
**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES:
CHANGING PERCEPTIONS TO MAKE CORRECTIONAL CENTRES
SITES OF PREFERENCE**

Christiaan Bezuidenhout¹ and Gernia van Niekerk²

ABSTRACT

Many students are distanced from the realities of correctional facilities and never consider doing practical community engagement programmes in a correctional centre. Students of criminology usually deem practical community engagement work in corrections as a high-risk unnecessary endeavour. The authors explore how students' sense of civic responsibility changes over time when they are tutored to do community engagement in correctional facilities. The perceptions of students were gauged before embarking on a community engagement project in a correctional facility and were then requested to write a phenomenological report about their experience after the completion of the seven-week project. Many students transformed dramatically and their perceptions changed significantly. In addition, this contribution also focuses on the position of tertiary institutions in community engagement. Although many consider corrections dangerous areas for community engagement, tertiary institutions have no choice but to engage in this frequently forgotten population. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) contextualises a range of issues and highlights compulsory curricular activities in disadvantaged often forgotten communities. The authors believe that tertiary institutions and especially student projects in corrections will improve the practical value of criminology as a discipline and contribute more to the restorative ethos that features strongly in the South African Criminal Justice machinery.

Keywords: *Tertiary institutions; community engagement; community development; corrections; criminal justice; participation; partnership; relationship.*

INTRODUCTION

"It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones." [Nelson Mandela] (cited in Smith, 2009).

Often correctional facilities are deemed warehouses of neglected criminal populations. Although no clear official recidivism rate figures for South Africa exists some scholars' estimate that the rate is as high as about 94 percent (Cilliers & Smit, 2007: 86; Jules-Macquet, 2014: 19; Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA), 2010: 1). With a very high recidivism rate and an attitude of "nothing works", it is easy for many South Africans to give up hope on the criminal populations in corrections. In addition, many scholars and practitioners believe nothing works regarding the rehabilitation of incarcerated offenders (Van Wyk, 2014: 66).

However, the authors deem correctional centres as sites of preference to engage the community in restoring the past wrongs. Many believe it is unsafe for community members to engage with hardened incarcerated offenders as many of these offenders are in a correctional centre because of their violent nature. Many believe that violent offenders have psychopathic tendencies, which cause them not to be successfully rehabilitated (Bartol & Bartol, 2014: 183). Managing risks and responding to risk related occurrences is probably the

-
1. Associate Professor, Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria
E-mail: Christiaan.Bezuidenhout@up.ac.za
 2. Manager: Community Engagement, University of Pretoria. E-Mail: Gernia@up.ac.za
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biggest challenge during community engagement. A correctional facility is a high-risk environment and one needs to respond in different ways to this manmade risk when community engagement projects are planned. Beck (2009: 292) states that one can either deny the existence of the risk, act apathetically towards the probable risks or one can transform existing perceptions and actions to confront a risk situation of this ilk. Therefore the main ways of coping and managing risks are through denial (inability or unwillingness to actually see the risk and possible threats in a correctional facility), apathy (the resigning to and acceptance of the risks as a normal part of your existence without doing something about it; disregard its existence and refrain from doing any projects in correctional facilities), or one can actively engage in addressing risk. The latter is also known as the Transformation Strategy (Beck, 2009: 291). Universities have to prepare future leaders and change agents. Although a risky prospect, universities have no choice but to adopt a policy of transformation with a strategy whereby students are allowed to engage constructively in neglected populations. Through active community engagement, their involvement will ensure that tertiary institutions do not neglect any grouping in society and it will ensure a more holistic development of students.

Although violent crime remains at unacceptably high levels (Geldenhuys, 2015: 121) and students and lecturers are at risk while they are engaging in communities (often in high risk informal settlements or in correction facilities) the risk is recognised and the need to transform and manage the risks associated with community engagement in these populations is accepted. Universities can endeavour to manage risks and threats to the best of their ability with proper planning and protocols. Proper planning and strategies are therefore needed to allow students and lecturers to engage with 'high risk' communities, in order to apply theory in practice. Although it is debatable whether universities should be seen as 'public institutions' that have no choice but to do 'good' deeds in 'bad' places or areas, the authors are reluctant to enter this debate. It is, however, strange that state budget contributions to universities have and are being cut and more often than not universities are expected to survive on public contributions and student fees but are nevertheless still expected to engage with state organisations such as corrections. To contextualise this article further, the authors move away from this puzzling rhetorical issue and focus on current practise and experience of the issue of student community engagement (with the emphasis on such activity in a corrections setting).

