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Volume 18

Issue 7 *Collaboration in higher education:  
Partnering with students, colleagues and  
external stakeholders*

Article 05

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2021

## The doors of opportunity: How do community partners experience working as co-educators in a service-learning collaboration?

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### Recommended Citation

Walker, A., Mercer, J., & Freeman, L. (2021). The doors of opportunity: How do community partners experience working as co-educators in a service-learning collaboration?. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 18(7), 56-70. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.7.05>

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## The doors of opportunity: How do community partners experience working as co-educators in a service-learning collaboration?

### Abstract

This article explores the experiences of organisations participating as Community Partners (CPs) and co-educators in a service-learning module in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in South Wales, UK. It focuses on the opportunities and challenges faced by community organisations when working within the Service-learning (SL) model, and the relationship with the university and the students, including issues of expectation, assessment and identity. The partners provided SL placements of 30 hours or more in a range of community projects and organisations. These placements were intensely collaborative affairs. We researched the experiences of community partners to better understand the dynamics of the relationship; to better understand how to prepare community partners, HEIs and students; and to tease out how complex partnership projects like this one with multiple partners may be conducted successfully. A qualitative study was conducted. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Three main themes emerged from the data: Dynamic Tensions; For Each and Every One; and Broadening Horizons. The findings suggest that developing a transformation of the relationship is key to a strong and effective partnership. There needs to be active and dynamic collaboration between CPs and HEIs, including involvement in research projects like these, to better understand and navigate the pleasures and pains of successful cooperative relationships.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Service-learning requires a high level of collaboration between different organisations which can be challenging, when trying to meet the needs of all partners.
2. Effective collaboration requires commitment, flexibility and compromise.
3. Community Partners are an essential part of a service-learning collaboration and should be recognised as co-educators and included in planning and assessment.
4. Collaborative assessment has high validity but low reliability and clear guidance and support are needed to overcome the difference in understanding and approach of different Community Partners.
5. Organisational identity has an impact on the nature of collaboration.

### Keywords

Service-Learning, community partners, co-educators, community collaboration

## Introduction

Service-learning (SL) is an experiential pedagogy, a structured, collaborative learning experience that combines volunteering with explicit learning objectives and reflection. SL students are expected to provide community service, but also to learn from the community partner (CP) with which they are placed, about their roles as citizens, community issues and the symbiotic relationship between their experience and their academic coursework (Seifer, 1998).

SL is essentially a collaborative model of learning, which aims to benefit all: CPs, students and university. This collaborative practice results in individuals from many different organisations working separately and interdependently to address community issues that they would not be able to achieve working alone (Keyton et al., 2008). However, in the literature on CPs experiences from the U.S., it is often a problematic relationship which is not perceived as collaborative by the CPs themselves.

SL is a developing pedagogy in the United Kingdom. There is very little research focused on the CP perspective in the UK context and none in Wales. Wales is approximately a third of the size of London, the capital of the UK, and has the highest level of poverty of the four nations of the UK (JRF, 2017), so, insights into the opportunities and challenges of SL are assumed to not only benefit those directly involved in the SL partnership, but also wider society.

This research focuses on the experiences of CPs working with the department of Applied Psychology at a university in South Wales and explores how their experience of working within the SL model compares with the literature from the U.S. It also explores the role of the CP as co-educator, their role as community assessors, and the impact this has on the CPs perception of the SL collaboration.

## Literature review

In the literature from the U.S., there is evidence of a non-profit (third sector) identity, a strong sense of supporting the community and being willing to provide opportunities. Gibbon (2011) suggests that the third sector, though diverse, is identified by its caring nature. The sector aims to work toward an improved society through the provision of goods and services, inspired by the common good and underpinned by values such as solidarity, responsibility, dignity, justice, cooperation, democracy, inclusivity, sustainability, and accountability. The CPs saw SL as contributing to their mission in the short term, but also as an investment in the future of the third sector (Jettner et al., 2017) through the development of future leaders, workers and volunteers.

