

Supporting academic staff as champions of service learning

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Abstract

Over the past five years or more, the innovative, challenging educational approach of service learning has been introduced at an ever-increasing number of South African higher education institutions. In this article, the focus will be on the gap that exists between the rhetoric of a renewed focus on community engagement (and service learning in particular) and the reality of staff members' perceptions in respect of the lack of substantial support for their efforts. The distinction made by KerryAnn O'Meara (2003) between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for staff to engage in service learning will set the stage for the discussion. In addition, O'Meara's suggested reframing of incentives and rewards from different vantage points (i.e. the structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames) will form the basis for the evaluation of data acquired through a service learning staff survey conducted at the University of the Free State (UFS). This institutional example will illustrate how the UFS has only recently taken the first steps on the road towards equitable recognition for staff involved in service learning.

Key words and phrases: staff members involved in service learning; intrinsic motivators; extrinsic motivators; resources; staff support; recognition and rewards

Introduction

An increasing number of higher education institutions in South Africa regard the community-based experiential pedagogy of service learning as a valuable form of community engagement which actively involves higher education staff, students and a variety of stakeholders in society. The growing support largely came about as a result of the national CHESP¹ initiative of the Joint Education Trust (which later became the JET Education Services section of the Trust). CHESP's strong links to donor organisations and higher education institutions of the USA naturally resulted in the introduction into the South African agenda of service learning (also referred to as 'academic service learning', 'community service-learning' or 'Service-Learning') as a well-established mechanism for integrating service with the learning programmes of students.

In the South Africa context, there has been a renewed focus on community engagement (initially referred to as 'community service') as a core function of higher education over the past ten years. Community engagement has been heralded as a key element in the transformation of higher education institutions, and as a manifestation of their responsiveness and social responsibility.

¹ The Community – Higher Education – Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative was launched in 1999 in partnership with the Ford Foundation and the WK Kellogg Foundation (cf.). CHESP has since supported a number of groundbreaking initiatives, including a leadership development programme; the development of service learning modules at various institutions; research projects; a capacity building programme for academic staff; conferences; and publications.

However, it is debatable whether the reality of current higher education engagement practices in any way matches up to the rhetoric in this regard. As Michael Gibbons (2006) suggests, it would in fact be necessary to entrench community engagement not just as a 'core function' but indeed as a 'core value' of higher education in order for these institutions to participate effectively in the production of knowledge that is aimed at addressing the most urgent challenges of society. In cases where community engagement came into its own as a core value in this regard, profound changes to the way institutions conduct their business would become evident.

One of the key changes that has to be effected concerns the contextualisation of curricula within conditions that are conducive to the production of what Gibbons (2006: 8-11) refers to as 'socially robust' knowledge (i.e. knowledge tested for reliability in a variety of application contexts). As I have argued before (Erasmus 2007), contextualisation of the curriculum through the introduction of service learning provides students with opportunities to participate in knowledge production within transaction spaces where such contextualisation takes place. Through these experiences, students should become better prepared to take up the responsibility of becoming co-producers of reliable knowledge that serves the public good. This, however, requires that lecturers act as role-models and take the lead in 'transgressing' the borders between what many academics still regard as 'sacred' versus 'profane' knowledge, as McMillan (2002) suggests. The question is: What support and recognition do these knowledge-workers at the frontiers receive from their institutions?

I believe that the firm establishment of community engagement as a core value, specifically through the introduction of community-based service learning as a component of learning programmes, is strongly dependent on the proper support of staff as the champions of service learning – champions who work not only at the chalkboard, but also at the coalface most of the time. In this regard, I want to add my voice to that of Pribbenow (2005: 35), by stating that my focus in this article on staff members engaged in service learning is meant to find resonance with those committed to gaining a better understanding of staff – one of higher education's most important resources – and to supporting them. Regarding those staff members who dare to venture into the – for South Africa - uncharted waters of service learning (i.e. a manifestation of social responsibility as required by government and society), higher education institutions need to reciprocate by finding appropriate ways to support and encourage them in their efforts.

The challenge: Bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality

What has become apparent over the past seven years since the introduction of service learning into the South African higher education system is the strong perception among staff engaged in this educational approach that there is limited understanding, very little support and even less recognition or reward for their efforts. It has become evident by now that service learning is not just another 'fad' (as a senior UFS academic described it some time ago) in the guise of transformation, but that it is here to stay. **The challenge now is to establish how higher education systems could better support the engagement of staff in service learning.** To find broad national directions in this regard, one need not look any further than the sound suggestions put forward in publications of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC).

The HEQC's quality management requirements for service learning, as outlined under **Criterion 7** of the *Criteria for Institutional Audits* (HEQC 2004: 11), firstly mention the need to integrate

service learning into institutional and academic planning. The second bullet under Criterion 7 specifies the following elements as minimum requirements:

- **Adequate** resources² and **enabling mechanisms** (including **incentives**) to **support** the implementation of service learning, including staff and student **capacity development**. (My emphasis)

It is significant that 'enabling mechanisms' in support of implementation are directly linked to incentives and capacity development, for both staff and students.