Community engagement and social value of tertiary institutions

In recent times with state budgets being cut and increased responsibility of sustainability on tertiary institutions, legislators and stakeholders all over the world increasingly began to question the social value of Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), beyond the basic tasks of teaching and research. For many years, Community Engagement has been part of IHE, but has only gained significant momentum in the past decade (Community Engagement in South African Higher Education, 2010). The primary objective on accessing communities, however, was for a long time focused on research and education. In other words, research into community matters and teaching about communities with the community as the object and students as the passive onlookers. From this platform, academics could learn and benefit from the process without much concern for the challenges the community is facing. Although community engagement was placed on many tertiary institution agendas, there remained a need for clear guidelines and operational streamlining. During 1997 and 1998, the Ford Foundation made a grant available to the Joint Education Trust for the conducting of a survey on community service in South African higher education. The key findings of the survey were that:

- (i) most higher education institutions in South Africa included community service in their mission statement;
- (ii) few higher education institutions had an explicit policy or strategy to operationalise this component of their mission statement;
- (iii) most higher education institutions had a wide range of community service projects; and
- (iv) generally, these projects were initiated by academic staff and students and not as a conscious institutional strategy and actually not as a core function of the academy (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slamet, 2008: 60).

After this survey, the work of the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE), and the Department of Education, with resulting *White Paper on Education: A programme for higher education transformation*, of 1997, which informed the Higher Education Act of the same year and the establishment of the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) programme and similar initiatives, more tangible social value and engagement practices were launched at the various South African tertiary institutions.

A key objective of this programme being to “promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programme s” (Department of Education, 1997: 10). Before these initiatives, little attention was given to what students or communities had to say about their involvement or to the provision of services for the benefit of the communities. No or little consideration was given to what the community might perhaps be able to offer from their side and how engagement could have a life-changing impact on the student. In short, until the late 1990s, community engagement was a relatively unknown concept in South African higher education (Lazarus et al., 2008: 59).

Several documents and collaborative initiatives have since been developed and from the external context, the most recent government publication in South Africa that impacts on universities and community engagement is *The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). This document addresses a range of issues including a short section on the context, variety and funding of Community Engagement. It is quite clear that compulsory curricular Community Engagement, especially in disadvantaged and often forgotten communities, is the format favoured by this White Paper.

Engagement with local communities, especially previously neglected populations, such as corrections, must now become central to the agendas of the IHEs (Community Engagement in South African Higher Education, 2010). Community engagement by universities creates opportunities for IHEs to confront a range of issues, inter alia, the relevance of some knowledge; stimulates teaching and creates new teaching ideas; stimulates the learning process and impacts on academic programme s; opens up new fields for research and enables students to participate in community development and community building. It also allows students to change perceptions and to become change agents. Engaging in all communities has become a given part of the curriculum for many students but community service is still seen by many IHEs as a way to give something back to society as part of their social responsibilities. There is more to community engagement than just community service since there should be a reciprocal gain for the engaging party and the receiving group (Van Niekerk & Kilfoil, 2014).

FORMALISING OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The notion of community engagement was somewhat fuzzy until some understanding emerged during the late 1980s and mid-1990s about the conception of ‘community engagement’ (Community Engagement in South African Higher Education, 2010). During the 1980s-1990s the so-called ‘problematic’ projects emerged when everyone tried endlessly to address community ‘needs’ merely through charity, which resulted in communities becoming increasingly dependent on hand-outs and charity work. The legacy of this era still lives on and breaking the dependency cycle of communities, which was created, still proves to be very difficult.