The benefits of community collaboration are many, but the main benefit of working with SL students is perceived to be their personal attributes and how their contribution can help the CP to meet their goals. SL students bring a sense of energy and an additional resource, which enables CPs to extend and enhance the quality of their services (Jettner et al., 2017) through collaborative working. They bring benefits to the service-users, by listening to them, engaging with them and making them feel valued (Deeley, 2005). They bring benefits to the staff of these organisations with new ideas and inputs.

Despite the positive contribution made, there are 'costs' to SL collaboration. Finding the time and resources to support students is challenging. A lack of professionalism, born of their youth and immaturity, can sometimes result in students' insensitivity to clients' experiences, unreliability, or

lack of commitment and motivation (Jettner et al., 2017; Karasik, 2020). Thus, whilst SL is valued, variability in commitment can make SL an unpredictable investment and demonstrates a need for better preparation and support by the Higher Education Institution (HEI). Too often, SL students are perceived as being sent out with little or no understanding of the CP's mission and aims (Gibson et al., 2020).

Good communication with the HEI is seen as critical for the development of a solid and constructive relationship essential for the success of SL collaboration. Typically, there is little or no communication with academic staff, and this is seen as a missed opportunity (Rinaldo et al., 2015; Steimel, 2013), and contributes to the CP's lack of information about the course needs and the HEI's lack of understanding of the CP's mission. HEIs are perceived as not preparing their students for what they encounter on placement or communicating the SL aims and outcomes either to the students or the CPs (Steimel, 2013). Importantly, course learning objectives do not always match with community needs (Steimel, 2013; Tinkler et al., 2014). This disconnect within the partnership is a significant challenge for the development of SL, and the development of trust within the relationship.

Thus, CPs often feel like they have little influence over the content or design of curricula. They see themselves as co-educators, providing support and guidance to SL students, deserving of respect (Van der Ryn and Wu, 2018), and wishing to be viewed as possessing valuable knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, this is often not the case (Wegemer et al., 2020) and so Cotton and Stanton (1990) recommend CP involvement in the planning, orientation, training, supervision and evaluation of SL. Working in close collaboration from the very beginning, with open and honest communication, appears key.

When relationships are sustained and communication is good, SL is viewed as having the potential to make a positive impact, with HEIs working with the community to develop community engaged-research, collaborative grant funding, initiating new partnerships and producing better community outcomes (Gibson et al., 2020). This is seen as leading to a better relationship generally, between the HEI and the community, and the students involved. Hopes for a long-term SL partnership are common, recognising the potential for these relationships to progress from transactional to transformative relationships (Jettner et al., 2017), moving the focus of the service from charity to social justice.

Whilst equal collaboration is key, the relationship between the academic team and the CP is often fragmented or non-existent. In the US, SL is institutionalised and as such there are teams of administrators in the SL office that interact with CPs. Generally, this approach was not considered useful by the CPs who would like stronger links with the academics and a better understanding of the needs of the academic programme (Rinaldo et al., 2015; Tinkler et al., 2014). When CPs are included in the partnership, including in research, it is often for their perspective on student learning, or the secondary benefits of SL to teachers and students. Thus, CPs' perceptions of their SL experiences have not been widely explored nor has much been written about how collaborative projects like these might be improved. This could be due to research being the domain of academia, and so the SL agenda is typically driven by academic concerns, not only about student learning but also about faculty perceptions of SL pedagogy (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019).

In the UK, the situation is different. All the research that has been published in the UK has come from academics taking on the SL mantle with a relatively small group of students. Therefore, it is the academics who form links with CPs. As this was the case in this study, it is vital to understand

how the CPs responded to this more intimate collaboration, and whether this approach would be able to overcome the difficulties in culture discussed by the US partners.

The aim of the study presented in this paper was to build on this literature review and explore CPs' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges of providing SL placements, their experiences of working within the SL model and teasing out how complex collaborative projects with multiple partners, may be conducted successfully. The value of this study comes from the fact that CPs' perspectives on the collaboration are less common in the SL literature (Tinkler et al., 2014), especially in relation to community-based assessment. Also, there is no previous research in the Welsh context.

