed in some way, having, in most cases, become clearer, stronger, and more important. Some students reported that the domain of their purpose in life changed and that the purpose of helping others has become stronger.

1.3. Lerner and Lerner Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development

This study was framed using Lerner and Lerner's theory of the Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development. Understanding the development of purpose is crucial within the context of positive youth development [18,25]. The Five Cs Model encompasses five key attributes that are associated with the holistic growth of young individuals: character, competence, confidence, connection, and caring [26,27]. Character development involves fostering a sense of ethics, integrity, and values in young people. It is through character development that individuals begin to define their personal principles and sense of responsibility, laying the foundation for a meaningful purpose in life. Competence refers to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and capabilities that empower young individuals to excel in various aspects of their lives. A well-defined purpose often requires the competence to pursue and achieve specific goals. Confidence is closely related to the development of a purposeful life. As young people build self-assurance, they are more likely to set ambitious goals, take risks, and believe in their capacity to make a positive impact on the world. The attribute of connection emphasizes the importance of fostering meaningful relationships with others. Building connections with family, mentors, peers, and the broader community can provide young individuals with the support and inspiration needed to explore and define their purpose in life. Caring entails a genuine concern for the well-being of others and a commitment to making a positive difference in the world. Developing a sense of purpose often involves caring about specific causes, communities, or issues and taking action to contribute positively. When a young person develops all these attributes, they tend to demonstrate active and positive engagement with the social world which, in turn, manifests in a contribution to family, school/university, and community settings [26,27].

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that well-designed service-learning experiences have the potential to yield expected outcomes in terms of purpose of life among students, as they inherently integrate all three aspects emphasized by the 'Big Three' model, as described by Lerner and Lerner. The incorporation of (a) positive and sustained relationships, (b) activities promoting relevant life skills development, and (c) platforms for practical application of these skills within family, school, and community contexts, within the design of service-learning programs, can effectively contribute to the students' holistic growth and purpose development [25,26,28,29].

1.4. Purpose of the Study

SL has been increasingly studied, in an international context, particularly at the level of the impact of SL on students [5,7,9]. However, the literature relating SL to purpose in life and analyzing how purpose in life changes during and after a SL course is still scarce. This research was intended to add to the existing literature regarding the intersection between SL and the purpose in life of university students.

Using mixed methods, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

Q1. How do students who participated in SL define their own purpose in life?

Q2. To what extent do students report that their purpose in life has changed due to participating in a SL course?

Q3. To what extent do students consider that the service they have performed was related to their purpose in life?

Q4. To what extent do students consider that being involved in activities of helping others is part of their identity?

Q5. To what extent do students consider that the service they developed helped others?

2. Materials and Methods

The study took place at a Portuguese humanistic university that was established by the Congregation for Catholic Education and that is recognized by the Portuguese government. This is a four-campus university that offers its students the possibility to access bachelor's, master's, and/or integrated master's degrees in a wide variety of areas (e.g., dental medicine, economics, law, management, nursing, psychology, social work, and sound and image). This study is part of a larger initiative known as the CApS Project, which is currently being implemented at this university. Its primary goal is to institutionalize and promote the dissemination of SL methodology not only within the university itself but also among other higher education institutions in Portugal.

2.1. Participants

At the time the study was carried out, 15 SL courses were taking place at the university as part of the CApS Project. The teachers responsible for the SL courses were asked to invite their students to take part in the study. Therefore, the sample comprised 112 university students involved in 15 SL courses (82 female; 73.2%). The average age was 23 (SD = 6.51), ranging between 18 and 51 years old. Students were attending 15 different academic baccalaureate programs (*n* = 75) in several areas: social work (19.6%), law (12.5%), nutrition (9.8%), communication science (5.4%), nursing (4.5%), tourism (4.5%), management (2.7%), psychology (1.8%), bioengineering (0.9%), a double degree in law and management (0.9%), and economics (0.9%). The remaining students were enrolled in a master's degree (*n* = 38) in the following areas: dental medicine (25.0%), clinical and health psychology (4.5%), educational psychology (2.7%), and applied microbiology (0.9%). In total, 14 students were in the 1st year of the degree (12.5%), 8 were in the 2nd year of the degree (7.1%), 42 were in the 3rd year of the degree (37.5%), 16 were in the 4th year of the degree (14.3%), 20 were in the 1st year of the master's degree (17.9%), 1 was in the 2nd year of the master's degree (0.9%), and 10 were in the 4th year of the master's degree (8.9%). Students were involved in 11 mandatory courses; 2 were elective courses, and 2 took place as part of extracurricular activities. These SL courses featured the "Big Three" characteristics: (a) all experiences were developed in the context of a relationship between students and at least one teacher; (b) the service activities were designed to allow not only the consolidation of curricular content but also the development of several skills (e.g., responsibility, autonomy, and critical thinking); and (c) service activities could be great moments for students to practice their skills [28].

