



## POLICY BRIEF

### ***Service-Learning at the UFS: A Human Development and Capability Approach Informed Policy Brief***

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### **Connecting Head, Hands and Heart**



Figure 1 Source: Division of Service Learning

#### **About this brief**

This policy brief summarises key findings from a doctoral study, which focused on exploring the role of service-learning (SL) in human development based on a case study of the University of the Free State (UFS). The study approached SL from the Capability Approach (CA) and Human Development (HD) perspectives. This policy brief proposes a multidimensional way of framing and positioning SL, and so enables us to develop an expanded and inclusive version of SL in terms of its meaning, purposes and values for all actors (partners) involved.

#### **Context**

SL at the UFS dates back to the early 1990s with the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Social Sciences playing a pivotal role in its foundation (Fourie, 2003). The significant development of SL at the UFS is attributed to it being foregrounded within the broader transformation of higher education agenda articulated in the White Paper of 1997 and also highlighted in the White Paper of 2013. Other factors include the early adoption of SL at the UFS (Fourie, 2003), the work of

Community Higher Education Service Partnership Programme (CHESP) and Joint Education Trust (JET) (Erasmus, 2007). With only eight SL modules in the early 1990s (Fourie, 2003), currently there are 60 modules in various disciplines across faculties in the university (UFS, 2016).

Table 1: SL Modules across the university in 2016

Faculty	No of SL modules
Economic and Management Sciences	5
Education	2
Humanities	14
Health Sciences	23
Law	3
Natural & Agriculture Sciences	8
Theology	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>

Despite the increased number of SL modules, very little is known about whether, or how SL benefits accrue to all actors involved, namely staff, students and community members particularly in relation to capabilities and HD values. There is also a need to develop a more nuanced, inclusive and expanded conception of SL because the current conceptualisation does not take sufficient account of multidimensionality of SL and broader human development values of SL.

### SL within the Transformation agenda

The White Paper of 1997 outlined a number of purposes of higher education. Recently reiterated in the White Paper of 2013, the purposes that specifically resonate with SL include:

- To demonstrate social responsibility of universities and their commitment to the common good, by making available their expertise and infrastructure for community service
- To promote and develop, among students, an awareness of and social responsibility for higher education's role – through community service programmes – in social and economic development.
- To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens.

These policy imperatives capture the potential contribution higher education institutions can make to individuals and broader society through educational practices such as SL.

At the UFS, SL policy is aligned with these purposes of higher education. Policy priorities related to SL at the UFS can be seen from institutional strategic frameworks, namely the SL policy of 2006 and strategic plan of 2012-2016. These include:

- Quest for an excellent, equitable and innovative university.
- Making a significant contribution to the development of its province and also that of its wider region, South Africa and Africa.
- Increasing democratic and diverse participation aimed at eradicating inequalities.
- Greater responsiveness to a range of social and economic challenges and commitment to solutions which might require adaptation in terms of research, teaching, learning and curricula.

- Increase co-operation and partnerships with all role-players in society (the community, as well as the public and private sectors).
- Students learning the value of public service through both their formal degree studies such as the various service learning programmes.

Thus, we might conclude that SL at the UFS is positioned within a human development framing. However, limited evidence is available to assess the extent to which SL in practice advances such goals.

## **Methodology**

Multiple sources of data were gathered, including: review of institutional documentations such as the Strategic Plan, SL reports, student reflections and SL module descriptions; interviews with 4 SL administrators, 16 staff and 10 community members; one focus group with 12 community members as well as five focus groups with 60 students from the School of Nursing and Faculty of Humanities.

## **Key findings**

### **1. Generic soft skills**

Across all three sets of data, the generic soft skills developed by students in and through SL included communication skills, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, time management skills, listening skills, team work, report writing skills, respect for diversity, problem solving skills, and analytical skills.

Considering the importance of these soft skills for employability and social life, it is fundamentally important for SL design and implementation to incorporate them as an ultimate goals of SL design, implementation and outcomes.