In the period from 2000 onwards a process was started by, which communities were given advanced access to the knowledge and resources developed at IHE, whilst the community engagement approach changed from ‘community service’ to that of ‘community development’. Communities began to benefit profoundly in a sustainable way through this ‘new’ community engagement approach. Different tertiary institutions adopted a myriad of approaches in an effort to make community engagement a key pillar in the core responsibility of a tertiary institution. After a good deal of trial-and-error initiatives tertiary institutions have managed to streamline their community engagement efforts, since many institutions soon realised that a very specific and clear plan was needed. Haphazard endeavours had become costly and in many cases community engagement took place unmonitored and in some instances implemented unethically. Fortunately, over time and with more experience gained, projects became more organised and streamlined. For example, the model for Community Engagement at the University of Pretoria, which at this stage is four-fold (Van Niekerk & Kilfoil, 2014):

- (i) To achieve common objectives within the IHE’s main focus areas of:
 - The creation of knowledge (research);
 - The translation of knowledge (teaching/learning); and
 - The application of knowledge (community engagement).
- (ii) To establish partnerships, and to support and strengthen community agencies relevant to local priorities in order to impact on community development;
- (iii) To integrate teaching and learning, and research with realities in society; and
- (iv) Embedding community engagement into the curriculum.

Community engagement has become an integral part of the curriculum of many tertiary institutions. At the University of Pretoria Community Engagement is intellectualised and conceptualised as being integrated into teaching and learning, as well as in research. In this regard, the Strategic Plan 2025 of the University of Pretoria states that:

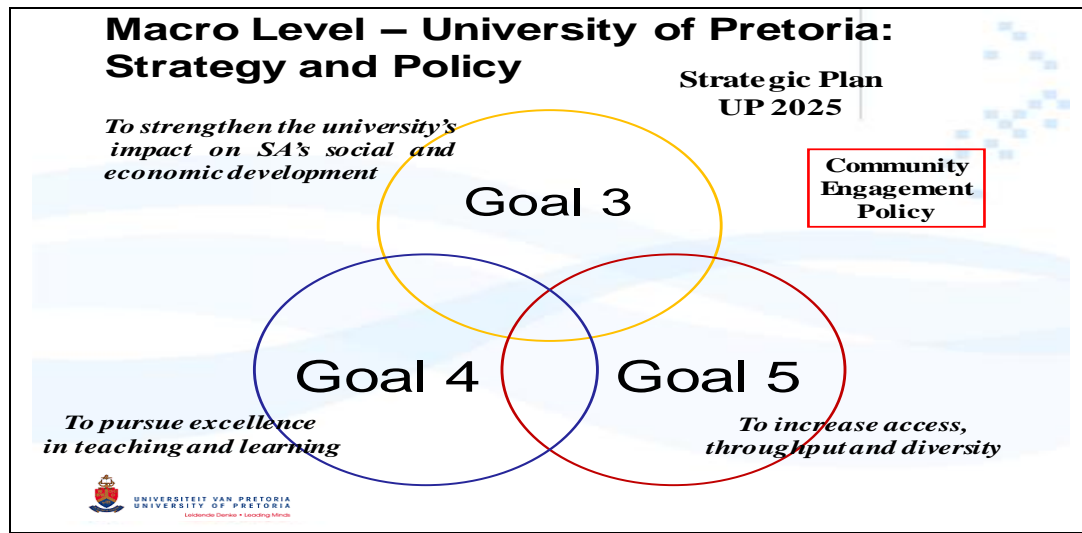
“Engagement with society and communities flows from the University’s teaching and research functions. In this light, support will be leant primarily to curricular and research-related forms of community engagement and to developing desirable attributes in students. In essence, community engagement is about civic responsibility and citizenship, and linking the best of the research and teaching skills of the staff and students to the specific needs of this diverse community, thus giving effect to the ‘public good’ of universities. In turn, student life and the attributes developed while students are at university are enriched through their service and engagement” (University of Pretoria, 2011: 10).

The goals, strategies and performance indicators are included in the document along with key targets. Three goals might be relevant to community engagement although it is only

mentioned specifically in the first: strengthening the university's impact on South Africa's social and economic development, pursuing excellence in teaching and learning and increasing access, throughput and diversity.

At the macro level, the University of Pretoria has, for more than a decade, supported Community Engagement (moving towards community development as alternative for community service), and it is included in the most recent iteration of its University of Pretoria Strategic Plan 2025 (S4616/12: 10), as integrated into teaching and research. Three of the five goals of UP 2025 combine around Community Engagement.