2.2. Instruments

For data collection, an online questionnaire was administered to students after the SL course, which included an open-ended question: "Describe in your own words what you consider to be your purpose in life".

It also included four follow-up questions to understand student's perceptions of change in their purpose in life arising from the SL courses and other perceptions about their SL course [9]: "To what extent has your purpose in life changed as a result of the service-learning course?"; "To what extent is the service you performed related to your purpose in life?"; "To what extent do you consider that being involved in activities to help others is part of your identity?"; "To what extent do you think your service work in this course/extracurricular activity helped others?". These four questions were answered on a 5-point scale (1: nothing; a little; moderately; a lot; 5: totally).

This questionnaire was developed based on the previously identified quality indicators of a SL course. Following a literature review, no studies were found that directly addressed

the relationship between university students' purpose in life and SL. Moran, e.g., [17,24] is an example of an author who has been studying purpose; however, the author does not focus specifically on the relationship between university students' purpose and SL. Therefore, the formulated questions were designed as exploratory.

2.3. Procedure

The online questionnaire was administered between May and June 2021 in a classroom context, with the support of teachers. To prevent ethical and deontological issues, the students' informed consent was obtained, and their participation was voluntary, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were previously informed about the aims of the study, as well as about issues of data protection, namely the assurance of data confidentiality and anonymity, and the delimitation of the use of the information collected for research purposes.

2.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of purpose in life was conducted through qualitative content analysis with NVivo 2020®. Descriptive quantitative analysis using IBM SPSS 27® was performed to analyze the answers to the four follow-up questions; means and standard deviations are presented.

Content analysis was made semi-inductively, starting from the codification of the text students wrote to answer to the question "Describe in your own words what you consider to be your purpose in life". After the first codification, codes were aggregated to new codes adapted from the scale of Major Life Goals (MLGs) from Roberts and Robins [30] (cf. Table 1). MLGs, as the authors define it, "involve a person's aspirations to shape their life context and establish general life structures" [30] (p. 1285). MLGs are somewhat aligned with the concepts provided by Damon et al. (2003) [21] and by Moran (2018) [24] as they intend to transcend the dimensions of lower-life goals and emphasize aspirations. The dimensions of MLGs are based in "value domains, which are theoretically one step up the motive hierarchy" and were used "to organize major life goals into conceptually related clusters" [30] (p. 1286). Not all the MLG dimensions defined by Roberts and Robins (2000) [30,31] were used; theoretical, political, and aesthetic MLG were not used, and the dimension of physical well-being was adapted to general well-being to include mental and emotional well-being. A new dimension was created, professional, as the codes in that dimension report to dimensions of work (i.e., professional achievement) that do not fit into economic MLGs.

Thus, for the purpose of the analysis, the dimensions of MLGs were taken as main codes (parent codes) and constituted the main categories of analysis. The inductive categories that emerged from the data were taken as subcategories and aggregated as child codes in the corresponding main (parent) codes. In the following section, main categories are written in bold, and the subcategories are underlined.

3. Results

3.1. Q1. How Do Students Who Participated in SL Define Their Own Purpose in Life?

As presented in Table 1, students' wording of their purpose in life reflects multiple dimensions, namely social, personal growth, well-being, professional, relationship, economic, religious, and hedonistic.

Table 1. Coding of students' wording of their purpose in life (*N* = 112).