More recently the HEQC, in collaboration with the above-mentioned CHESP initiative of JET Education Services, developed *The Good Practice Guide and Self-evaluation Instruments for Management of the Quality of Service-Learning* (CHE/HEQC-JET/CHESP, June 2006). **Indicator 7** of the self-evaluation instrument at institutional level stipulates that there should be '**adequate institutional support** for the development and implementation of service-learning'. The following ideal arrangements (complete with reflective questions and suggested examples of evidence) specified under this indicator explicitly refer to forms of support for staff members:

7.1 There is **adequate** service-learning **capacity building and development** for staff (p. 41)

7.4 There is **institutional recognition for excellence and innovation** with regard to service-learning for staff, students and external partners (p. 42) (my emphasis in both cases)

However, at this stage it is not at all clear what could or should be regarded as 'adequate' resources, support and recognition in an environment where so many worthwhile causes are vying for a 'slice' of a higher education 'cake' that has recently begun to show signs of shrinking. It has also not yet been established exactly what measures are to be employed to assess 'excellence and innovation' in service learning. A study of the literature reveals that even after several years of embracing this pedagogy, institutions in the USA still find it challenging to work out a fair deal in this regard. One aggravating factor lies in the complexity inherent in the nature of community-oriented academic work such as that required by service learning. According to O'Meara (2003: 205), many who have studied various forms of outreach and who have published their findings have pointed to the difficulty in measuring the myriad number of outcomes that result from participatory action research and community-university partnerships.

In order for an institution to address the above challenges regarding support and recognition for staff engaged in service learning, it is necessary to begin with a baseline study in the form of a systematic inquiry into the opinions, job satisfaction levels and expectations of these staff members. For obvious reasons, this should only be the beginning of a participatory change management process in the form of, for example, an organisational action research process that is well-integrated with other change management initiatives on campus. For the purposes of co-ordinating the various issues that need to be addressed in such a process, an illuminating, suitable theoretical framework has to be found.

² A personal observation from working in the field is that many South African institutions still fail to acknowledge that "adequate resources" are a precondition for the implementation of service learning as a pedagogical approach, and that such resources obviously require additional, earmarked funding.

A theoretical framework for the investigation

In the USA, considerable attention has been given to aspects relating to support, recognition and rewards for faculty members engaged in service learning. Compelling arguments for such support and suggestions as to how this could be approached are to be found, among others, in Berndt (1996); Coles (2005); Driscoll, Sandmann and Rosaen (2001); Gelmon and Agre-Kippenhan (2002); Stacey and Foreman (2005); and Ward (2005). However, merely transplanting any of these ideas, frameworks or models into the South African situation would not be feasible – the strategic objectives, realities and limitations of any given institution will determine the road to be followed in this regard.

For the University of the Free State, the journey on this ‘road less travelled’ (by South African institutions) officially started during the second half of 2006, when some of us resolved to establish what the staff satisfaction levels regarding service learning actually were. Subsequently, a survey instrument was developed to enable us to gauge the opinions, attitudes, satisfaction levels and expectations of staff involved in service learning. The actual survey was conducted during February of 2007. To assist me to make sense of the data that had been collected, O’Meara’s (2003) (re-)framing of the issues at hand presented itself as a concise, but at the same time comprehensive framework for a critical evaluation of the information. A point of departure of the framework – to which I wholeheartedly subscribe – is that **staff members have to be supported both as persons and as professionals**.

O’Meara’s framework points to the importance of starting off by identifying the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that motivate staff to engage in service learning and, in addition, retain their commitment over time. In the following outline, I shall select from O’Meara’s article those aspects that I regard as being of particular relevance for the UFS situation. My choices will be based on what I have learned through close collaboration with true champions of service learning over a six-year period.

Extrinsic factors refer to the environment and conditions in which the work is done, including (1) **reward systems** (i.e. incentive grants; recognition in the form of awards; promotion criteria that include service learning; and performance management systems that recognise service learning as scholarship); (2) **workload** (e.g. time-release, stipends and workload flexibility); and (3) **working conditions**, including assistance with some of the logistical and administrative aspects of the work.

Intrinsic motivational factors pertain to the nature of the work and how it affects the staff member personally. Such factors include (1) **freedom and autonomy** in teaching (i.e. having the necessary confidence and feeling competent to do the work); (2) **intellectual exchange** in the form of discussions on service learning pedagogy and research, with opportunities for support and mentoring between staff; and (3) **impact on students and external partners**³(assistance in gathering such evidence).

³ Although O’Meara only refers to the impact on students in this article, it was clear from the survey that UFS staff members are also very much concerned about the impact on community members.