## **Method and methodology**

This study took an idiographic approach. It explored the CPs perceptions of the opportunities and challenges of SL and their perceptions of its benefits for service users and the organisation itself. It aimed to collect a variety of perspectives and voices using semi-structured interviews. It particularly focused on the impact of the relationship with the HEI, assessment and organisational identity on the success of the collaboration.

### ***Context***

This research was conducted as part of a larger study which also included students' experiences of the SL module. The module was a recent addition to the undergraduate programme and so the aim of the research was to evaluate the efficacy of the SL model for the Welsh context and learn from the CPs how best to manage and develop the collaboration.

At the time of the study, the undergraduate Psychology programme in which the research was conducted, was working with 27 workers at 12 community organisations. 54 Students were enrolled and 11 staff taught on the module. Participants were recruited from a purposive sample of those organisations with the inclusion criteria that they must have supervised at least two SL students. Six eligible individuals responded to an email request for participants and were subsequently interviewed (see Table 1). All names are pseudonyms. Interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes at either their place of work, or on campus. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The procedure for the analysis followed the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clark (2006).

*Table 1: Participants and their community organisations*

Pseudonym	Type of organisation	Role within organisation	Types of volunteers
Sally	Project focused on educational mentoring with pupils in socially disadvantaged areas.	Volunteer Coordinator	Student volunteers
Chloe	Project focused on mentoring looked after children.	Volunteer Coordinator	Student volunteers
Amanda	Project aiming to encourage student participation in research.	Project Manager	Student volunteers
Usha	Community-based organisation aiming to overcome social exclusion through mentoring.	Director	International students and Community volunteers
Dylan	Community based recovery centre, focused on recovery from addiction.	Director	Members in recovery and Placement students
Cordelia	Community based triage service, working with offenders under the age of 18.	Education Officer	Community volunteers and Placement students

The term participant refers to the CP worker interviewed, and all named participants are CP workers. In this study, the term community is used not only to refer to a specific geographic area, but to communities of action, practice and circumstance. Sally, Usha and Amanda worked for projects that were based in specific geographical communities. Sally and Amanda also had a specific community of practice, secondary and Higher Education (HE) respectively. Usha had both communities of place and action, with a wider remit of increasing social cohesion in her area. Chloe, Dylan and Cordelia were focused on communities of circumstance, relating to looked after children, addiction and youth offending. None of the CPs had worked with the SL model before, although most of them had collaborated with HEIs through work placements and all had engaged with volunteers.

For the recruitment process, CPs wrote a role description which was advertised online, from the start of the Autumn term. Students submitted formal applications and each of the CPs chose whether to select at this stage, or to arrange recruitment interviews. All decisions on selection were made by the CPs, who knew that they were not committed to taking anyone they did not consider to be right for the role. The students could apply to multiple placements and if offered more than one, could choose which one to accept.

The assessment for the module was shared between the CP and the academic team. The CP based summative assessment focused on general employability skills relevant to Psychology which was worth 40% of the module grade (see Table 2). The academic assessment was a Critical Incident Report which was worth 60% of the module grade.

Table 2: Employability skills covered in the community-based assessment

Punctuality and Attendance	Attending required training, reliability.
Planning and organisation	Organises own time, plans events and meetings as appropriate
Communication	Verbal and written communication skills, can adapt speech and writing skills to the needs of others
Questioning	Uses questions to obtain information and for clarification, shows sensitivity in questioning
Listening	Uses verbal and non-verbal cues to encourage communication. Listens to instructions and follows guidance
Teamwork/working with others	Develops good working relationships with team members and service-users
Interpersonal sensitivity	Shows respect for others' views and opinions, deals well with disagreement or conflict
Organisational Sensitivity	Shows respect for the goals of the organisation. Is aware of the effect their behaviour may have on others
Initiative	Works well without supervision, makes suggestions and new ideas. Pitches in when needed
Organisational and Personal Targets	Meets the organisational target highlighted in the role description and personal learning objectives

## Findings

SL is a complex practice and the themes from the data represent the different challenges and opportunities that the CPs faced and how the collaboration with the HEI developed and grew. Three themes were identified. The first theme, *Dynamic Tensions*, focused on the challenges of fitting the SL model into the CPs' everyday work. The second theme, *For Each and Every One*, explored the concept of community and issues that arose from trying to meet the needs of everyone involved. The third theme, *Broadening Horizons*, focuses on the learning: for the SL students, the service-users and the organisations, and how CPs perceived that learning to have developed.

