

COMMUNITY PARTNERS' EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICE- LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MODULE

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this empirical research paper is to investigate the self-perceived role of the community partner of a higher education service-learning and community engagement module.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative approach was followed by distributing a questionnaire to the community partners of a community engagement module and coding the responses using ATLAS.ti. A total of 36 responses were received from community partners who work with students enrolled in a compulsory undergraduate community-based project module at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology.

Findings: The community partners share a common interest in the students' education. They are experts in their fields and can share their knowledge with the students and the university. Through these partnerships, long-term reciprocal relationships can develop. Community partners can become co-educators and partners in education. The pragmatist representations of community partners can be challenged when they understand their own stakes in service-learning or community engagement projects. This better aids higher education institutes in the management and evaluation of service-learning and community engagement pedagogies and curricula.

Research limitations/implications: Two main limitations underlie this study. Firstly, this research is based on data from one community module at a single university. Although a large number of students are registered in the module, the study would be improved by conducting it at more than one university countrywide. Secondly, the study was performed during the first coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown the country experienced.

This was a completely unexpected event for which everyone was totally unprepared. Many of the community partners lacked the resources to receive or respond to an online questionnaire. The nature of the lockdown prevented the researchers from reaching these community partners for a face-to-face interview. The voice of these community partners is, therefore, silent.

Practical implications: The community partners reiterated their need to be seen as equal partners in the module and appreciated being part of a group of non-profit enterprises working together with a university to pursue a set of common goals. However, their status as peers depends on their willingness and ability to contribute sufficiently to the structure and demands of the service-learning module. The community partners who were able and willing to orientate each group of students to their organisation's mission and objectives, and who executed their roles according to the course requirements, experienced the greatest success in terms of project effectiveness and efficiency, and also in terms of future benefits when students returned to volunteer or provide donations. Given time, these community partners grew into an equal partner with the university's stakeholders, where both their own needs and those of the students were met during the various service-learning projects.

Social implications: Since all respondents in this study are non-profit organisations, the financial assistance and free labour afforded to them by the students are of paramount importance. The community partners also understand the longer-term value implications of successful student projects, as some students return of their free will to volunteer their services when gainfully employed after graduation.

Originality/value: Community engagement projects are rarely investigated from the community partner's point of view. This paper elicited their responses and examined them through the lens of Fraser's theory of social justice (Fraser, 2009).

Keywords: Service-learning; Community engagement; Community-based Project module; JCP module; campus partners; University of Pretoria; South Africa.

Community partners in a service-learning and community engagement project

South African higher education institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in addressing challenges in society. The high unemployment rate of 29.1% (Oosthuizen, 2019) and the accompanying low educational rate of young adults place high demands on the community. The HEIs need to respond to critical challenges in society. To instil a sense of social responsibility in graduates, it

is important to adjust their strategic goals and curriculum transformation efforts. It is therefore important that higher education institutes produce graduates that are able to contribute to nation-building. Now, more than ever, it is necessary for these institutions to produce graduates who are able to advance a more just and humane society in South Africa. Through service-learning or community engagement, graduates can have the skills and knowledge to uplift society (Osman and Petersen, 2010; Fenzel and Peyrot, 2005). The Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997), viewed community service as a necessary and integral part of a higher education curriculum. The document called on higher education institutes to “demonstrate social responsibility and their commitment to the common good” (Department of Education, 1997, p. 11). It calls for graduates to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to uplift society (Department of Education, 1997). Through this White Paper, community engagement was integrated into teaching, learning and research in higher education in South Africa (Erasmus and Van Schalkwyk, 2011).

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training in South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) integrated community engagement into the core domain of higher education. The Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) implemented the national guidelines by adding the requirement of “participat(ing) as a responsible citizen in the life of local, national and global communities by acting professionally and ethically” in its exit level 10 of engineering curricula (ECSA, 2014). The national guidelines and ECSA's requirements are interpreted differently amongst higher education institutes in South Africa, which resulted in diverse models being applied (Hall, 2010). In contrast with other engineering faculties that have incorporated these requirements in existing modules, the University of Pretoria decided to create a separate credit-bearing module to incorporate these criteria.

The most popular approach was to incorporate community engagement into the curriculum through service-learning courses. Students have the opportunity to participate in

organised community engagement activities for which they receive academic credits (Osman and Attwood, 2007). Specific needs are address in an identified community. This ensures that students understand the relationship between the community's needs, their dynamics and the curriculum outcomes. The incorporation of critical reflection in the process ensures that students understand their learning experience, understand their social responsibility (Bender, 2008; Jacoby, 1996) and grow into socially responsible citizens (Bingle and Hatcher, 1996). A service-learning endeavour must be meaningful for the community and must create in-depth learning opportunities for students (Grobbelaar, Napier and Maistry, 2017).