To provide a framework for understanding organisational behaviour in terms of its impact on service learning, O'Meara (2003: 209–214) suggests that the following table be utilised:

Table 1. Reframing of support, incentives and rewards for service learning (adapted from O'Meara, 2003: 209-210)

<p>Framing questions</p> <p>The structural frame (i.e. how well structures fit in with goals, priorities and environment)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well is service learning integrated with other aspects of the staff member's role? • How well does the service learning experience support the learning outcomes of the module? • To what extent does the institutional environment allow for flexibility in workload? • How does the institution recognise service learning as scholarship? <p>The human resource frame (i.e. whether people's needs are being met)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dostaff have sufficient training to experience autonomy and be successful in service learning? • Are there support services to assist with logistics and administration? • Do staff members find the work meaningful and rewarding? • How can involvement in service learning be used to advance, rather than detract from, the pursuit of promotion and other forms of recognition? <p>The political frame (i.e. how individuals negotiate to obtain scarce resources)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the institutional commitment to service learning made clear and public? • Are there adequate resources to support staff involvement in service learning? • Are service learning success stories marketed and publicised? • How can networks and coalitions be formed to advance the service learning agenda? <p>The symbolic frame (concerned with organisational values and how people make meaning of experiences)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does service learning comprise part of the institution's identity and benchmarking? • How does service learning connect with staff members' own personal mission and values? • What symbols, rituals, ceremonies and opportunities for celebration are in place in order to draw people to the efforts and make them feel that they are connected to something of significance? 	<p>Support, incentives and rewards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to write and publish articles on the experience. • Assistance with the documentation of service learning as a form of teaching scholarship. • Assessment that demonstrates increased learning outcomes when service learning is utilised. • Reduced workload for service learning staff, especially during first implementation. • The embedding of service learning in the structures and organisation of the institution that support the various forms of scholarship. • Investing in staff training and enrichment pertaining to service learning. • The provision of support services to assist staff involved in service learning. • Opportunities are provided to assess learning outcomes and reflect with staff on what the experience has accomplished. • Mentoring between staff members for additional support in attaching meaning to experiences. • Letters to department chairs and personnel committees for promotion, and commendation of staff members. • Equitable inclusion of service learning in the performance management system. • Mission statements; speeches by academic leaders to staff. • Reports and articles in campus and other publications. • Public commendation of service learning by deans/department chairs during meetings. • Stipends, release-time for module development, professional development funds. • University committees and task teams. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting service to institutional values, history and benchmarking. • Understanding and connecting personal values of staff members to the work. • Creating discourse communities around service learning. • Providing opportunities for staff, students, the service sector and community members to get to know each other better. • Award ceremonies, annual celebrations. • Open activities for sharing by family members of staff.
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The above framework and organising principles were utilised for the purposes of finding a structure within which a critical inquiry into the UFS case study can be conducted.

The inquiry: Institutional context

The University of the Free State has openly and publicly committed itself to the integration of community service into academic programmes and curricula⁴. In order to achieve such integration, priority is given to the development and implementation of service learning modules. Thus, section 4.2.1 of the UFS Community Service Policy (2006) unequivocally states that “the inclusion of compulsory community service learning modules in all academic programmes (at least one per programme) is a policy priority and will be propagated accordingly”. Specific reference is made in the policy to the ‘proven record’ of service learning as an educational approach that leads, through reflection, to “a deeper understanding of the linkage between curriculum content and community dynamics, as well as the achievement of personal growth and a sense of social responsibility within staff and students involved”. Thus, the policy clearly states the broad range of benefits, as envisaged by the UFS, which will be pursued by means of this approach.

By February 2007, at the time when the data were collected, 34 service learning modules had been registered. A more recent survey indicated that an additional 16 modules have been registered for implementation during 2008, bringing the total to 50. In view of this growth, it is clear that the need to take the service learning staff component seriously is becoming even more urgent than before. Of particular relevance, therefore, is section 4.3 of the Community Service Policy (UFS 2006), which provides an outline of strategies to be followed in terms of support for and recognition of staff involved in community service. Here, specific reference is made to the integration of “appropriate recognition of and credit for involvement of staff in community service in the performance management system”, making provision for an individually negotiated weighting for such involvement, and the facilitation of staff development and capacity building for (academically) ‘integrated community service’ (such as service learning). In this way, the UFS acknowledges that achieving staff participation is one of the most challenging aspects of the institutionalisation of service learning, and that staff recruitment has to be followed by efforts to sustain the staff’s involvement, as Bringle and Hatcher (2000) point out.

Other aspects of the institutionalisation of service learning at the UFS are at various stages of development. Recently the contentious issue of ‘adequate resources’ (as mentioned under 2. above) has taken a giant step forward. While a more or less *ad hoc* funding regime was previously in place, funds for service learning modules to be implemented during 2008 were officially included in the budgeting process of faculties towards the central budget (as per the requirements of sections 4.5.5 and 4.5.6 of the Community Service Policy). The availability of human resources, in the form of dedicated community service coordinators in four of the five faculties, means that considerable administrative support is now available to staff offering service learning modules.

An incentive (for me personally) to focus renewed attention on the matter of support and recognition for staff is the following: The UFS was subjected to an institutional audit⁵ by the Higher Education

⁴ Cf. www.ufs.ac.za/communityservice for information in this regard.