### **Theme one: Dynamic tensions**

SL needs the commitment and active collaboration of the HEI, student and CP in order to be successful. Each of these contributors has their own agenda and responsibilities and this can cause tensions within the collaboration. Participants all perceived challenges differently, and they ranged from the logistical to the methodological, depending on the nature and mission of the organisation. These tensions were dynamic as they differed for each collaboration and could change over time.

The difference between volunteers and service-learners was highlighted by all the participants.

Each student had to commit to a minimum of 30 hours on placement. Sally thought that the compulsory hours had had a positive impact on commitment and attendance, and it meant that she could rely on the SL students' attendance and so could plan more effectively:

*... we stopped using volunteers, because for mentoring it would have to be for a certain period of time in order to get something for those. Um, by using the volunteers as part of [this] module, they've got that commitment. (Sally, volunteer coordinator)*

But the completion of those hours was perceived by others to sometimes be the students' main focus, rather than a genuine interest in the work. Volunteers were perceived to be more altruistic in their motivation:

*... we have had brilliant service-learning students, but I've had others that I get the impression, 'I need to get these hours done and then I'm going to go home at the end of this and probably you won't hear from me again.'* (Chloe, volunteer coordinator)

The impact of SL on student motivation was one that the participants could not agree on. Chloe and Cordelia felt that service-learners were extrinsically motivated and that the completion of 30 hours was sometimes seen as the goal by the SL students, but all the participants agreed that it ultimately depended on the attitude of the individual and so could not be generalised.

The necessity for formal learning is another major difference between the volunteer and the SL student. In SL, it is important that the learner is assessed on their learning, and in this module, the CP was asked to assess the SL students' performance whilst on placement. The assessment took time, but all the participants agreed that completion was a simple process. Some felt that, as with the time commitment, the assessment helped with the students' motivation. Working with volunteers, Sally had often been let down by students who stopped attending before her project ended. She felt the assessment gave the students a reason to complete the hours.

*I think the value of them being assessed, helps the commitment and their performance.* (Sally, volunteer coordinator)

Another challenge that emerged from the data was the difference in understanding and practice of assessment. The CPs were asked to assess the SL students' learning and performance whilst on placement. This was broadly seen as positive, but opinions on the impact of assessment on students' performance differed:

*I think they were more eager to please, because they knew they were going to get assessed on things like responsibility.* (Amanda, project manager)

*They feel like they have to do it, to make sure that you write down an okay report. Um, and I suppose that kind of limited their enthusiasm.* (Cordelia, education officer)

Consistency of marking was a cause for concern for Chloe and Sally:

*Sometimes my marking might come across as harsh compared with someone else's, or someone else's may come across as a bit more lenient.* (Chloe, volunteering coordinator)

Different CPs had different expectations of the SL students. Sally, Amanda, Chloe and Cordelia, working in education and criminal justice, expected high levels of professionalism from the start:

*We were hoping for the two students to be able to almost lead on an assessment.* (Cordelia, education officer)

In contrast Usha and Dylan did not expect the students to come with all the skills and knowledge that they might need, but expected that they would learn once in place:



*... they're new to third sector, that's what I've learned and they are doing it for the first time, but then they don't know how it works.* (Usha, director)

In the theme, *Dynamic Tensions*, the participants discussed the opportunities and challenges of working within the SL model. The six participants had worked with over 30 SL students and inevitably students came with different experiences, attitudes and motivations. The CPs too, had a range of motivations for participating in the SL module and different expectations of the students and their role within the organisation. Each participant had a different view on the impact of the time commitment and the assessment, but the one thing all the participants agreed on was that each experience was unique and it was, in Dylan's words, "enriching all round."