Diagram 1: Macro level strategy and policy



(Van Niekerk & Kilfoil, 2014).

Goal 3: To strengthen the university's impact on South Africa's social and economic development through the following strategies:

- i. Align enrolment growth, particularly in professional fields, to high-level scarce skills needs and the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS).
- ii. Increase the number of active partnerships with industry and government.
- iii. Seek optimal impact partnerships in local communities.

In 2013 the UP Senate also approved the latest revision of the Community Engagement Policy (which also stipulates the procedures for student security) (UP_reg_1001e).

Moving to the Meso Level, the role players are identified and each has a distinct but integrated role. Lecturers develop programme and module outcomes. The Community Engagement staff members negotiate and build relationships with community members for sites of learning based on the outcomes and problems identified by communities.

At the Micro Level, the same role players act to achieve the planned curriculum outcomes by responsible lecturer(s) through documentation, assessment and student briefings and debriefings by the Community Engagement office (stressing the nature of community dynamics) and security issues whilst the communities identify appropriate opportunities. The scope of community engagement at the University of Pretoria was noted and approved by the UP Senate and expressed in the following resolution:

“The identity and purpose of the university is firmly located within its research and teaching nexus; community engagement and support services flow from this. Therefore, although higher education is said to rest on three integrated pillars, namely teaching and learning, research and community engagement, community engagement is not separate from the other two pillars and must therefore relate to them. It should also take into account the changing role of higher education in South African society, the need for producing graduates who can lead the country in a developing context, and the imperative of reconciling community engagement with social innovation” (RT 503111, 12 may 2011).

The senate committee for teaching and learning focuses on decisions that require institutional adoption and policy changes aimed at improving the overall student academic experience and success, and not on projects or operational matters (charter for the senate committee for teaching and learning 2013).

Community Engagement has to be a standardised practice and is potentially powerful but expensive (travel/transport/insurance) and may cause curriculum overload of/and confusion amongst students as well as fee difficulties (i.e. one programme may have many modules with community engagement components, while another programme may only have one structured component). Furthermore, Community Engagement components added to modules have to budget for transport and other miscellaneous costs and must first go through the required academic processes and standards. Good oversight and regulation of Community Engagement through Faculties’ Teaching and Learning committees, Faculty Boards and Senate are important participants, both for the benefit of the students (in terms of overloading of curricula and fees) and the institution (in terms of risks). In many cases there is an over-requirement (a possible overreaction), which often leads to the scaling back of these activities. The fear to engage because of the potential risks attached to the endeavour often kerbs possible outcomes.

An academic programme should ideally only have one community engagement component of four credits/40 hours and the travel cost of this component should be included in the students’ fees. In this regard, the number of times that the student is expected to travel should be minimised (to lower risk and cost). The university yearbooks should be revised and the modules that contain community engagement should be clearly indicated in the yearbooks (Minutes: Academic Planning Committee (APC). Meeting March 2012).

- At present there are about 120 Community Engagement modules and 15 000 participating students (including voluntary workers) per year at the University of Pretoria.
- The aim is to accommodate students doing community engagement in communities within a 20 kilometre radius the different campuses allowing R200 for transport costs per student to and from sites of learning (Minutes: Senate Committee for Community Engagement. Meeting August 2012).

With the above-mentioned guidelines the respective roles of the university, lecturers, Community Engagement staff and the students, as active role-players in Community Engagement at an IHE, are now clear outlined for all participants. This raises an important question in the context of this article, namely: the role and position of the community in a community engagement programme.

Where does the community stand in community engagement?