⁵ Section 7 of the Audit Report of the UFS, “Quality arrangements for community service”, is available at www.ufs.ac.za/servicelearning.

Quality Committee (HEQC) in October 2006. The Audit Panel of the HEQC commended the University for its continued commitment and initiatives to establish community engagement as a credible core function, specifically mentioning the focus on reconceptualising its activities in this area from a community service perspective to a community service learning and research perspective – in an attempt to link the core functions in a cycle in which they inform each other. The fact is that service learning constitutes a major element in these efforts of the University, and therefore the following statement by the Panel has particular relevance here: “In its interaction with UFS staff at various levels and the external stakeholders, the Panel was struck by the staff’s general commitment (...)”.

In my opinion, the challenge facing the UFS is to retain and continuously strengthen this commitment of staff, hence the present investigation into the attitudes, satisfaction levels and expectations of staff members who are currently engaged in service learning, either as lecturers offering a module or as faculty coordinators of service learning and other community service activities.

The survey⁶: Design and methodology

As a first step in determining how staff members involved in service learning need to be supported, an instrument was developed, in the form of a self-administered survey questionnaire for staff. It included closed (Likert scale-type) questions to establish tendencies, as well as open-ended questions aimed at eliciting more detailed responses from the participants. The sections containing closed questions were loosely based on an instrument used by the Evaluation Research Agency during the service learning module development phase of the CHESP initiative⁷. Several open-ended questions were included, based on remarks often heard on campus which until now had only enjoyed anecdotal status. The questionnaire did not include a definition of service learning, since it was assumed that all respondents, as staff members of the UFS, would understand the concepts to mean –

an educational approach involving curriculum-based, credit-bearing learning experiences in which students (a) participate in contextualised, well-structured and organised service activities aimed at addressing identified service needs in a community, and (b) reflect on the service experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the linkage between curriculum content and community dynamics, as well as achieve personal growth and a sense of social responsibility (...)⁸.

The questionnaire was structured to determine the following:

- a) a profile of the respondents;
- b) personal sources of motivation and pride (open-ended questions);
- c) their attitudes regarding the (perceived) benefits and challenges of service learning for themselves, students and partners – both community and service sector (closed questions);

⁶ I wish to acknowledge the time and effort that a former colleague, Nicolene du Toit, put into this survey, which constituted the initial stages of an MA study in Higher Education Studies, under my supervision. She has since moved to greener pastures in a new workplace and has decided to discontinue the study.

⁷ Cf. Mouton and Wildschut (2005) for more information on the research.

⁸ This is the official UFS definition of service learning which forms part of the Community Service Policy (2006).

- d) their opinions regarding the concerns, challenges and deterring factors inherent in service learning (open-ended questions);
- e) their job satisfaction levels regarding service learning (closed questions);
- f) their expectations regarding the way in which service learning should be accommodated at the UFS and recommendations in this regard; and
- g) what they consider to be their own responsibility in promoting service learning.

An evaluation of the questionnaire itself rounded off the instrument.

Responses to closed questions included could be indicated on a five-point Likert scale, but were not intended to provide a basis for an exact measurement of attitudes for the purposes of inferential statistical analysis. The aim of these questions was to establish broad trends within this qualitative study, which was undertaken mainly to inform action in a future organisational development process.

During 2006 a pilot test was conducted by distributing the questionnaire among those staff members with at least three years of experience in service learning, who also served on the community service portfolio committees in the various faculties. The questionnaire was adapted on the basis of the contributions and recommendations of this group of respondents, after which it was distributed to all other staff members (in an effort to achieve comprehensive sampling) who would be involved in service learning modules, at either under- or postgraduate level, during 2007. Not all the respondents are academic staff members – three of them are community service coordinators in their faculties. However, one of the coordinators also offers a service learning module in collaboration with another staff member, and thus occupies a ‘hybrid’ position, as several of us do. After intensive lobbying, 26 out of a possible 36 staff members completed the questionnaire (n = 26).

Once the questionnaires had been completed, the data were analysed and a survey report was compiled with the assistance of a data-analysis agency (www.screendeep.co.za). The survey report was disseminated to members of the institutional Service Learning Committee for discussion at meetings of the community service portfolio committees in the faculties. The respondents who participated in the survey will be invited to a follow-up group discussion that will form part of an action research process during which remedial strategies will be worked out to fill the current gaps that exist in terms of staff support and recognition. On the basis of the findings, a plan of action will be developed, along experiential learning and action research lines – plan, act, observe, reflect, review – making it possible to engage in a participatory process in a true service learning spirit. The intention is that the same instrument should be administered at regular intervals in future, in order to gauge progress.

Owing to limited space, what follows will not comprise a full report on, and interpretation of, the results. What I regard as the most prominent and noteworthy aspects will be selected; and hopefully, those who have an interest in the promotion of service learning may find the discussion useful. Full reporting will be undertaken during the dissemination of feedback to the respondents, who will have to become full participants in the change management process which should follow.