### **Theme two: For each and every one**

SL can only be successful if everyone involved in the process benefits from the experience. The CPs focus was their service users, but they also recognised the importance of others to their work, and so their locus of care was broadened to meet the needs of volunteers, SL students, the HEI and the wider community. It was clear from discussions with participants that community could have different meanings. Some saw community as shared experience whilst others viewed it as the people involved with the organisation. However, there is the sense of 'their' community – the people that they work with, and the wider community; sometimes several circles of community exist beyond their reach, with which they hope to engage, enlighten and foster understanding.

The CPs brought a strong third sector identity to SL, eager to meet the needs of everyone involved while also keen to ensure sustainability of service provision. Although organisational needs were regarded as essential, all the participants placed the needs of their service-users and students above those of the organisation:

*We have to work around their availability, we don't say, 'This is not a good day,' every day is a good day as long as they commit.* (Usha, Director)

Building good relationships was viewed as essential to a successful collaboration and the CP's relationship with the module leader was seen as important in understanding the needs of the students and the organisation's mission and ethos.

*[We were sent] a handbook, which had literally everything in it. And, we went through that quite carefully, and that was, um, again a very welcome thing to have.* (Amanda, project manager)

This was seen as important with respect to being able to choose suitable students, in the preparation for placement and in the development of the relationship between the university and the CP. Participants valued the collaborative opportunities offered by the university to feedback their experiences and help shape the placement and the assessment:

*We are able to evaluate and recognise where things might need to develop, be developed or improved and how the students can be supported further, so it doesn't feel that it is fixed in stone, that these things can also be developed.* (Sally, Volunteer Coordinator)

Participants also highlighted the symbiotic nature of SL and how all those involved can be seen as being on parallel journeys. When students work with the CP, they enter a new community as an outsider, and they will not necessarily recognise the norms of the organisation or have the same

background, encountering different political and cultural viewpoints. Sometimes this could be problematic, but all the participants felt that with adequate support, students can successfully collaborate to benefit everyone. In SL, students' behaviour and choices impact on all those that they work with. Practical and emotional support was therefore at the forefront of the CPs' thoughts:

*They are very young people and that they also get to hear things in group perhaps, uh, ordinary young people might not hear about, so it's very important really to be able to process this with them so they can talk it through, you know. Um, so I am very aware of my responsibility here as carer really, for them.* (Dylan, Director)

Students' experiences were perceived by the participants as often mirroring that of the people they worked with; this journey was often one of personal or professional development:

*They're working with young people and helping them build their confidence and self-esteem, but also at the same they're building their, their own, the students' own confidence.* (Chloe, Volunteer Coordinator)

Usha felt that with sustained partnership came the potential for the organisation to develop too:

*Students, coming to us, and volunteering will be an asset to us, a connecting link between (organisation) and (HEI), that's a plus point for us and if it continues, we've got flow of young people, learners coming to us and then giving us new ideas, we grow, they grow.* (Usha, Director)

The theme, *For Each and Every One*, focused on the individual, and yet related, journeys that the participants observed as the SL students, the service-users, the CPs and the HEI worked together. The CPs worked hard to make the SL experience a good one for the students they worked with. This included creating new roles and including them in activities and groups. All participants appreciated the additional time and resource that the students brought and acknowledged the importance of a good match between student and placement. Meeting many diverse needs could be challenging, but flexibility and compromise seemed to be key in everyone getting the best outcome, and the relationship between the CP and the module leader was essential for a strong collaboration.

### **Theme three: Broadening horizons**

The final theme focuses on social responsibility and community and highlights that dynamic real-world SL collaborations have the potential to change perceptions and explore differences.