Through the establishment of projects based on needs, academics can bring theory into practise. In addition, many benefits can be reaped as experience and knowledge can be gained during community engagement activities. However, the question remains: Where does the community stand in community engagement? The community should be actively involved in Community Engagement and they should participate as community partners. Currently Community Engagement at the University of Pretoria engages 870 registered community partners, which raises the concept of 'participation' – the principle that applies in this instance is 'what can we do together with the community' in order to gain reciprocal advantage from the interaction. The partnership relationship between the University of Pretoria and its community partners is highly professional and based on respect and trust. However, often due to historic matters a gap (or relationship distance) exists between the IHE and local communities. An IHE, in participation with communities or their agencies, can implement a great deal to close the 'gap' between them. For instance they can expand the functionality of the community partner, its existing strengths and its energy (manpower). In addition they can supplement its assets and respond to engagement opportunities based on problems the community is struggling with. They can contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of people and have a positive influence in community development. This will in turn expand the capacity of the community - its individuals or groups. Communities on the other hand in participation with IHE can also offer to undertake a number of things/activities to assist closing the 'gap' between them. For instance they can carry out a thorough analysis and identify quality community engagement opportunities from all sectors. They can also provide opportunities for reality making, which could create new knowledge. In addition, new research opportunities can be identified, which in turn can contribute in a positive way to community development. Collaborations of this type can contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of people in a community.

The era of doing community work as a charitable endeavour or as a burden ('because we must') has no standing in the new genre of community engagement. No Community Engagement module should aim to do something 'hastily' in the community without aiming to contribute to development especially in so-called 'forgotten communities' such as corrections. A Community Engagement module should provide a quality experience, knowledge creation, and the creation of reality. Real life problems in communities should be addressed in a sustainable way. Quick fix once-off engagements are often not sustainable, not practical, costly and are accordingly doomed to fail. Academic staff simply do not have the time to sustain artificially these kinds of projects and charities. Poorly planned charitable endeavours in the community can develop into a dysfunctional dependency on the part of a community. In situations such as this it is sometimes demanded or expected that the institution or lecturers to provide the necessary skills or resources required to make the project work or to alleviate specific problems in a community. The methodology of participation is a process meant to start a 'spiral of understanding'. Such a spiral of understanding is based on an epistemology of understanding and respect for each other's boundaries. This is based on attained knowledge or values, assumed by ontology. Science has to be an integral part of the methodology of participation. Skolimowski (1994: 71-80) lists the following characteristics of effective participation that can be used as a guideline in engaging in often 'forgotten communities' such as correctional centres:

- The skill of empathy;
- The skill of close association with the object of enquiry;
- The skill of learning and to use each other's language;

- The skill of engaging with the object of inquiry (academia with community and vice versa);
- The skill of intentionally understanding each other's world or 'spiral of understanding';
- The skill to make meaning out of each other; and
- The skill of imaginative hypothesis, which leads to the art of identification, which is the skill of transforming our awareness of each other (Skolimowski, 1994: 159-163).

According to Arnstein (1969: 216-224) participation is a categorical term, and highlights the importance of distinguishing between merely engaging in a superficial act of participation and full participation (Community Engagement in South African Higher Education, 2010). Full participation impacts positively on outcomes. Partnerships illustrate a degree of participation in that power is redistributed with regard to the planning of responsibilities that are shared through negotiation between participants and power holders. Delegated power also illustrates a degree of participation – in that participants' opinions form part of the decision making process with nobody being treated as a sub-citizen. Everyone whose interest is at stake holds power to have an opinion as part of the decision making process. Delegated control is at the core of the process of participation as each participant has the power to take responsible steps to test his/her opinion to that of others, but stay accountable for the decisions taken and its outcome.

Quality partnerships provide quality community engagement opportunities, which in turn provide quality community engagement activities for students. These community engagement activities include the following:

- Expanding the capacity of CBOs, NGOs, individuals or groups in a community;
- Improving the quality of life of the recipient or beneficiary;
- Contributing towards the development of the community; and
- Expanding the functionality of the CBO or NGO, its existing strengths, its energy (manpower), assets and ability to respond to challenges the community faces (not needs).

The most successful way community engagement can be carried out is in partnership with a community and its community based organisations in the context of community development. Community development is an on-going process.

CONTEXTUALISING EFFECTIVE RECIPROCAL PARTICIPATION AND REALISING CHANGE IN SCEPTIC STUDENTS

Correctional facilities as a site of preference for community engagement and the development of desirable attributes in students, as per the strategic plan instruction of the University of Pretoria, will now be verified. In the past few years more and more students from different faculties have been utilised in correctional facilities, each with a different focus of engagement. For instance, social work students might carry out therapeutic work, whilst medical students would focus on primary health issues and engineering students might train offenders how to build or repair a computer. The education students often act as tutors for younger awaiting trial offenders who were school going before their arrest and assist them with homework and preparation for exams. Criminology students are utilised in different projects in correctional facilities such as the Experiential Learnership Programme where honours students conduct risk and needs assessment of sentenced offenders. Other programmes include upgrading and improvement of infrastructure where the students are divided into groups and work side by side with the inmates to improve visitor areas or classrooms and to embark on a mutual restorative endeavour.