The results of the survey

Staff profile, motivators, and deterrents

Since this survey was the first of its kind undertaken at the University, the intention was only to establish general trends regarding the way in which staff members involved in service learning currently perceive their situation. In future, it might be necessary to conduct a more focused and diversified investigation. For the purposes of this article, I have also decided not to analyse the data according to a variable such as ‘faculty’, since doing so might jeopardise the anonymity of participants in faculties where very few staff members offer service learning modules. The following is a profile of the respondents, with percentages given as approximate values.

Of the staff members who participated in the survey, more were female (65%) than male (35%), in keeping with a general trend that has been noticed in South Africa. In line with the language composition of UFS staff, the home language of most respondents is Afrikaans (65%), followed by English (23%); while Sesotho, isiXhosa and Setswana comprise the home language of one respondent each. Most gave their age group as ‘under 60’ (35%), followed by ‘under 50’ (27%), ‘under 40’ (23%) and ‘under 30’ (12%). One person fell into the ‘under 70’ category. The six faculties respectively account for the following number of service learning modules: Health Sciences (11); Humanities (6); Natural and Agricultural Sciences (3); Theology (3); Economic and Management Sciences (2); and Law (1). As community service coordinators, two of the respondents do not offer their own modules, but are indeed fully ‘engaged’ in service learning.

The section of the questionnaire that is aimed at gauging the attitudes of staff members opens with the question: “What sources of motivation are there for you to engage in CSL⁹?” (Q13). Many of the responses fall under **intrinsic motivators**, particularly the belief that service learning has a positive impact on students, such as the practical application of theoretical knowledge in solving real-life problems, as well as an awareness of responsibility towards communities. Attitudes of respondents regarding benefits for students are clearly reflected in the following quotations:

It is an effective pedagogy. It facilitates holistic student development.

[I] realise that knowledge of the world will be acquired in the world and not in a closet.

Staff members are also motivated by ‘seeing the needs in the community’, in the hope or conviction that service learning can benefit the community and lead to their ‘upliftment’¹⁰. Other motivators include certain **extrinsic factors**: awareness of similar international trends; ‘pressure from top management’; a desire to participate in transformation in education; commitment to projecting the image of the University; UFS leadership; funding support and encouragement.

The next question was meant to elicit even more personal responses: “What are you most proud of regarding your work in CSL?” The most prominent aspects mentioned related to the sense of achievement that staff experienced as a result of the realisation that they were able to integrate theory and practice in a meaningful way, thus enhancing student development (e.g. critical thinking,

⁹ CSL = Community Service Learning. In the course of 2007, “service learning” became the preferred term used at the UFS.

¹⁰ The fact that several staff members used terms such as “needs” and “upliftment” shows that they still have a “deficit” approach to community engagement, as opposed to the asset-based approach that we are trying to encourage at the UFS.

a sense of social responsibility, team work), while also contributing to service delivery, community development and empowerment. The opportunity that was afforded them to work cooperatively with staff from other departments – ‘very rare at the UFS’ – was also singled out. Some respondents expressed a sense of excitement in respect of the high levels of innovation and change stimulated by the service learning approach:

Lots of new knowledge and new plans to achieve academic outcomes. People get involved.

Forces all involved to break out of comfort zones. Helps student and academic staff challenge inherent perceptions and attitudes about ‘others’.

Staff members also felt proud when they realised that they were able to show true commitment, build relationships, facilitate a process whereby communities take ownership, and in one instance, advance his/her own research agenda through the service learning experience.

Closed questions aimed at eliciting attitudinal responses, confirmed that most staff members have a strong belief in the positive outcomes of service learning. Approximations of the most significant scores, on a five-point Likert scale, are given below. Abbreviations used are as follows: Strongly disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Agree (A), Strongly agree (SA) and Not sure (NS).

Items relating to personal aspects (Q15.1) included the following:

Doing CSL is consistent with my personal philosophy – SA (85%); A (15%)

Doing CSL is consistent with my teaching philosophy – SA (62%); A (31%); SA (8%)

CSL helped me to understand my professional strengths and weaknesses – SA (62%); A (27%)

Participation in CSL is an important aspect of my professional portfolio – SA (62%); A (31%)

CSL enhances the relevance of my personal research focus – SA (54%); A (19%); D (15%)

CSL allows me to participate in and/or support community service – SA (62%); A (27%)

A statement that was deliberately worded in the negative, elicited the following response:

CSL is not a sound academic pedagogy – SD (42%); D (23%); A (19%); SA (12%)

Even though it is thus clear that a total of 65% of respondents believe that service learning is a sound pedagogy, it is significant that the responses to the statement: “Others will not think that it is academically sound” were mostly in the affirmative: A (50%); SA (19%); D (15%). This clearly indicates that many staff members still experience a lack of validation of their work by colleagues.