The ability to progress was a recurring theme, although the nature of how that was addressed differed. Some organisations appeared to focus on the transitional moments. Dylan thought the journey his service-users took, from addiction to being a functioning member of society, was paramount:

*Many of these people have come through (name of organisation) and have sound recoveries themselves and, uh, it's part of uh, reconnecting with society that they, they, start to become givers instead of takers, and uh, that's in the main, how we use them.* (Dylan, Director)

By working with SL students, they could educate individuals who would then take their learning back to their own communities and help to create a better understanding of addiction:

*There are huge benefits to, um, I don't believe there's a family anywhere now, that hasn't in some way been affected by the misuse of drink or drugs, so the more informed people are, the better they are to be able to deal with this. (Dylan, Director)*

SL students were perceived as providing a window on a different world for the people that they worked with. Having a different background meant that they could bring a unique perspective, which could open new ways of thinking for everyone:

*It's connecting the local community to the outside area. It's good to connect. Integration is a major issue with all our beneficiaries. They don't go out. I would rather bring in people from outside so at least they are exposed to people. (Usha, Director)*

CPs were also outsiders to the world of academia. As such, the responsibility for a positive collaboration went both ways:

*You have to invest a huge amount of trust in us, I mean, if we don't fulfil our end of the bargain, that's going to leave you with a massive problem because you've got students that you've entrusted to us [...] and we can't let you down. (Amanda, project manager)*

This theme focuses on an issue which sits at the core of collaboration and the SL model: creating a greater understanding of individuals, communities and ourselves. In this theme we have seen the strong sense of social responsibility that the CPs bring to their work, supporting service-users and supporting and educating the SL students and the wider community.

## **Discussion**

This research explored the opportunities and challenges that the CPs faced focusing on their provision of SL placements for Psychology students, and their expectations and experiences of working within the SL model.

A major opportunity and challenge raised by the participants was that SL requires a complex series of interconnections: the collaboration between the HEI and the CP; the relationship between the student and the CP; and between the student and service-users. This multi-layered, multifaceted collaboration between academics, students, CPs and service-users is what makes SL possible.

Fundamental to SL is the HE-community relationship. This is often discussed in the literature in terms of partnership and reciprocity. However, there are inherent differences in culture between HE and community organisations and this can lead to a difference in expectations. Academic staff at a university live a relatively elite and privileged life, especially when compared with the communities engaged with, where marginalised communities and individuals are often identified by their disadvantage and lack of economic resource. Students too, by the nature of being at university, are in a privileged situation. These differences in social and economic background may bring tension, conflict or division unless handled carefully and so there is an inherent danger of the community feeling used or misunderstood unless the partnership is equitable and respectful. The position of power is always in the hands of the HEI, who leads the collaboration and it is essential that any power imbalance in the partnership is addressed through open communication.

### ***The HE community partnership***

The partnership model in this study started as transactional, however ongoing and meaningful communication changed the dynamic, creating a more transformed and transformational collaboration. The initial contact was from the module leader in order to discuss the possibility of SL placements to meet immediate needs. Initially the HEI decided on the nature of the collaboration, whilst always allowing the CP to make the decision about the nature of the placement. Meetings with CPs ensured that the placement always met their needs and CPs wrote a role description which was advertised to the students. Regular contact with the CPs, listening to their experiences and providing support for issues and concerns helped to build a strong collaboration, and it soon developed into a transformational relationship as the commitment on both sides increased and the purpose of the SL model was adapted to create greater meaning (Enos and Morton, 2003). Flexibility from the HEI was paramount in this process, ensuring that the needs of the CP were central to the process and enabling each organisation to develop a placement which met their needs. The module and the assessment were adapted to address issues that arose. All parties made an ongoing commitment which increased the level of understanding between the HEI and the community and a deepening personal relationship between the individuals involved.

The literature review highlighted how often CPs were unhappy with the HEI relationship due to a lack of meaningful contact with the academic team. In this study, all participants were satisfied with the level of partnership communication that they experienced. Personal contact with the module leader who showed a willingness to support and respect the CPs' needs seemed to build a higher level of satisfaction than previously observed in the literature. There was room for further development though. Some CPs wanted to develop the collaboration continuum to become more integrative. Dylan wished for even closer links with the department and Usha aspired to work more broadly with the department and with other parts of the university, but all were satisfied that the initial collaboration was working effectively.