Community engagement or service-learning activities in higher education have to meet the actual needs of the specific community. This presupposes cooperation and planning between the community partner and the lecturer before the project starts. Together, the two parties have to identify the objectives for the students' learning and determine the structure of the interaction between the student and the community partner. Methods to monitor and assess the activities have to be identified, and outcomes stipulated that students have to reach in order to complete the activity. An important aspect of the community engagement or service-learning activity is that students have to engage in ongoing reflection during their project, as well as after it has been completed (Rinaldo, Davis and Borunda, 2019).

Our purpose in this study was to contribute to the growing body of literature on addressing the aspect of the community's voice through their experience with community engagement projects and to provide a better understanding of how community partners perceive their role in HEIs' community engagement projects or service-learning modules. While existing research focusses on broad university–community partnerships, this paper describes the model of a community engagement module. The module is unique in that it has a low lecturer-to-student ratio ($\pm 1,900$ students to one lecturer) and addresses a wide variety of needs in the community. Therefore, the research question for our study is: “how do community

partners perceive their role in an undergraduate community engagement module of a higher education institution?”.

Literature review

Community partners are required to invest considerable time in community engagement and service-learning projects. This includes the planning, implementation and evaluation of a project (Rinaldo et al., 2019). Successful projects can result in broadening the number of potential community partners for the HEI and strengthen the viability of service-learning or community engagement projects. However, projects that do not fulfil the communities’ needs, risk being discontinued (Rinaldo et al., 2019).

Existing literature suggests multiple factors that ensure a successful university-community partnership, one of which is communication between the university and the community (Strand et al., 2003; Vernon and Ward, 1999; Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah, 2016). Various authors have emphasised the importance of the voice of the community to assist in the identification of their specific needs (Christopher et al., 2008; Tarantino, 2017; Fear et al., 2011; Strand et al., 2003). as well as the role community partners play in planning projects and determining the project outcome for the students (Sandy and Holland, 2006).

The study of Sandy and Holland (2006) on the community partner perspectives of community engagement projects indicated that the community partners must value the partnership. They must have a clear understanding of the partners’ perspectives, must be co-planners of the projects and must establish accountability for project outcomes. However, the expectations and motivations that the various partners bring to the alliance play an important role in the success of a partnership (Bassellier and Benbasat, 2004). The resources and services that community partners need (Youngblood and Mackiewicz, 2013; Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah, 2016) have an impact on their expectations of the partnership and the resulting collaborations (Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah, 2016). It is important to match the goals of the

community partner with the project goals (Lester et al., 2005). Community partners derive value from being part of a community project with an HEI.

However, researchers are of the opinion that the voices of non-education communities seem tentative, muted and sometimes non-existent. Too often, they envisage themselves as subordinate members, useful perhaps, but not essential (Tyler and Haberman, 2002; Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah, 2016; Rinaldo et al., 2019). Ferrari and Worrall (2000) are also of the opinion that the community would rather give positive evaluations so that they do not jeopardise their relationship with the university. The result of valuable community projects can be positive word-of-mouth. This will broaden the base of potential community partners and strengthens the viability of service-learning (Rinaldo et al., 2019).

Tyler and Haberman (2002) indicate that community partners' expectations and motivations to be in a relationship with an HEI change over time. They classified community partners, along a range of committed, supportive indifferent, protective and exploitative partners. It takes time to build trust with the community partner and encourage the community voice (Barnes et al., 2010; Clayton et al., 2010; Wallace, 2000).

Theory underlining the study

The framework for social justice developed by Fraser (2009) is used as an underlying theory to this study. Fraser (2009) proposed a framework for social justice based on parity of participation in which all parties in a particular matter should ideally be able to participate as peers in social interaction. Her framework comprises three facets: the concept of economic redistribution, the recognition of the importance of a party's culture, and the concept of representation, based on the political system. For Fraser, these three aspects are interconnected, and separating anyone from the others results in an incomplete and diminished concept of justice.

Fraser's framework of social justice can be applied to the partnership between a university and its community in order to address the different voices, perspectives, viewpoints and mindsets

of such a partnership. These different outlooks on the relationship between the community and the university represent the three principles identified by Fraser (Reynolds, 2014). The first principle of economic redistribution is the act of directing the university's resources to the local communities. This is one of the driving forces behind the community engagement module. The second principle is the recognition of equal importance afforded to both the university and the community partner's contribution to a project. Attending to this facet should prevent valuing the university's knowledge contribution over that of the community partner. The third principle is the concept of equal political representation. It prescribes that all parties involved should be able to participate equally in the project. This implies that equal responsibility be afforded to both the university representative(s) and the community partner during the planning and execution of every project.