Aspects relating to the exceptionally positive effect that service learning has on students¹¹ (Q15.2), included the following:

CSL motivates students during their education – SA (52%); A (42%)

CSL brings greater relevance to resource material – SA (73%); A (27%)

CSL improves student satisfaction with their education – SA (46%); A (42%)

CSL encourages self-directed learning – SA (54%); A (38%)

CSL helps students see how the subject matter they learn in the classroom can be applied in everyday life – SA (88%); A (8%)

CSL helps prepare students for their careers – SA (65%); A (23%)

¹¹ Cf. Carmichael (2007) for well-substantiated South African evidence to corroborate this.

In my personal interactions with staff it often seems that extraordinary student learning and developmental outcomes provide the strongest motivation for staff; this is underscored by the overwhelmingly positive responses regarding benefits for students, and to a slightly lesser extent benefits for partners. In many instances this conclusion is based on results obtained through the evaluation instruments (pre- and post-implementation questionnaire and focus group protocols) that staff members who participated in the CHESP initiative were required to administer in terms of the grant agreements¹².

Items relating to attitudes regarding outcomes for the partners (i.e. communities and the service sector) elicited the following responses:

- CSL provides useful service in the community – SA (92%); A (8%)
- CSL gives community members a voice in addressing their needs – SA (38%); A (27%); D (23%)
- CSL contributes to community building – SA (62%); A (27%)
- CSL promotes the creation of university-community partnerships – SA (62%); A (27%)
- CSL assists the service sector with the rendering of services where shortages exist – A (38%); SA (31%); NS (19%)
- CSL creates opportunities for service sector staff to contribute to curriculum development – A (38%); SA (31%)
- CSL creates opportunities for service sector staff to contribute to professional development of students – A (46%); SA (12%); NS (12%)
- Students create extra work for service sector staff – D (27%); A (27%); SA (15%)

The following two sets of responses are a cause for concern and need to be addressed during the follow-up action research process that is foreseen for this investigation:

- CSL often leads to exploitation of communities – SA (42%); A (27%); D (23%)
- Student involvement creates community expectations that cannot be met – SA (54%); A (15%)
- Negative opinions about service learning-related matters mostly pertain to **extrinsic factors**. This tendency became clear in the responses to the question regarding sources of motivation (Q13):

Other than [the] stipulation that one has to offer a module, the UFS gives no motivation for participating.

None! After many years of blah blah blah I have not received any credit on the level of accredited publications!

The floodgates to a stream of frustrations were opened by the question: “What are the most important challenges that you experience regarding CSL?” (Q17). Responses mostly underscored the ‘most serious concerns’ highlighted under the previous set (Q16) of closed questions (i.e. workload and time constraints; availability of financial and human resources; recognition in terms of promotion and other incentives; the management of risks and liability; and communication with partners). In addition, some staff mentioned that they found it challenging to link disciplinary content with service learning activities, and that they were concerned about the longer-term sustainability of the impact on both students and communities.

¹² In this instance also cf. Wildschut and Mouton (2005) for more information about the CHESP programme evaluation research.

The answers to the following open question: "What do you believe to be the factor deterring academic staff from engaging in CSL?" (Q18), mostly confirmed that what these staff members considered to be challenging about the work would most probably also deter others from becoming involved. In addition, the following aspects were mentioned: Difficulties with operational issues; lack of understanding of service learning and the research possibilities that it holds; the 'publish or perish philosophy', which does not allow for fair consideration of engagement; resistance to change; ivory tower syndrome; the 'comfort zone'; and the lack of contact with communities.

The above data analysis has shown that there is a large gap between, on the one hand, the overwhelmingly positive opinions held by staff members regarding the benefits of service learning for students and external participants, and, on the other, the limited support and recognition that the staff currently receive for their commitment and efforts. In the next section, some of the most prominent findings will be interpreted and evaluated critically within O'Meara's framework for organisational support that has been outlined above (cf. section 3).

Reframing staff expectations as key organisational issues

The following section (Q19) of the questionnaire was designed to gauge the job satisfaction levels of staff in terms of the relevant stipulations of the UFS Community Service Policy (2006) and some of the indicators of the institutional self-evaluation instrument contained in *The Good Practice Guide and Self-evaluation Instruments for Management of the Quality of Service-Learning* (CHE/HEQC-JET/CHESP, June 2006). The set of closed questions was supplemented with open-ended questions aimed at a further probing of the specific expectations of staff regarding the way in which service learning should be accommodated at the UFS. In addition, staff members were explicitly requested to write down their recommendations for improvement; in this manner they were afforded an opportunity to contribute to finding solutions and also towards constructing a more equitable dispensation for service learning staff. A detailed analysis of these suggestions will be utilised for the purposes of mobilising staff for future action. In a further effort to encourage staff to find a balance between their expectations and the contributions they can make, they were asked to elaborate on what they see as their own responsibilities regarding the promotion of service learning (Q34).¹³

What follows is a brief overview of how the most important findings of the survey could be reframed in terms of institutional behaviour that impacts on staff support issues. I shall begin by referring to the **political frame**, since this has proved to be the main arena in which crucial negotiations pertaining to leadership support, the allocation of (scarce) resources and (academic) legitimacy have taken place at the UFS over the past five years.