### ***Community partners as co-educators***

Another opportunity and challenge was the role of co-educator. CPs play a critical but often unacknowledged role as co-educators. Their often-challenging role is essential to SL. The literature calls for HEIs to recognise and celebrate the significant role CPs play as co-educators in advancing diversity education through SL and yet they are not included in the assessment process.

There is no discussion of CP assessment in the existing SL literature as it is generally not a part of SL assessment. Howard (2001) states academic credit should not be awarded for the quality of the service, but rather for the student's demonstration of academic and civic learning. This makes academic sense but leaves civic learning unassessed by the community being learned from. This attitude that academic learning is of greater value than good quality community engagement could be seen as a response to the claim that SL is not academic enough (Roberts and Edwards, 2015), but the lack of value placed on the needs of the CP is paternalistic and is a root cause of many of the issues that CPs raise. By excluding the CPs' voices from the assessment process, valuable insight into the students' level of civic learning is lost.

In this module, CPs were asked to assess students on generic skills and attributes, and to grade them on the extent to which they demonstrated their competence on placement. Participants welcomed the opportunity to participate in the formal assessment of the module. They recognised that feedback was important for the student to understand how their work had been perceived. A purely academic assessment is not sufficient to understand the full breadth of learning which takes place in SL. The

assessment developed in partnership with the CPs, included their ideas and priorities. This opportunity to feed into the assessment process was seen as an example of good practice in the partnership, but it was not without its challenges.

### ***Reliability in collaborative assessment***

CPs were included in the assessment process to ensure that their voice was heard and valued. However, in attempting to address issues of equitable collaboration, additional issues were raised about the reliability of collaborative assessment. Participants' different attitudes to the assessment may have influenced their perception of its impact on the students and also the way that they graded their students. Sally and Chloe both felt that there was a lack of reliability in the assessment as they felt that some assessors were too generous. They felt that this reflected badly on the grades they had given, which they perceived to be fair, but which they felt were seen as harsh when compared with others. In collaborative working, each individual decision can impact on the whole collaboration and the assessment process highlighted the difference in CP approaches.

Workplace assessment has a naturally low reliability but high validity because it sits in genuine but variable contexts and includes the relationship between trainee and assessor (Lefroy et al., 2017). Assessors' judgements of performance in work settings can only be understood in situ, as they are framed within the context in which assessment takes place. Between-assessor differences in the assessment of performance can be high, "reflecting assessor idiosyncrasy in the interpretation of task performance as a result of differing personal experiences, beliefs and professional values" (Govaerts and Vleuten, 2013, p. 1169).

The issue of reliability in collaborative assessment highlights differences in expectation and how CPs perceived the relationship between performance and grades. There appear to be two underlying issues here. Firstly, the most influential factor seems to be the CPs' expectations which is compounded by the diversity of placement opportunities. Sally expected a professional approach, with students working independently with young people, preparing their own resources and planning their own mentoring sessions, yet Cordelia's students mainly shadowed a member of staff. The assessment, however, did not differentiate between levels of difficulty within the placement.

Secondly, some assessors valued some aspects of the assessment more highly than others. Dylan for example, emphasised the importance of communication and Amanda thought that teamwork and a professional attitude were the most important factors. There is a tension between HE assessment criteria and the range of more fluid approaches to assessment found in the community, and the solution seems to be greater collaboration and high-quality support from the HEI.

### ***The impact of organisational identity on approaches to service-learning collaboration***

The findings show that the participants all demonstrated a strong sense of social responsibility, but they also differed in their expectations of the collaboration, and of the students. One of the reasons for these differences may be their organisational identity, which influences expectations and perceptions. For some, specific skills were essential, whilst for others, the right attitude was more important. Some wanted students to show initiative and to be able to work independently, whilst others were happy for the students to take on a more collaborative role, without responsibility.