Community engagement and tangible change in students

During 2012-2013 two different Criminology Honours student groups were requested to do community engagement programmes in two different correctional centres (Baviaanspoort Correctional Centre (north of Pretoria near Cullinan) and the Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre in Pretoria). As soon as the compulsory module in Community Engagement in the Honours module in Criminology is mentioned the majority of prospective participants protest about doing a Community Engagement activity in a corrections centre/facility. The student objections are often followed by phone calls and e-mails from unhappy and/or concerned parents and guardians. The basic premise by the majority of the students and their parents or guardians being that the university has no right to utilise their children in a Community Engagement project in a correctional facility. Some parents felt that a correctional centre should not be regarded as part of the ‘community’ or a place where students should do community work. This was an often-repeated response from parents and they clearly state their feelings and reasons in this regard. The reasons vary between “it is too dangerous” to “imprisonment means that someone is taken out of society”, and accordingly imprisoned inmates cannot have privileges such as engaging with members of society. However, the question remains: How can one expect a person to rehabilitate if they are not given the opportunity to engage with law-abiding well-adapted people from society in a controlled environment and in a healthy way where the students and the offenders will benefit from the engagement? The two groups that were monitored during 2012 (n = 23 students) and 2013 (n = 20) made up a combined total of 43 students. Only a few responses from the pre- and post-community engagement feedback sessions have been selected in order to demonstrate the dramatic change in sentiments and perceptions that occurred in the minds of the students involved. In Table 1 below are captured some statements from students, who were informed that they will be doing Community Engagement in a prison. These responses were selected out of responses by the total group of 43 students.

Table 1: Spontaneous change in pessimistic students

	Before the Community Engagement	After completion of the Community Engagement
Student 1	<i>“Prof this is suicide – why a prison. It is unsafe and horrible...”</i>	<i>“...I also had the opportunity to regularly speak to two offenders while working [in the prison]. They shared their stories with me and they made sure we had everything we needed for the project. They also made us bookmarks and little cards to thank us for doing the renovations. The project was not without challenges, but I had a great team working with me and every challenge was conquered. ...Because when you face challenges with people and suffer together with them, you form a very close bond with these people. The project had a positive influence on me and every challenge this past year has shaped my character. I now truly believe that your ‘comfort zone’ is the most dangerous place to be, because your ‘comfort zone’ never allows growth. I can only be grateful for the opportunity.”</i>

Student 2	<i>“I do not see the need for this. I find it ridiculous.”</i>	<i>“...I’m truly thankful for the opportunity to give back to the community, to make a difference and touch other people’s lives. The work I did in there will always be a reminder that good can be done in prison. If given a chance to re do it again, I would most gladly take it, but with a more positive attitude right from the start.”</i>
Student 3	<i>“Prof – really? A prison, why not a nursery school or old age home? Why should we do a practical there? It is unpractical [sic]...”</i>	<i>“...Once we started working in the prisons, however, we all quickly changed our minds. We had so much fun ... The prisoners began telling us their stories about how they ended up in maximum security prison, and although some stories were more believable than others we felt privileged that they trusted us enough to tell us something so personal. Some of our members didn’t want to leave when the time came to go back to the University. The experience will be one I remember forever. It has taught me not to judge others too quickly and that sometimes even prisoners need help because they are often the first people that society cast aside because of a common personal belief that they are bad and not worth the time and money of ‘good’ citizens.”</i>
Student 4	<i>“A community project in a prison, Oh boy there we go. Do they deserve a project? Why us and why them...”</i>	<i>“...The student found the project extremely enlightening during a period of a great deal of academic pressure. The project’s success stands as a memento of the necessity to occasionally divert one’s focus to the needs of others. Every day in prison was a reminder of the privilege the student had to do what she loves – to study Criminology. In simple terms; it felt good to, in a way, finally give back to those who were often the subjects of our studies during the last four or five years. Thank you to Professor Bezuidenhout and everyone else that were part of the project...”</i>
Student 5	<i>“Why should we do something for people, who didn’t obey the law and that they have to be punished for these deeds...”</i>	<i>“...Although this was a positive experience, I still experience feelings of sadness and [feel] sorry for these offenders. The one day after we entered the centre, some of the prisoners were being transported to another correctional centre. They were sitting there with their belonging and I was wondering, are these things the only things they owned and what will they be returning to... I personally feel that both the Department of Correctional Services and the community must try to become involved with projects such as this...”</i>