Category	References	% *
Social	87	78%
Help or take care of others	43	38%
Having an impact	20	18%
Build a better world	10	9%
Making others happy	8	7%
Practice the good	3	3%
Having empathy as a value	3	3%
Personal Growth	43	38%
Personal development	19	17%
Personal success	7	6%
Making the best of oneself, endeavor	6	5%
Achieve your own goals	5	4%
Being truth to oneself	3	3%
Personal fulfilment	3	3%
Well-Being	41	35%
Being happy	22	19%
Being healthy	6	5%
Quality of life	6	5%
Enjoy every moment of life	5	4%
Have a peaceful, balanced life	1	1%
Traveling	1	1%
Professional	15	14%
Having a job, a career	7	6%
Professional fulfilment	7	6%
Being a good worker	2	2%
Relationship	10	9%
Build a family	5	4%
Having good relationship with the people around	4	4%
Making the family proud	1	1%
Economic	7	6%
Have independence, financial stability	5	4%
Being rich	2	2%
Religious	2	2%
Fulfill a divine purpose	1	1%
Practice Catholic values	1	1%
No purpose in life	2	2%

* Percentage values were obtained dividing the number of references of a code by the total of references obtained (*N* = 112).

The **social dimension** emerged in the most frequent category of responses. Based on the students' perception about their purpose in life, they essentially valued 'help or take care of others', as the following examples refer to:

> *to help others, so that they can overcome their difficulties, and later, they can be autonomous and respond or have strategies to overcome their problems/difficulties, which may arise throughout life*
>
> (female social work student)
>
> *supporting others and helping create positive change in the world*
>
> (male social work student)
>
> *I believe that my purpose in life is to use all the knowledge I have acquired throughout my academic career to help people achieve their goals, improve their quality of life, or simply make them feel better about themselves*
>
> (male nutrition student)

Still in the social dimension, 'having an impact' was the second most frequently mentioned aspect. This means that students are mostly prosocial oriented in their formulations

of purpose in life. For example, a student from a health program mentioned that her purpose in life is, besides helping her family, to "alleviate the pain of patients in order to have a positive effect on the community". In addition, students' perceptions of purpose in life contemplated other social aspects, such as to 'build a better world' ("leaving the world a little better than I found it", female social work student), 'making others happy' ("My purpose in life is to make others proud and happy!", male dental student) and, although with less emphasis, to 'practice the good', ("do the right thing", female social work student), and 'having empathy as a value' ("Always give the best of me in any circumstance, always having empathy as main value", female nursing student).

A second category that emerged from the data was the **personal growth dimension**. Based on this domain, students considered that their purpose in life translated into 'personal development':

my purpose in life is to be the best person I can for myself and for my neighbour

(female dental student)

to be a human being more evolved in many ways

(female nursing student)

I consider that one of my main purposes in life is to learn, to evolve

(female nutrition student)

The students' answers also referred to other aspects related to the dimension of personal development, such as 'personal success' ("[my purpose in life is] to be successful", male tourism student), 'making the best of oneself, endeavour' ("always giving the best of myself in any circumstance", female nursing student), 'achieving your own goals' ("[my purpose in life is] to achieve all my goals", female dental student), 'being true to oneself' ("never ceasing to be what I am", female education psychology student), and, also, 'personal fulfilment' ("[my purpose in life is] feeling fulfilled", male dental student).

Another category that emerged from the students' answers about their purpose in life concerns the **well-being dimension**. There were several students who considered 'being happy' their purpose in life, reflecting the wish for happiness that learners have for their life, as we can see, for example, in the following answers:

be happy and make the most of this short time that is this passage through planet Earth

(male communication science student)

I think my purpose in life is to be happy and faithful to myself

(female nutrition student)

I consider my purpose in life to be happy and work every day to do so, including my personal and professional life in this purpose

(female dental student)

Although less frequent, students' purpose in life also referred to other aspects of well-being, namely 'quality of life':

truly complex is to define a person's purpose in life. However, after introspection, my personal perspective points to the idea that the burden of all of us should be to be able to live with relative satisfaction-with a quality of life that gives us the desire to make the most of every day

(female law student)

Furthermore, in the well-being dimension, we found 'being healthy' ("[have] emotional, social and mental stability and above all have health", female law student), 'enjoy every moment of life' ("enjoy life to the fullest", male tourism student), and, finally, 'have a peaceful, balanced life', only referred by a female social service student: "have a balanced life with myself and with those I like most around me".

Furthermore, the purpose in life of university students referred to a **professional dimension**, such as 'having a job or a career', without mentioning the economic profits of that:

getting a job in the area in which I studied and that it makes me satisfied and happy"

(female tourism student)

having a job that I like in which I can give the best of myself, but also have time for my family and friends!