The Community-based Project Module

The Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology at the University of Pretoria presents a compulsory undergraduate module, Community-based Project (code: JCP) for all undergraduate students in the Faculty. The objectives of the module include that the community project must impact on an identified section of society and that this society should be different from the students' own background. The module also aims to develop the personal, social and cultural values of the students. After completing the project, the students should show a willingness to serve the community and need to understand the social issues in South Africa. Through the module, students also have to develop various life skills, which include communication skills and leadership skills (Author, 2014).

A high number of students enrol in the module annually. During 2019, 1598 students were enrolled in the module, and during 2020, 1907 students were enrolled in it. Students can choose a project from a proposed list of identified projects for the module, or they may identify their own project, provided that it complies with certain criteria. These criteria include that

their partner must not be a for-profit organisation, and students must use their existing skills in the project. In cases where projects do not have an allocated community partner, a JCP mentor is appointed to supervise the project.

The students are mainly second-year students and are registered for various degrees in the faculty. Typically, the students focus on pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools and non-profit organisations, which also include animal shelters. Students prefer to do building, renovation and maintenance projects, but also repair old computers for schools and non-profit organisations and teach community members basic computer skills (see Figure 1). Other projects include the development of websites and the creation of mobile applications (apps), upgrading libraries and reading corners, and adjudication and assisting with various tasks at local museums (Jordaan, 2014). During 2020, the scope of the projects changed to include more online projects because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the strict lockdown regulations applied in South Africa.

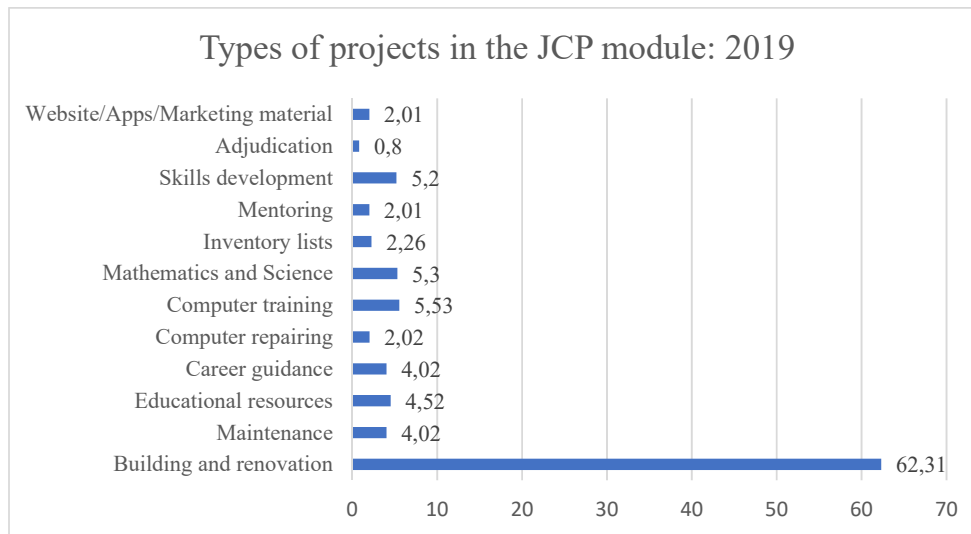


Figure 1: Typical projects in the JCP module during 2019

Students attend a compulsory orientation lecture where they are briefed on the outcomes of the module, as well as ethical issues involved when taking photographs. They do various reflective assignments on the outcomes of the module using the e-learning management

system (blackboard). As part of their final assignment, students develop a reflective report on the outcomes of their project, upload a reflective video onto YouTube and present the outcomes to the lecturer in a PowerPoint presentation (Jordaan, 2013).

The community partners play a crucial role in the module. They assist in identifying projects for the students to execute, monitor and guide the students throughout the project and assess the final project. The community partners verify the hours that the students have worked. They also approve the final video and give permission that the photographs and/or videos were taken during the execution of the project may be used for the students' final presentation, and that they may be uploaded onto YouTube and possibly made public.

During 2019, the students were involved with 235 different community partners and in 2020 they were involved with 245 different community partners. These partners ranged from pre-schools, primary schools and secondary schools to non-profit organisations and animal sanctuaries. A number of projects also took place on campus, ranging from career guidance to computer training for community members.