It was encouraging to note that a majority of the respondents are convinced that there is institutional commitment in terms of the above. Most of them agreed fully with the following statements: that service learning is consistent with the mission and vision of the UFS (Q19.1); that it has been integrated into the core functions (Q19.2); and that it forms part of the strategic plan of the institution (Q19.3). A key issue that has surfaced in leadership circles in the past is that of whether

¹³ I find it difficult to consider any of the staff responses objectively. However, when they were required to put forward ideas about the contributions they could make toward the promotion of service learning, they seemed a little less enthusiastic than when making suggestions for institutional action

or not service learning could be regarded as a strategic priority for the UFS – which may be interpreted to mean: whether or not strategic funding will be made available in the long run. In my opinion, the sustained allocation of adequate financial and human resources could be regarded as the litmus test for the institutionalisation of service learning. While this issue has, to a large extent, been addressed at the UFS, the staff members who participated in the survey indicated that there is still much room for improvement regarding the allocation of stipends, time-release for module development and earmarked funding for participation in service learning conferences.

Another ‘political’ issue that needs to receive further focused attention is the question of whether service learning could be regarded as an academically sound pedagogy (cf., e.g., section 6 above) and how it could be embedded within the scholarship agenda of the UFS. A recent change in this area was the significant removal of service learning from the Chief Directorate: Community Service and its establishment in its rightful ‘academic space’ as the Service Learning Division¹⁴ within the Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development (CHESD). In future, networks and coalitions should be formed, as O’Meara suggests, with the specific purpose of furthering the service learning agenda, especially with regard to service learning as a unique way of combining the scholarships of teaching, discovery and engagement.

The **structural frame** is concerned with matters pertaining to the level of support that staff are receiving from the management structures in faculties. At the UFS, each faculty has a Portfolio Committee: Community Service. During the second half of 2007, a Service Learning Committee was officially constituted as part of the institutional portfolio committee structures for teaching and research. In this manner, the status of service learning has been affirmed, further strengthening its integration into the academic fibre of the UFS. In addition, special opportunities to conduct and publish research will have to be created through dedicated support and encouragement.¹⁵

One of the strongest concerns and/or deterrents that were mentioned by respondents is the fact that service learning is so much more labour-intensive, and requires so much more time, than other forms of teaching, thus further increasing their already heavy workloads. Lecturers also find it difficult to fit in enough time and space within the service learning curriculum development process to include contributions of the various external partners and students in a meaningful way. Support is thus needed to negotiate workload reduction and time-release, especially in respect of the development of new modules and the pilot implementation phase. More assistance from colleagues could also alleviate problems relating to time constraints; and staff could be encouraged to develop service learning modules for post-graduate students, during which these students could act as facilitators for undergraduate service learning activities. At the UFS, resourceful staff members have already started to experiment with this course of action, and are seeing the multiple benefits it holds.

Within the **human resource frame**, questions are asked to establish whether people’s needs are being met, specifically with regard to training and development; administrative support and assistance; the performance management system of the institution; as well as promotion, incentives and other forms of recognition for the work performed.

¹⁴ Cf. the following website www.ufs.ac.za/servicelearning.

¹⁵ Examples of how such opportunities can be created are found in special issues of accredited journals dedicated to service learning, e.g. Bringle and Erasmus (2005) and this issue of *Education as Change*.

Staff responses concerning the availability of development programmes (Q23) and accredited training (Q25) to equip them with knowledge regarding service learning curriculum development were very positive in the case of those who had completed the Service Learning module (code: HOS 717) which forms part of the MA programme in Higher Education Studies that is offered by CHESD¹⁶. Since only eight of the respondents had completed this module at that point in time (cf. Q11), there was clearly room for improvement. In addition, some staff members mentioned a need for ongoing staff development, which will definitely be attended to in future in collaboration with the Staff Development Division of CHESD.

Even though dedicated management and support structures, which are described by some respondents as satisfactory, have been made available at institutional and faculty level, the following response (to Q20.1) indicates that support is not provided to the same degree in the various faculties:

I feel a lot of effort is [made] to inform staff of the benefits of CSL and to get them excited and committed, but once they are on board, they are mostly left to run with CSL on their own and the set/promised support structures are not being provided continually.

More effective support at the institutional level will hopefully help to alleviate this problem.

Another major cause of dissatisfaction, which in some cases has virtually resulted in a sense of being exploited by the University, lies in the fact that staff members currently do not see incentives, recognition and rewards – especially not in the form of possibilities for promotion – coming their way. The challenge in addressing these burning issues lies in the fact that staff, including myself, need to understand that merely being involved in service learning does not warrant special treatment, however admirable our efforts might be. What is required is that we produce evidence of good practice, innovation and especially scholarship, as I have argued elsewhere (cf. Erasmus – under review). Two of the critical questions that we need to ask ourselves are: How can we collect and present convincing evidence of excellence for the purposes of negotiating promotion and other forms of recognition for ourselves? How do we lobby those colleagues who matter and who still need to be convinced of the value of the work?