(female social work student)

[my purpose in life] *is to be a good social worker in the future*

(male social work student)

Having 'professional fulfillment' was also mentioned as important:

I haven't thought much about this subject, but at this moment I want to fulfill myself professionally

(female educational psychology student)

I consider that my purpose in life is to feel fulfilled both personally and professionally

(female clinical and health psychology student)

being a successful person, having a job that makes me happy and fulfilled, having a comfortable life

(female social work student)

Although with less frequent expression, 'being a good worker' ("being one of the best professionals", male dental student) was mentioned as well.

Finally, four other categories emerged, although with less frequency: **relationship**, which relates to family or close people ("have a good family and social relationship", female dental student); **economic**, which relates to having financial stability or being rich ("my purpose in life is to have a high standard of living, wealth and a high status career", male social work student); **religious**, which relates to religious values ("the purpose of my life is essentially about helping others and trying as much as possible to spread the Catholic values that I hold. Putting my life at the service of others, in favour of a better and increasingly humanist society", female law student); and **hedonism**, which relates here to 'traveling', referred to by a female social work student.

3.2. Q2. To What Extent Do Students Report That Their Purpose in Life Has Changed Due to Participating in a SL Course?

Q3. To what extent do students consider that the service they have performed was related to their purpose in life?

Q4. To what extent do students consider that being involved in activities of helping others is part of their identity?

Q5. To what extent do students consider that the service they developed helped others?

As mentioned, the questionnaire also included four follow-up questions about students' purpose in life to understand student's perceptions of change in their purpose in life arising from the SL courses (Table 2).

When asked about if their purpose in life had changed due to the participation in SL, 38.4% answered 'moderately' and 33.0% answered 'a lot'.

Regarding the question about if the SL course was related to students' purpose in life, the frequencies were that 46.5% reported that the SL course was 'very' related to their purpose in life, and 25.9% reported that it was 'moderately related'; only 13.4% reported that SL is 'little', or 'nothing' related to their purpose in life.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the 4 follow-up questions about students' purpose in life (*N* = 112).

	N	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*
To what extent has students' purpose in life changed as a result of the SL course?	112	1	5	3.03	0.995
To what extent was the service students performed related to their purpose in life?	112	1	5	3.58	0.998
To what extent do students consider that being involved in activities to help others is part of their identity?	111	1	5	3.98	0.853
To what extent do students consider that the service developed helped people?	112	2	5	3.71	0.788

Regarding the question of if being involved in activities of helping others is part of their identity, most of the students believed that being involved in these activities is part of their identity; 26.1% of the students consider that being involved in these activities is 'moderately' part of their identity; 40.5% considered that it is 'very' related to their identity; and, still, 30.6% of the students identified that being involved in this type of activities is 'totally' aligned with their identity.

Students' answers about the extent to which the service they developed helped others indicate that the most of them (61.6%) considered that the service helped people 'a lot' (46.4%) or 'totally' (15.2%).

Complementary analyses to explore if the results varied by study cycle (bachelors and masters) were carried out. Based on an independent samples test, it was found that there were significant differences between bachelor students (*n* = 80) and master students (*n* = 31) in terms of change in their purpose in life as a result of the SL course; t(109) = 2.87, *p* < 0.01. Master's students reported a bigger change in their purpose in life as a result of the SL course (*M* = 3.39) compared to bachelor students (*M* = 2.90). There were also significant differences between bachelor and master students regarding the question "to what extent is the service you performed related to your purpose in life?". Master's students reported greater alignment (*M* = 3.84) than did bachelor's (*M* = 3.48) students, t(109) = 2.24, *p* < 0.05. Regarding the questions "to what extent do you consider that being involved in activities to help others is part of your identity?" and "to what extent do you think your service work in this course/extracurricular activity helped others?", there were no significant differences between bachelor's and master's students. The analysis also considered differences in these four questions based on the students' course. The Kruskal–Wallis test showed that there were no differences in any of these four questions related to the students' course of study.

Furthermore, complementary analyses (Pearson's correlation coefficient) revealed that these four quantitative questions about the students' purpose in life were positively correlated with each other (*p* < 0.01); correlation values ranged from 0.35 to 0.64.