Method

The 36 participants in this research project represent a range of non-profit organisations, from pre-schools, primary schools and secondary schools to non-profit organisations, zoos and animal sanctuaries who are actively involved in the community-based project module of the University of Pretoria. The two researchers interviewed the first 11 participants by visiting them at their premises. These partners were all situated in the larger Tshwane area (Pretoria), South Africa. A questionnaire (see Table 1) was presented to each participant, and their replies recorded using a tablet or cellphone. The questionnaire consisted of five demographic questions and nine open-ended questions on the community partners' experiences of the module and of the students. After each interview, the responses were transcribed into a document according to the questions listed in the questionnaire (see Table 2).

Table 1. Questionnaire to the community partners of the community-based project module (JCP) of the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology

- 1 What type of organisation are you?
- 2 What is the focus of your organisation?
- 3 When was your first experience with JCP students?
- 4 How many JCP students worked in your organisation and when?
- 5 What did the students do for your organisation?
- 6 Would you think the community project of the JCP students prepared them for their future careers? If so, how?
- 7 What were the benefits of having the students involved in your organisation? Please explain
- 8 Were the goals for the student's JCP project apparent to you? Please elaborate
- 9 Were the JCP students prepared to fulfil their assigned roles? If not, elaborate
- 10 Did the participation in the JCP project make the students more aware of the needs in the community? Please explain
- 11 Did the involvement in the JCP project have valuable social and economic benefits for your organisation? Please explain
- 12 Explain how you see your relationship with the JCP students
- 13 Based on your experience with the service-learning programme, what are your most pressing concerns about serving as a community-partner for the JCP module?
- 14 Any other comments you have about the JCP module

Table 2. Respondents information

Respondent number	Industry type	Years in the programme	Format of data collection data
1	Pre-school	15 years	Interview
2	Pre-school	3 years	Interview
3	Pre-school	3 years	Interview
4	Pre-school	1 year	Interview
5	Secondary school	10 years	Interview
9	Animal sanctuary	14 years	Interview
10	Government organisation	4 years	Interview
12	Pre-school	4 years	Interview
17	NGO	4 years	Questionnaire
18	Museum	2 years	Questionnaire
22	Heritage Society	3 years	Questionnaire
23	NGO	3 years	Questionnaire
24	Animal sanctuary	3 years	Questionnaire
26	LSEN pre-primary school	2 years	Questionnaire
31	NGO	6 years	Questionnaire
32	NGO	6 years	Questionnaire

The implementation of the countrywide lockdown to combat the COVID-19 pandemic required the researchers to upload the questionnaire onto Qualtrics and ask the community partners to respond online. The questionnaire was forwarded to 52 community partners via email or WhatsApp. These community partners had an active cellphone number and had been involved with the community-based project module for more than two years. Twenty-five of the 52 community partners who had been contacted responded to the questionnaire.

The replies were downloaded from Qualtrics and added to the transcribed document. The two types of responses (interview and online responses) were entered into the document according to the questions in the questionnaire. The quality of the online feedback was excellent, which led to the researchers finding a negligible qualitative difference between the interview and online responses. The transcribed document was uploaded to ATLAS.ti.

The types of community partners that were involved in the study were mainly pre-schools (25.0%), followed by museums (13.9%) and non-profit organisations (11.1%) (see Figure 2).

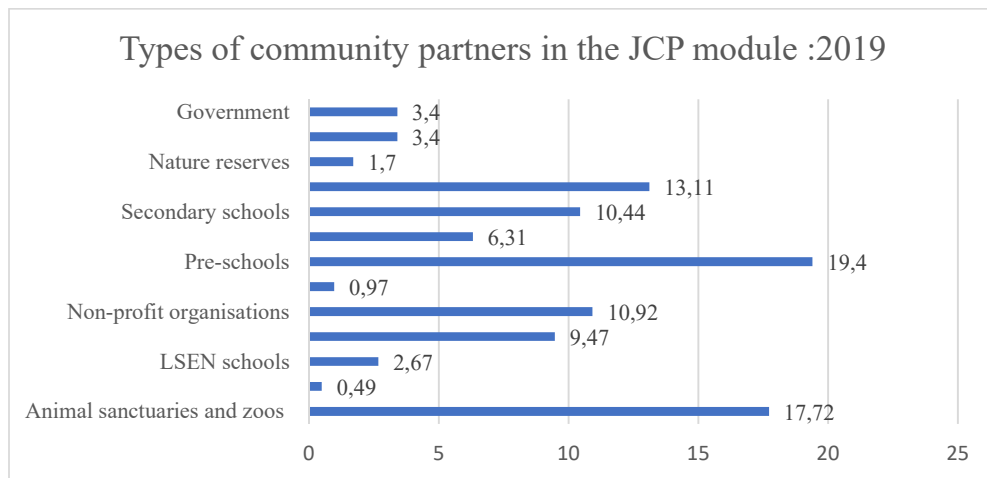


Figure 2: Types of community partners of the JCP module during 2019

Respondents in this study comprised community partners who had been involved with the community-based project module for two or more years. Most of the respondents had been involved for the last three years, while five respondents (13.9%) had been partners for more than 10 years. Seven (19.4%) of the respondents had each accommodated more than 200 students during this time, while one community partner had accommodated more than 2,000 students during their 15-years involvement with the module.