<p>Student 6</p>	<p><i>“This is going to be challenging. I am not sure about this. Is this an informed idea and really compulsory?”</i></p>	<p><i>“... I am grateful for this experience and I have learned so much about myself and others throughout the process, but the most important lesson learned is never base your perception of ANYONE on those stereotypic pictures shaped by others. Instead try and engage in a first-hand experience and thereafter you decide! I am so grateful that I have been given such an opportunity through Professor Bezuidenhout and today I will work within the correctional centre environment any day. Giving back to the community is what I strive for, making a difference and letting others know that it is possible to change the lives of others through working together as a community...”</i></p>
<p>Student 7</p>	<p><i>“This is not what I have expected in my Honours year. Do we have a choice? Are there other options to consider?”</i></p>	<p><i>“...I must admit at first we all wondered why we should do our community service project at a correctional centre instead of a shelter or other similar organisations, but later on we came to understand that this will not only have an impact on the offenders, but it will also enhance the family’s experience. In conclusion this was a feel-good project in, which the Criminology Honours class could give something back to the community...”</i></p>
<p>Student 8</p>	<p><i>“I feel uncomfortable with the idea and the location. Surely more acceptable venues for community help are available. Why can’t we choose where we would like to engage?”</i></p>	<p><i>“Prison has taught me that everyone deserves a second chance; everyone deserves an opportunity to better themselves and improve their lives. Going to prison everyday was so fulfilling because I could see the progress I was making and the difference the work I was doing had on the inmates. I’m truly thankful for the opportunity to give back to the community, to make a difference and touch other people’s lives. The work I did in there will always be a reminder that good can be done in prison. If given a chance to re-do it again, I would most gladly take it, but with a more positive attitude right from the start...”</i></p>

The initial responses by the majority of the students weighed heavily on the negative side of the objection scale. Subsequently, at different times, the authors had a few meaningful discussions with the students on the prospective community engagement projects at the different correctional facilities. They were tutored on the probable positives and negatives of prison engagements and were accompanied to the different prisons for a few sessions. Eventually the students were allowed to take responsibility and ownership of their different projects. It is clear how dramatically the Community Engagement experience in the prisons impacted on them. Only one student from the 43 pre-test and post-test reactions reacted in a neutral way. He stated the following in his response:

“...Because the task was compulsory, it was seen more as an obligation than a voluntary activity for personal growth. Thus no valuable life lessons were gained as I personally remained objective to the task. Therefore it was seen as an academic task rather than a contributing activity...”

All the other 42 students wrote extremely positive and moving responses that exhibited and indicated life changing experiences in students, many of whom were at first very hesitant about the whole exercise.

It must be noted that eight students on the contrary, who were adamant from the start to work in prison, fully embraced the opportunity to make a difference in these neglected communities. One student truly highlighted the fact that “this type of initiative is restorative justice in action, and I embrace it wholeheartedly...”. These particular students thrived on the responsibility that goes along with working in correctional facilities. The moment they walk into a prison they become role models and impact on the lives of many of the inmates, often unknowingly steering an inmate in the prescribed direction of rehabilitation without even noticing their influence. It is only when this is pointed out to the students that they then realise the impact and necessity of their engagement with this often neglected community. They also then realise their potential of being a mentor in life to others, such as prison inmates. By reaching out to others, no matter what the mistakes they have made in the past and without judging them, these students not only invoke the willingness to change amongst many inmates they work with, but also make them feel they are ‘worthy’ as human beings. It is often observed, in these student-inmate interactions, how offenders become determined to succeed in changing their behaviour of the past. Typically, students will undertake projects in order to enhance facilities or facilitate programmes that relate to specific themes identified for this purpose by the Department of Corrections such as ‘anger management’, ‘life skills’, and ‘conflict handling’.