4. Discussion

The results presented meet the definition of purpose in life proposed by Moran (2018) [24], as in the formulation of their own purpose in life, students consider aspects related to themselves, as well as on the need and willingness to help others, and to have a positive impact on the community and society. In addition to self-oriented goals, a purpose also has to include others and the environment [20]. The results showed that students' purpose in life included a pro-social orientation, which is associated with well-being in middle age [17,32]. The data of our study were also in line with the results of the study of Manninen et al. (2018) [23], an exploratory mixed-methods case study that aimed to examine the life goals of 151 Finnish social work students, from the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, which is a non-profit public higher education institution. Students were asked to answer the Life Goals Questionnaire, which encompasses the seven MLGs that were also considered in our research. The study by Manninen et al. (2018) demonstrated that most participants considered self-focused goals in their purpose in life, emphasizing happiness and self-actualization. The participants of the Manninen et al. (2018) study [23] also showed, as in the present investigation, goals focused on family and those close to them; however, the goal of helping others was below what was expected by the authors, being reported only by 25% of the students. In contrast, helping others was

one of the most relevant aspects in our study. In both studies, the religious and political dimensions were barely considered by the students, and the aspect of 'being rich' was practically not contemplated in the students' perceptions of their purpose in life. Instead, students' perceptions refer to 'having financial stability' and having 'an adequate and reasonable standard of living'. Considering the convergence and divergence of the findings between our current study and the research conducted by Manninen et al. (2018) [23], it is crucial to delve into the underlying factors that might contribute to these variations. One significant aspect to explore is the cultural context within which the two studies were conducted. Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, being a non-profit public institution, might have fostered a specific set of values and goals among its students, potentially influencing their perceptions of purpose in life. On the other hand, our study, conducted in a different academic setting, might have been shaped by the unique academic environment, faculty, or program structure, which could have led to variations in the prioritization of certain goals. Moreover, it is essential to consider any temporal changes or shifts in societal priorities that may have occurred between the time of Manninen et al.'s (2018) study and our present investigation. Societal changes, economic fluctuations, or global events could have influenced the evolving perceptions of purpose in life among the student population.

The students' formulations of purpose in life in the current research referred to civic purpose, as they consider the world beyond the self [33]. Civic purpose is associated with three types of activities: community service, expressive activities, and political activities [33]. Because the current study focused on SL courses, the community service component was very present. On the other hand, contributing to the world through political action did not seem to be part of the students' perceived purpose in life. Despite the potential for political engagement to instill a sense of responsibility and meaningful contribution, it was notable that the students did not prominently emphasize political goals in their formulations of purpose in life [33]. Young people need opportunities to participate in changing and improving their communities through civic engagement, political action, and collaborative problem solving, as such experiences can play a crucial role in their holistic development [33]. Engaging in civic activities fosters a sense of social responsibility and community awareness, nurturing their understanding of the interplay between individual actions and broader societal impact. Similarly, participation in political processes empowers young individuals to recognize the significance of their voices in shaping public discourse and policy decisions, instilling a sense of agency and active citizenship. Additionally, collaborative problem solving cultivates essential life skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and effective communication, which are fundamental for their academic and professional growth [33].

Furthermore, the results presented in the present study are in line with the dimensions of purpose proposed by Damon [17–19]. The findings highlight the importance of personal meaningfulness, intention, engagement, and beyond-the-self impact in the students' formulation of their purpose in life. The students' articulation of their own purpose underscores the significance of each of these dimensions, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of their aspirations and goals. The strong emphasis on the need and willingness to help others and to have a positive impact on the community and society reflects the students' commitment to beyond-the-self impact. Additionally, their expressions of pursuing their aims into the future and their active involvement in SL initiatives demonstrate their intention and engagement. By integrating these dimensions, the study further underlines the alignment of SL with the fundamental attributes of purpose, emphasizing the transformative role of SL experiences in students' personal and social development.

Most of the students reported changes in their purpose in life after participation in a SL course. First, institutions can be considered a source of cultural influence for the development of purpose [20]. The development of purpose in life tends to occur in adolescence and early adulthood [20,34,35], the developmental stage in which most university students are. Second, this change in students' purpose in life after the SL course is consistent with the literature as these service experiences motivate students to "pursue

additional personal, intellectual, and spiritual learning" [36] (p. 625). SL courses contribute to students' exploration of values and personal meaning, and the notion of who they are and how they perceive the world around them are often challenged [36].