In some faculties, progress has been made in the sense that service learning has recently been included in the promotion criteria; but guidelines as to how it should be assessed or weighed still have to be developed¹⁷. These guidelines need to form part of the integration of service learning in the new performance management system that is being phased in at the UFS¹⁸. It is envisaged that the inclusion of service learning is to be negotiated by those who are involved in it during 2008. The underlying assumption of this inclusion is that it is in the best interests of the staff member, the community and the institution if service learning is not treated as a stand-alone activity, but is rather integrated with other aspects of staff roles, such as teaching and research. In this I wish to concur with O'Meara (2003: 211) and many others, in stating that the quality of

¹⁶ Information available at www.ufs.ac.za/servicelearning.

¹⁷ Excellent examples of how institutions in the USA approach this issue, are the following: Zimmerman et al. (1996); Zlotkowski (2000); Driscoll et al. (2001); O'Meara (2001); and Gelmon & Agre-Kippenhan (2002).

¹⁸ Geyer and Huysamen (2007), who are spearheading this process at the UFS in a very efficient and supportive manner, utilise the change management model proposed by Kotter (1996).

service learning is always better if it is treated as a scholarly activity and if its impact is assessed in ways that can be documented for promotion and other forms of recognition. Admittedly, however, some staff members will need assistance with the systematic collection and convincing presentation of evidence.

Factors to be considered in terms of the **symbolic frame** of organisational behaviour, refer to the values of both the institution and individual staff members, and how people attach meaning to experiences when they are connected through symbols, rituals and ceremonies. At the UFS there clearly is a need for more sharing with colleagues, through the creation of discourse communities, interest groups and research teams, especially across disciplinary and faculty boundaries. In the past it has become clear that staff members benefit tremendously from the cohort effect created by organised opportunities to share service learning-related matters, and the way in which these opportunities link up with their personal mission and values. In future, special consideration should be given to service learning celebrations and special award ceremonies, during which the UFS leadership should again acknowledge, as they did in the past, that excellence and innovation in service learning comprise a proud part of the university's identity.

The above reframing of aspects relating to the support and recognition of staff engaged in service learning will be used as the basis for strategic planning regarding joint actions to be taken to address concerns that were raised, and also to strengthen what is already in place. Subsequently, longitudinal studies will be conducted to gauge the progress in terms of specific indicators as agreed on by the various stakeholders. To this end, organisational change management frameworks could be employed, such as those outlined by Kotter (1996) and Zuber-Skerritt (2001), or others already used at the institution.

Conclusion: Towards staff support as embodiment of reciprocity

To me, it was a worthwhile exercise to reframe the data acquired through the UFS staff survey in terms of O'Meara's proposed framework. Salient aspects that surfaced could be viewed from different vantage points; this enabled me to interpret the findings from a perspective of a truly participatory role for university staff members. With the results of the survey interpreted from this perspective, it remains for the UFS to negotiate, within a spirit of reciprocity, trust and cooperation, how staff could be assisted professionally and personally in their pursuit of excellence in service learning. We need to demarcate the parameters of what could be regarded as adequate enabling mechanisms and institutional support for those who wish to be engaged in service learning as champions of change, and, not only as requirements for an HEQC assessment of policy implementation.

Because service learning is a relatively new intervention in higher education in South Africa, its champions still bear the burden of proof with regard to its unique value and potential. Assuringly, more and more studies are providing convincing evidence that it is indeed a pedagogy that delivers an exceptionally high 'return on investment', as demonstrated, for example, by Carmichael (2007) with reference to the service learning module that she developed for the MBA programme of the University of the Witwatersrand. As I have argued elsewhere (Erasmus 2007), one of the unique features of service learning lies in the fact that it actively advances contextualisation of the curriculum by encouraging marginalised sections of society to speak back at academia. By endorsing the notion that all participants should have a full say in defining the outcomes of the engagement, and through its insistence on reciprocity and mutuality, service learning has the potential to invoke

a philosophy of caring and social justice, as Petersen (2007: 13) argues. In addition, the outcomes-based, more student-centred and community-oriented approaches encouraged by the service learning ethos are geared towards better preparing students to take up their social responsibility in society. It should be obvious to leaders and administrators that the tremendous paradigm shift inherent in this approach requires considerable resilience and commitment from those staff members who are willing to take the higher education transformation agenda forward through service learning. Institutions will have to work out how best to support them in this. On the other hand, staff members need to mobilise themselves in order to negotiate a fairer deal for those engaged in service learning. The onus on them is thus heavy and it could become a burden if their efforts are not strengthened by their work environment.

I am convinced that academic departments, faculties and institutions that are responsive when staff request adequate support and enabling mechanisms for their service learning work will reap manifold benefits. Those institutions that are convinced of the potential and value of service learning should resolve to work towards a dispensation – albeit somewhat utopian – in which staff members will be able to give the reason for their engagement in service learning, with full conviction, as did one UFS colleague, by stating: “*It is my job and I love it!*”

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