The first five questions of the questionnaire determined the demographics of the respondents. The last four questions provided the most data as they were open-ended questions,

which elicited detailed and well-considered replies from the respondents. The data were qualitatively coded and categorised for themes using ATLAS.ti. The approach comprised three stages: appraisal, identification and interpretation. During the appraisal phase, the two researchers first independently coded the feedback from the community partners and then compared and consolidated it. The identification phase consisted of jointly identifying themes from the community partners' feedback. Finally, the feedback from the community partners was interpreted. The interpretation was aided by the available responses to the open-ended questions, which encouraged community partners to share their experiences of working with students.

Results of community partner research

The feedback from the community partners could be divided into six distinct themes. These themes included the following.

1. The interest of the students is just as important as the interests of the community partner.
2. Community partners are colleagues, clients and supervisors.
3. The community partners require detailed steps on what is expected from them.
4. The university's involvement is important for the community partner.
5. The financial assistance plays an important role in the relationship.
6. Community partners perceive the future value of the students after graduation.

The community partners felt that mutual respect was important and that it allowed the development of a positive working relationship between the students and the community. They valued the students' contributions to their organisations, while some community partners indicated that they needed to better understand what is expected of them in this partnership. The themes are now discussed in turn.

Theme 1: The interest of the students is just as important as the interests of the community partner

A community partnership requires a community partner to develop a relationship with both the students and the lecturer. The data show that community partners who have been involved with

the JCP module for more than three years proactively identify possible projects for the module early in the academic year. They develop a strong relationship with the students and see themselves as mentors to the students. In contrast, community partners who have been involved with the JCP module for less than three years see themselves as advisors or supervisors. Nevertheless, most of the community partners focus on the students' development and see the free labour and additional funding brought in from the students as a bonus. For them, the partnership is interlinked amongst the university (represented by the lecturer), the students and themselves. These partners are passionate about their institutions and eager to accommodate a large number of students to assist in the maintenance of the institution.

It is important that the students feel positive about the project they will be doing. Because a community partnership with an HEI is a two-way relationship, it is essential that both parties experience their needs as being met. The community partners must feel that their wishes are met, and the students should feel that their interest and input in the community are appreciated.

However, in our study, only three (8.3%) of the community partners were of the opinion that the students did not understand the community's needs and were not interested in understanding their socio-economic situation. These three community partners indicated that the students were only focussed on the project and did not want to get involved in the context. In contrast, a number of community partners performed an orientation session with the students at the beginning of their project, where they shared their purpose and vision, as well as the challenges they encountered in their organisations. These community partners reflected more positively on the interaction with the students, the students' understanding of the communities' socio-economic situation and the purpose of the specific project identified by the community. Two of these community partners enthusiastically described that, after completing their module, some students returned of their own accord to further volunteer their time.

The community partners see their role as essential in getting the students ready for the world of work. For them, the JCP module gives the students the opportunity to develop important work-related skills. Community partners identified skills like teamwork, planning, practical implementation, professionalism and budgeting that students acquire when doing their community project. The feedback from the community partners on the skills developed by the students confirmed the skills identified by the students in a previous study by authors (2019). When asked: “what skills do the JCP students need?”, respondent 2 stated: “*planning, organising, teamwork; the ability to coordinate with the group to achieve the desired goal*”, while respondent 1 reflected that “*responsibility, perseverance, gratification, pride in the completed project, critical thinking and how to practically solve their project problem*”. Their community partner colleagues echoed these remarks. This indicated that the main skills needed for the community project were teamwork, time management, communication skills and project management skills.