Furthermore, most of the students reported that their SL course was related to their purpose in life. It is important to highlight that the purpose has to be chosen, adopted, and formulated by the person [20]. Purpose cannot be built only through imitating others, for then it would no longer be a purpose but a duty [20]. The alignment between the SL course and the students' purpose in life could be due to SL experiences, in most cases, emerging from a curricular unit that students attend in their program. Considering that the program students attend is, usually, the one of their choice, and therefore, a program to which they relate in a meaningful way, it may justify why students consider that the SL course was related to their purpose in life. This argument may also explain the moderate results to the question related to changes in their purpose in life, as the SL curricular experiences resonate with their own (previous) choices. This could be due to the influence of the choice of the university program on students' purpose in life, or the other way around. Therefore, further qualitative research, with interview data, could provide insights into the relation between the program attended and students' purpose in life.

Another aspect that may influence the results of the study is the characteristics of the SL courses. We cannot forget that the students' outcomes depend on the SL course characteristics [37]. A study showed that the outcomes most closely associated with SL course benefits were learning about the community and academic learning [37]. These authors also found that SL courses with a focus on social change had a positive impact on learning about the community and appeared to have contributed to university students' academic learning. In addition, students who considered that their service activities had a positive impact on the community perceived that they had increased their learning about the community, and developed academic, problem solving and leadership skills [37,38].

The observed positive correlation among the four survey items, specifically addressing questions Q2, Q3, Q4, and Q5, highlighted the significant relationship between students' reported changes in their purpose in life resulting from SL participation and their perceptions of the relevance of their service-related activities to their overall purpose. These correlations suggest that SL experiences can have an influence on the holistic development of students, shaping not only their sense of purpose but also their role as contributors to societal well-being. Furthermore, the observed correlation between changes in purpose in life and students' considerations of their involvement in helping other as an integral part of their identity can support the argument that SL can enhance a deep sense of social responsibility and personal growth among students. The students' heightened awareness of the impact of their service activities on others, as indicated by the positive correlation, highlighted the impact of SL in fostering a sense of civic engagement and a commitment to pro-social behavior.

The present study can be considered an important contribution regarding SL in students' purpose in life, because more than studying students' purpose in life, it seeks to understand the relationship between purpose in life and SL, a topic poorly discussed in the literature. There are several studies concerning the impact of SL; however, there is still a lack of literature about the contribution of SL to the construction and development of students' purpose in life. The literature [13] shows that university students are committed to the process of exploring existential questions of purpose and meaning and have high expectations that academic experiences will promote their personal and inner growth.

SL within higher education institutions provides a unique platform for fostering the development of students' purpose in life. These experiences expose students to diverse communities, allowing them to engage with new people, culture, and ideas [11,13]. Through active involvement in SL initiatives, students can actively reflect on their roles in society and their individual contributions to the greater community. The dynamic relationship between SL and the development of a sense of purpose underscores the significance of incorporating purpose-driven activities within the academic curriculum. Consistent with the Five Cs

Model of Positive Youth Development by Lerner and Lerner, the findings of the present study underscore the dynamic nature of young individuals' purpose in life, highlighting the potential for changes and evolution over time [18,25]. The notion of purpose in life, as revealed by the participants, aligns with the development trajectory proposed by the Five Cs Model, which emphasizes the interplay of connection and caring in the formulation of a meaningful purpose in life [26,27]. This model emphasizes the dynamic nature of purpose development, emphasizing that purpose is not static but subject to the influences of personal growth and contextual changes throughout the life course [25,26].

When universities and teachers become intentionally involved in the process of developing students' purpose in life, students tend to demonstrate greater growth in their spirituality [13]. Additionally, students with a strong sense of purpose show better physical and psychosocial health, as well as healthier behaviors [22]. However, it should be noted that the development of purpose does not happen in the same way for all people, which creates challenges for teachers [17]. As a result, teachers may not be motivated to support students in their journeys of purpose in life discovery [13]. This points to the need to train teachers on these topics, so that they can be better prepared to discuss the 'big questions' with their students and support them in this process, which can be challenging.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study evinces multiple limitations. First, the research was conducted in a multi-campus, country-wide private university in Portugal, which raises limitations concerning the generalization of results. Additionally, the study sample consisted of university students from a Catholic institution, suggesting that the findings may have varied if the study had been carried out at a public university. SL in Portugal is still taking its first steps; thus, this study could be replicated in other Portuguese higher education institutions that are also using this pedagogic methodology. Nevertheless, it provides interesting data to reflect on the influence of SL courses on students' life in a wide form besides academic achievement.