### **2. Capabilities formation**

From the institutional perspective, the data showed that SL is positioned as a vehicle through which public good professional capabilities and citizenship capacities as espoused by Walker and McLean (2013) can be cultivated. SL is viewed as a pedagogy that can foster capabilities of critical examination, narrative imagination and global citizenship, affiliation among students and between students and community members.

The student focus groups and reflections pointed to the centrality of multiple affiliations, empathy, critical thinking, narrative imagination, self-examination, local citizenship, emotional reflexivity, recognition of power and privilege, informed vision, social and collective struggle, capability of learning, knowledge, and skills as the main capabilities mentioned by students.

From the interviews and focus group with community members, capabilities developed or valued included affiliation between community members and students, students' narrative imagination and local citizenship, and community members' capacity to learn, gain and use knowledge and skills.

In spite of the abovementioned capabilities being valued and/or potentially developed by SL partners, a critical analysis of the data indicated that these capabilities are not outlined and given attention in SL policy, modules as well as practice. Three reasons appear to explain this: (1) the narrow conception of SL, (2) an overemphasis on utilising SL mainly for credit academic purpose, and (3) the undermined and unexplored potential of SL as an enabler of capabilities.

### **3. Promotion of human development**

From the institutional perspective, SL is articulated within the values of empowerment, participation, agency and sustainability. It is also viewed as an important activity that fosters the capacity to aspire among community members. The data suggests that these human development values can be better promoted if the design and implementation of SL consider the importance of maintaining and ensuring human dignity.

Students recognise the value of community members participating in SL and creating their own empowering environments. SL also allows students to develop their agency and aspiration for contributing to future social change.

From the community members' perspective, SL can enhance their sense of empowerment and individual and collective agency, which are essential in developing capacities for self-direction, self-reliance and self-determination (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2010).

Although these values suggest that SL can foster the promotion of human development, the research also highlighted that often SL design and implementation does not take such a route. There is thus a need for an expanded version of SL that moves beyond the traditional way of understanding and practising SL.

### **4. SL tensions and conundrums**

Across all three sets of data, tensions and conundrums, which potentially act as barriers to the cultivation of capabilities, promotion of HD values and development of generic soft skills were identified. These included, among other things:

- a narrow conception of SL as an activity centred on students (for the purposes of academic credit),
- divergent interpretations of the notions of empowerment, participation and sustainability,
- the potential for paternalism when working with communities, particularly when SL takes place in contexts of extreme poverty and structural and systemic inequalities and power differential between SL partners.

### **Embedding affiliation and idea of partial justice in SL**

Affiliation (involves social relations, ability to live with and towards others, respect and equal valuing of differences (Walker, 2006; Nussbaum, 2003), emerged as an overriding capability valued by all SL partners involved in this study. This capability was seen to be important in enabling the development of other capabilities and in ensuring that SL partners are bound together by ties of recognition, concern and respect.

Also important was the idea of partial (or incomplete) justice, which focuses on removing remediable injustices, even when complete or ideal justice is not attainable. Identifying remediable injustices emerged as a potential way of understanding what is and/not possible in and through SL. This calls for SL partners to identify remediable injustices that surround us, and then to design SL courses accordingly.

### **SL from the HD and CA perspective**

When SL is approached from a HD and CA perspective, it should:

- Be conceptualised and framed as an activity geared towards capabilities enhancement and promotion of human development.
- Be a lever to advance a social justice agenda within and beyond the university.
- Lead to empowerment, which is about expanding and sustaining all human capabilities of all SL partners.
- Advance agency in terms of advancing individuals and groups' abilities to bring about change inside and outside the university.
- Lead to creating an environment through which all people can expand and sustain opportunities for both present and future generations.
- Enable students, staff and community members who are part of SL to actively participate in activities that affect their beings and doings.
- Enhance individuals and group aspirations to do and be what they value in their lives.
- Embed the approach to partnership within the capability for affiliation.
- Ensure that the design and implementation is geared towards achieving equitable outcomes.
- Take into account the idea of partial justice in order to encourage actionable and small change that SL can yield for all partners involved.

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