Meeting others' needs was important to the participants, who felt that they were benefiting from the new skills and ideas that the students brought, but they also felt that they were supporting the

students' professional development, by providing them with an experience which would support them into their chosen career. However, participants did not always agree on what the experience should look like, or how much support should be provided. Participants who worked in forensic and educational settings demanded a professional attitude and a strong skillset. They viewed SL as work experience and expected the students to work independently. Participants based in community settings were less demanding of specific skills and attributes and were more interested in attitude. Their organisational culture was more nurturing and collaborative. They viewed SL as a learning opportunity and were more willing to be flexible, to work together to offer students the best learning opportunity.

Mujib (2017) describes two perspectives on organisational identity. The technical perspective is deterministic, coming from the top and facilitated by the formal roles of management; the social perspective is more collaborative and is formed from the bottom-up, emphasising the central role that the employees have in forming that identity. Participants who worked in educational and forensic settings, all worked within large institutions. The nature of the institutions they worked in may have impacted on the project's own organisational identity by taking a part of the bigger institutions' identity and processes as a part of their own. In effect they were demonstrating the technical perspective, where the identity of the individual member is influenced by the stronger identity of the organisation. Each of these organisations works within a judgemental environment. In education and criminal justice, behaviour is assessed and judged in a formal way. This culture may have had a major influence on their organisational identity and may explain their expectation of professional attitudes and behaviour, and their formal attitude to assessment and to the collaboration. In contrast, participants working in community-based organisations were demonstrating a social perspective, where the identity of the individuals creates the identity of the organisation. The community organisations had strong ideas about appropriate behaviour, but were less interested in professionalism per se, and more inclined to nurture new members. They were organisations that valued a non-judgemental attitude to the people they worked with, and so this principle was also extended to the SL students and resulted in a more informal collaborative relationship.

In practice, the power within the collaboration will always be with the HEI, as it is their curriculum that initiates the partnership, and so it is incumbent on the HE team to ensure that they manage the partnership effectively. Koschmann (2013) highlights that the diversity of partner organisations can be challenging, as a successful collaboration depends on the willingness of all partners to cooperate despite the difference in approaches and attitudes.

### ***Covid-19 update***

The global pandemic has had a great impact on the HEI, the CPs and the relationship between the two. An update with the current academic team revealed that only one of the participants is still working with the HEI, as the others have moved on to other organisations. The pandemic has meant that staff have been furloughed and placements cancelled. New partnerships have been sought for online placements for 2021 and these have worked well and will continue, but the relationship with the new partners, where all communication is online, has returned to a more transactional model, where the relationship is functional, rather than personal. It has returned to a more co-operative rather than a collaborative model. Based on our research, this could be remedied by returning to the more personal and collaborative approach when the changes in working practices allow, to reignite the personal relationship with diverse organisations that leads to transformational practice.

## Conclusions

This study is focused on the experiences of a small purposive sample, but it raises questions about the nature of collaboration in SL and how HEIs can best ensure that the community is an equitable partner in the SL experience, integrating collaborative approaches and addressing unequal power dynamics.

In the literature from the US, CPs were generally unhappy with the relationship they had with the HEI. In this study, this was not the case. This was due to two differences in the way the module was run.

Firstly, the academic team worked personally with CPs to plan and manage the community-based learning. Regular contact and the ability to contribute to the development of the module helped to consolidate the feeling of collaboration.

Secondly, partners were given agency over who they worked with and formally assessed the students on their performance, and this enhanced the feeling of being a co-educator. Academic assessment alone cannot assess the full range of experiential learning SL can provide, and if the community's voice is not heard then they are not being treated as co-educators, but as a resource. Collaborative assessment brings its own challenges, with strong validity but reduced reliability, but is essential for a more equitable approach to SL collaboration.

Finally, it found that organisational identities have a strong influence on attitudes and approaches, and so regular communication, commitment and flexibility are essential to developing a strong SL collaboration between diverse partners.

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