There are also some limitations concerning the research design, including the absence of a control group and the lack of pre- and post-test comparison, making it impossible to verify if the results were related to the SL project. We also recognize the potential influence of social desirability bias within our study, whereby participants may have been inclined to respond in a manner they perceived as socially acceptable or desirable. This bias may have affected the self-reported measures and outcomes, leading to an overestimation of the results. Although efforts were made to encourage open responses, the presence of social desirability bias remains a limitation.

To overcome these limitations, studies to understand how the purpose in life of university students changes with participation in SL are needed, and interviews could be conducted with students to better understand the relationship between purpose in life and SL. In addition, it could be interesting to apply this study's questionnaire in other universities, in Portugal and/or in other countries (ensuring cultural issues), so that data can be compared.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to perceive how university students', who participated in SL courses, defined their purpose in life as well as perceptions of change in their purpose in life in the aftermath of the SL courses.

The study allows us to highlight two fundamental results:

(a) The purpose in life of students is centered on the social dimension, personal development, and well-being, in line with previous studies. The formulation of purpose made by the students focuses on their self-realization and happiness, but at the same time on the desire to be able to have a positive impact with their profession, these dimensions being significant in terms of their construction as active citizens.

(b) The data do not allow us to conclude that SL directly contributed to the formulation of purpose but maybe allow us to state that there is an influence relationship between

purpose and SL, and that students reported a connection. Indeed, students consider that this methodology responds to their desire for personal and social growth, and they see themselves in its application. However, considering tailored approaches for engaging students who may not be initially motivated for personal, social, and civic growth is important. One potential strategy could involve incorporating elements of experiential learning that are more closely aligned with their specific interests and aspirations. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages open dialogue and the exploration of diverse viewpoints could facilitate a more comprehensive engagement with the SL process. Reflection can be central in the whole process to make the connection between knowledge, service, and its effect on its construction. Sometimes, service experiences can be unpredictable for students, and moments should be provided in class to allow students to make meaning from the activities in light of the curriculum [39]. One of the most important elements of SL is the quantity and quality of moments of reflection that allow students to connect the service experience with the learning contents of the program [40,41]. These are extremely important moments because they allow students' attention to be focused on new interpretations of events, promoting their academic, social, moral, personal, and civic development [42]. According to Hatcher et al. (2004) [42], "Written assignments asking students to analyze their service experience in relation to their values, attitudes, goals, and intentions can be very powerful ways to help students analyze and clarify values" (p. 42). Incorporating a more intentional structure for fostering reflective practices in the context of SL could offer a strategic avenue for nurturing students' purpose development. By implementing targeted frameworks, such as guided journaling, group discussions, or personalized mentoring sessions, educators can facilitate a deeper exploration of students' evolving life purposes and their evolving roles within the community. The intentional integration of such reflective strategies into the course curriculum could provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of their personal values, motivations, and societal contributions, thus fostering a more profound sense of purpose and social responsibility among participants. Promoting reflection on the service performed allows students to develop meaningful insights which, in turn, can contribute to the adoption of pro-social attitudes and practices in the future [17]. Several reflections should be encouraged in the course trajectory [43] as regular reflections appear to be beneficial to students' outcomes [43].

This study highlights the significance of fostering a sense of citizenship throughout educational experiences, which plays a vital role in the development of socially responsible young individuals. These educational endeavors engender a dynamic and dialectical relationship between learning, personal growth, and the constructive engagement of students within their communities [44].

Summarily, universities can play an important role in fostering students' purpose in life, and SL stands out as an example of a methodology that can contribute to this development. For this reason and given all the benefits associated with the practice of SL, it is important to advocate for its integration into higher education institutions. Encouraging the training of teachers in this methodology is a crucial step toward achieving this goal. The design of SL courses should incorporate opportunities for students to engage in critical self-reflection. Exploring the concept of purpose in life could be one of the central themes of this reflection, as it can help students gain a deeper understanding of themselves and redefine their personal sense of purpose. Consequently, it is essential to intentionally prioritize the integration of purpose as one of the goals of SL courses.

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