Theme 2: Community partners are both colleagues, clients and supervisors

The community partner is willing to give their time, resources and opportunities to learn. Community partners are teachers, partners (Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah, 2016) and advocates of the module. Two community partners reflected on their role as mentors in this partnership and indicated that “*we give the opportunity and the mentorship for the students*” (respondent 18), as well as a “*mentor relationship – I should give them some guidance, but also enough freedom for them to be able to take the initiative*” (respondent 9)

For the community partners, it is important that the students understand the community partners' specific challenges. Respondent 22 reflected on the students' willingness to understand the challenges and indicated that “*the students were interested in our daily activities, our needs and our projects*”, while respondent 31 stressed students' understanding

of social responsibility that *“they have a renewed understanding of what social issues townships in south Africa face, and they have a desire to do more to make a difference in their futures”.*”

The community partners indicated that being involved with the JCP module motivates staff members to participate in the development of the students. The interaction with the students boosts the *“morale of the staff”* (respondent 10). The students also assist with the workload of the staff members and *“lift the pressure of the staff”* (respondent 12). Respondent 18 described the relationship between the students and the community members and stated that *“we learnt from one another as human beings, new skills were acquired, and bonds were formed”.*

On the question “did the involvement in the JCP project have valuable social and economic benefits for your organisation?”, the community partners reflected that they experienced a special connection with the university, and they felt part of the university community. This relationship is reflected in various comments, for instance, respondent 3 indicated that *“it shows us that we are not alone – university, government and ourselves”* and respondent 5 summed this connection up as *“we became part of the family of the university.”* The community partners are involved with the identification and approval of the projects that will take place on their sites. They are also involved in the assessment of the students. To demonstrate appreciation, they receive a t-shirt from the JCP office and a certificate of acknowledgement. Community partners in Pretoria are also invited to the students' annual prize-giving functions. For these community partners, the partnership is seen as a networking opportunity to work with other faculty members, as well as other community partners, as was indicated by one of the community partners. Respondent 5 reflected in this regard that *“it gives the school an opportunity to network”.*

Theme 3: The community partner requires detailed steps on what is expected from it

Community partners are eager to get involved with the JCP module due to the many advantages it affords the community. However, the newer community partners are necessarily less aware of the module structure and of their own role in the module. This is addressed by the lecturer, who strives to visit every community partner at the beginning of each year. When that is not possible, the community partner is contacted telephonically. This is especially applicable to the community partners who are not situated in Pretoria. As soon as a group identifies a specific project as a community partner, the JCP office forwards the community partner a letter indicating the goals and objectives of the project. This letter includes the relevant forms that the community member has to complete for the students. Even though the goals and objectives of the module are clearly stipulated in the initial letter to the community, a number of community partners were not aware of the goals and objectives.

Despite these widespread shortcomings in communication, most students are well prepared for their projects. Respondent 31 reflected on the students' readiness to do a project and indicated that *“the students we have worked with are professional, upfront and informative of their approach – while being flexible and adaptable to the existing needs”*

Theme 4: The university's involvement is important for the community partner

The community partner needs to feel that the university as such, as well as the lecturer and the administrative officer of the JCP module, is involved in the process and is sympathetic to their request and situation. The lecturer contacted the community partners at the beginning of the year to identify possible projects with them. As soon as a group has identified a specific project at a site, the community partners are contacted, and it is indicated that the students will come and do the project. At the end of the academic year, the community partner is invited to the annual function. It is important that the community knows that the lecturer is involved, and that

the task will be linked to the students' skills. There must be clear communication between the community partner and the lecturer on what is expected. Respondent 32 commented that *“the students do not always have the skills to do a specific type of work”*, while respondent 26 also reflected that the lecturer is the link to the student by indicating that *“the lecturer managed to connect our world to that of the skilled students the lecturer works with”*.

Theme 5: The financial assistance plays an important role in the relationship

The financial assistance that the students give plays a very important role in the partnership. Students receive limited funding from the university to execute their projects. They also provide free labour for 40 h. A number of students also find sponsors for parts of their projects. (in 2019, the JCP students sponsored r210 000 (\$11 616,93) to their projects.) Respondent 23 reflected on this aspect, indicating that *“we could not afford to put up information boards, etc. If it were not for the JCP students and the sponsors that they got”*. For community partners, the *“added economic value”* (respondent 1) of the students and the projects, as well as improving *“the aesthetic value of the building for children and parents”* (respondent 9) played an important role in accepting the students on their premises. For many community partners, the funding is very important, and the challenges that they experience to continue with their pre-school or non-governmental organisation are reflected in the feedback of *“the centre has a need for but not the manpower or money to do so”* (respondent 24) or *“we need more toys”* (respondent 4)

Theme 6: Community partners see the value of the students when they have already graduated

The community partners also understand that these students will soon enter the workforce and, as alumni, might plough back into their organisation, and indicate that some students even volunteer directly after they have completed the module. Community partners

realise that they invest in the students as possible future partners and donors to the institutions as respondent 17 indicated that “*some of our donors are previous JCP students we worked with*”.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how community partners perceived their role in a community engagement module, and particularly a specific module in the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology at the University of Pretoria.