Students who plan or opt to work in prison as part of their curricular community engagement, for any other scholarly purposes or as voluntary workers, have to attend an orientation programme before they are allowed to work in a correctional facility. Most people will never see the inside of a prison in their lifetime. However, many myths and misconceptions exist about how correctional facilities operate, how ‘things’ are in prison and even about ‘prison life’. Unfortunately a number of people that engage in conversations about how prison life is or/and the state of facilities in a correctional centre or even about issues of safety inside a prison, do so without actually knowing about the facts, conditions and life inside a prison. Despite conditions in prison, the ‘atmosphere’ in a prison is often more distressing to some than the prison conditions or prison life itself. A colleague once encapsulated the sentiment about the atmosphere in a prison as follows: The atmosphere “clings itself to you like a negative energy/aura that works itself off the days after one has left the prison”. It is pre-supposed that the often negative energy people portray toward prisons comes with the unconventional ‘territory’ and ‘clients’. This is difficult to explain and it remains a challenge as some visitors to prison are severely affected by it while others are not affected by it at all. Nevertheless, this is deemed a very important aspect to take into account when orienting and preparing students to work in prison.

CHANGING THE ROLES: USE THE OFFENDER IN THE COMMUNITY

The South African society is not very forgiving and the estimated 94 percent recidivism rate is evident of this to some degree. As a result many parolees and ex-offenders find it difficult to be re-introduced or re-integrated back into society (Van Wyk, 2014: 23; Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA)/Department of Correctional Services (DCS), 2008: 22). Society in general tends to be very negative towards the idea of employing a parolee. They become isolated and at times are forced to route back to crime to survive. The authors

saw this as an opportunity to get parolees involved in projects that were initiated in prison to present them with other available options and not to resort back to crime when they move out on parole. Parolees or ex-offenders are now being offered the opportunity to get involved with development work, which provides them with an opportunity to pay something back to society – “to correct their wrongs” (Johnstone, 2011: 2).

Many inmates study while they are in prison and complete different qualifications. This initiative involves utilising these parolees to apply their knowledge in their communities. Several parolees and ex-offenders grab this opportunity with both hands, since they are serious about correcting the past. For example, at the Adult Education Centre in Mamelodi parolees with matric and post-matric qualifications assist in tutoring learners who have repeatedly failed Grade 12 (e.g. mathematics). During 2014 this specific project had a 100 percent pass rate. This initiative manages the involvement of parolees in order to contribute, not only towards the sustainability of these UP departmental development projects, but to also contribute towards the development of society as a whole. Inmates have many skills and when directed towards another potential, many become valuable contributing citizens.

CONCLUSION

The authors are of the hope that tertiary institutions and especially student projects in corrections will improve the practical value of criminology as a discipline and contribute more to the restorative ethos that features strongly in the South African Criminal Justice machinery. Ovens (2011: 397), also reflects on the lack of understanding of the role of criminology in contributing to the criminal justice system as a whole. Well planned and executed Community Engagement initiatives in prisons and other neglected communities can make a significant impact on both the engaging party and the receiving community. The most successful way community engagement can be achieved is in partnership with a community in the context of community development. The time has passed where communities sit helplessly and wait for hand-outs and charity work until they are completely dependent. Government and universities are changing their policies to make Community Engagement projects more sustainable and to create opportunities of reciprocal advantageous engagement. Students, albeit sometimes negative, can make huge contributions in neglected communities and correctional centres. Correctional centres should be perceived as sites of preference for this purpose. From the study’s findings and experiences in prison with different Community Engagement projects it has become evident that students, as well as inmates gained from each other and the process ignited a reciprocal constructive spiral of change. At the end of each project reflexive communication sessions are held with the inmates and the majority always commend the community engagement efforts and the value it has for them. In addition, the students are also evaluated before and after the engagement project. The majority of them also express the view that they feel that they have made a difference in someone’s life and usually hint that every programme at a tertiary institution should have a well-structured community engagement component.

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