Community partners need to feel part of the bigger picture in students' development. Their role as mentors, supervisors and assessors must be respected and appreciated. However, to be effective, they should be provided with information detailing all that is expected from them. The community partners also need to feel that the university and its representatives, in the form of the lecturer and the administrative officer, are sympathetic to their situation and understand their needs.

Combining the responses of the different community partners provided a bird's-eye view of their differing approaches to the community module. The newer community partners exhibited low awareness of the module requirements, did not communicate their needs to the students and subsequently reported that some students were unwilling to immerse themselves in the context and only wanted to complete the project. Community partners who had been involved for longer, exhibited a better understanding of their role and responsibilities, and of the abilities of the students. Over time, the community partners realise that the module is a vehicle for the students' soft skills development, and that a heightened level of involvement, from their side, leads to better outcomes for their organisations.

Since all respondents in this study are non-profit organisations, the financial assistance and free labour afforded to them by the students are of paramount importance. The community partners also understand the longer-term value implications of successful student projects, as

some students return of their free will to volunteer their services when gainfully employed after graduation.

According to Fraser's theory of social justice, a community module would function best when its various stakeholders participate as peers in their social interaction. Since it has been found that most service-learning partnerships favour the contribution of the university (Reynolds, 2014), this study elicits the voice of the community partner. Harnessing Fraser's framework to aid us in understanding the community partners' responses in this study, it was encouraging to see that all three aspects of Fraser's concept of social justice were addressed (see Figure 3).

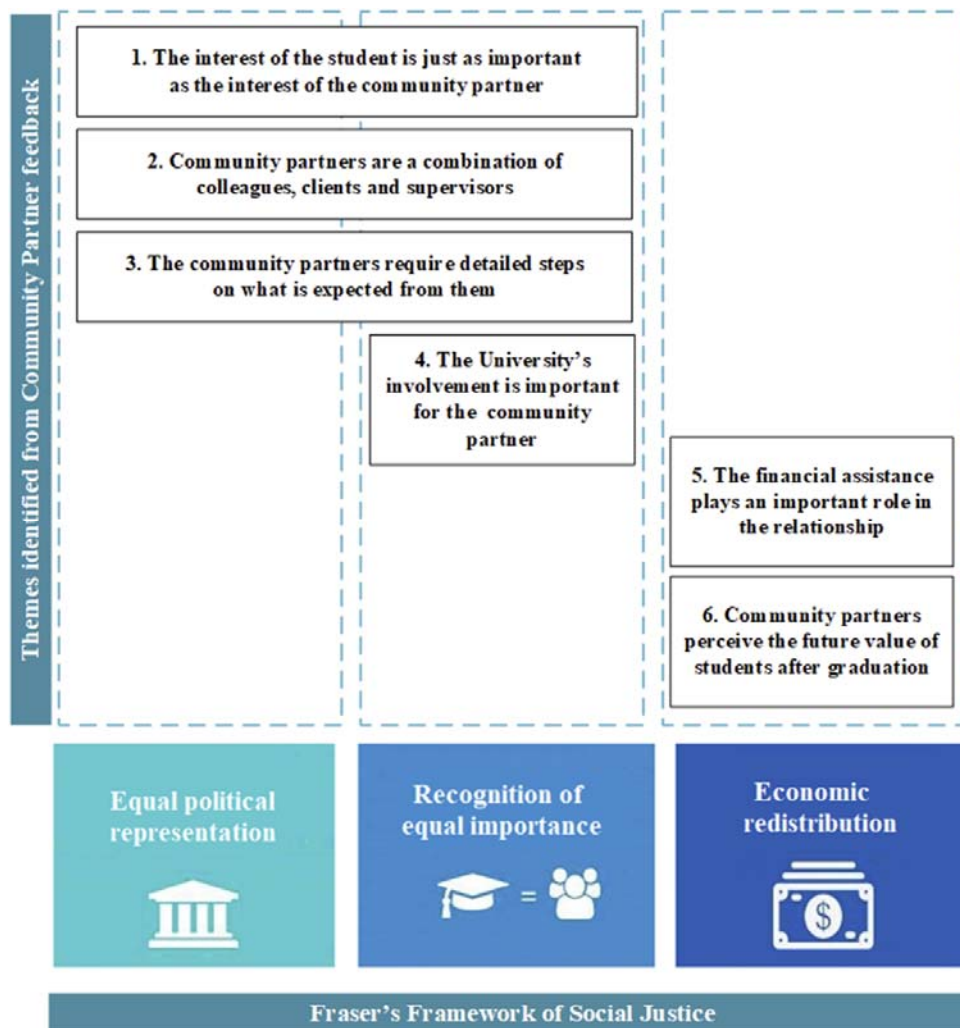


Figure 3. Community partners' responses, as seen through Fraser's framework of social justice

Figure 3 aligns the themes identified from the community partners' responses with Fraser's concept of social justice (Fraser, 2009). Themes 1, 2 and 3 straddle Fraser's concepts of equal political representation and the recognition of the equal importance of all parties in the community project. Themes 1 and 2 speak to the fact that community partners understand that all parties' needs are equally important and that all possess agency in the process. Theme 1 refers to the notion that the community is enriched by the students' projects on their premises, while the students simultaneously gain a variety of soft skills, such as project planning and teamwork, in the course of completing their module requirements. Theme 2 reveals that the community partners understand their role in the process and willingly act as colleagues to the module lecturer and as supervisors to the students. At the same time, they also happen to be clients of the module. The community partners report that their needs are met, indicating that they understand the importance of aligning their needs with that of the module. Theme 3 reveals the importance of supplying the community partners with a set of detailed steps on what is expected from them in the module. Practical guidelines are essential for the new community partners, who are eager to welcome students to their organisations, but do not yet fully understand the aims of the module. A set of detailed steps to follow would allow them to better align themselves to the shared goals of the module, thereby affording them better agency in the process. This satisfies two requirements of Fraser's framework (Fraser, 2009): equal political representation and the recognition of equal importance. Many community partners offer an orientation session for their students at the start of the project and have realised the importance of encouraging a positive attitude in the students. The students are grateful for their encouragement and support since, for most of them, it is their first time working in "real life". Reciprocity is once again demonstrated in the fact that some community partners reported that their employees are inspired by the enthusiastic and appreciative students. The recognition of equal importance and equal political representation of all parties is underscored by the fact that

the community partner has to assess the students on completion of the project, with the marks being recorded permanently in the students' final academic record. This is a responsibility the community partners do not take lightly.

Theme 4 addresses the recognition of the equal importance of both parties. The community partners report that the involvement of the university is key to a successful partnership. They rely on clear and direct communication with the lecturer, who needs to be aware of their situation and sympathetic to their requests. They greatly appreciate being invited to the university's annual awards ceremony, where their value to the module is underscored and celebrated. They also highlighted the importance of the networking opportunity afforded them during the event. Networking exposed them to new opportunities, a better understanding of the scope of the module, and new insights into managing the module at their own organisations. Themes 5 and 6 speak to the economic distribution aspect of Fraser's framework. All community partners reported that the financial assistance afforded them by the module is crucial, enabling them to address challenges for which they had no resources. Even more importantly, most community partners reported that many students returned of their own accord to offer their services, and that the financial value of these opportunities increased greatly once the students had graduated and had the backing of their respective organisations. It was encouraging to see that the responses of the community partners indicated that all three aspects of Fraser's framework of social justice had been addressed.

Limitations

Two main limitations underlie this study. Firstly, this research is based on data from one community module at a single university. Although a large number of students are registered in the module, the study would be improved by conducting it at more than one university countrywide. Secondly, the study was performed during the first COVID-19 lockdown the

country experienced. This was a completely unexpected event for which everyone was totally unprepared. Many of the community partners lacked the resources to receive or respond to an online questionnaire. The nature of the lockdown prevented the researchers from reaching these community partners for a face-to-face interview. The voice of these community partners is, therefore, silent.

Conclusion

This study investigated the self-perceived role of local community partners in the service-learning module of a university. It was found that the voice of the community increases with the level of its involvement in the module, which consequently improves equal representation. Community partners who exercise agency by educating themselves in the aims of the module, and supporting the students in their projects, gain the most from the partnership. Their status as peers depends on their willingness and ability to contribute sufficiently to the structure and demands of the service-learning module.

The community partners who were able and willing to orientate each group of students to their organisation's mission and objectives, and who executed their roles according to the course requirements, experienced the greatest success in terms of project effectiveness and efficiency, and also in terms of future benefits when students returned to volunteer or provided donations. Given time, these community partners grew into an equal partner with the university's stakeholders, where both their own needs and those of the students were met during the various service-learning projects.

A number of the newer community partners showed that they did not understand the goals of the university's community engagement module. This indicates a need for a concise set of guidelines for the induction of a new community partner, and is envisaged by the authors as a project for the immediate future. Longstanding community partners will be paired with

more recent members to assist with the facilitation of the process, and an orientation session would be organised for all members at the beginning of the academic year.

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