

Working towards community upliftment: A case of a tourism management service learning project

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Abstract

Community engagement in Universities of Technology is evolving to become a game-changer in addressing the economic challenges of the country. Service learning (SL) as a form of community engagement is promoted at higher education, as a learning paradigm. The SL project of the Tourism Management Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology(CPUT), as a form of community engagement, was designed with the focus on improving business operations for small and medium tourism enterprises(SMTEs). Outcomes of the SL project were based on the development of business plans for the SMTEs for implementation. The elements of the study covered in this paper aim to investigate the benefits of SL by participating communities, to add to the body of knowledge relating to community engagement. Action research was undertaken for this study, and census sampling was adopted to collect quantitative and qualitative data from participants. Data was triangulated and 89% of SMTE respondents responded positively to the benefits of the project, commenting that it "allowed me insight from the perspective of an outsider". In follow-up interviews, respondent's reiterated the benefits received from the SL projects, with some highlighting challenges with project expectations versus deliverables. The authors confirm authenticity of all data given in the article and that the research is original.

Introduction

Many tourism businesses manage to survive and become tourism industry players making a significant contribution to a country's economy, but these enterprises face a large number of obstacles. In a study by Vallabh (2012), the tourism sector is regarded by many aspiring business owners as having low barriers of entry: it is viewed as a straightforward entrepreneurial venture, which is easy to start and run (Becton & Graetz, 2001; Loyns, Young, Hanley &Stolk, 2015). The lack of understanding of the complexity of the sector has prevented many start-ups from succeeding (Page & Connell, 2014).

The concept of the Tourism Management SL project is based on educating and collaborating with business representatives, on creating proposals that a business will be able to independently implement and improve on after the SL project is completed (Easterling & Rudell, 1997). Thus, the purpose of the programme is to build partnerships based on mutual learning and skills development (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). As a brief background, the project took place in 2012 and 2013, with results collected the year after. An all-encompassing reflection of the project was required from the participants, thus the delay in data collection. Howard (2003) and Stanton (2015) indicate that for the continued participation of stakeholders in service learning, the processes of these projects needs to be recorded.

Previous studies on the benefits of SL from the students' perspectives have indicated positive results for participating communities, but this feedback could be biased as students link their reflections to subject credits. The focus on student perspectives by literature is creating a vacuum on feedback from participating communities (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

As results of various case studies are not transferable to other SL studies (Marullo, 1998; Morgan &Streb, 2001; Mouton &Wildschut, 2005), it thus becomes important that extensive research be done on this subject, to ensure validity of such projects. The SL project is curriculum-aligned to

one or multiple subjects in the tourism course (Osman & Petersen, 2013). This project was linked to the venture management and marketing related subjects of the senior undergraduate Tourism Management course, that runs parallel to the final academic year programme. A semester within the final undergraduate year of the programme was set aside for the collaborative process. Students and partner SMTEs conducted a needs analysis as a starting point to assess where improvement strategies for the participating SMTEs are required. At the end of the semester students present their work to a panel of judges, including lecturers and the SMTE representatives for feedback on work completed. During the feedback sessions, reflections on the personal experiences of all parties involved were also assessed. The aim of this paper is to present perceptions of the benefits of SL by participating communities.

Literature review

Service learning as community engagement

Service learning, as a form of community engagement, is defined as a learning experiential programme (Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999) that is credit-bearing and takes place in an organised service activity (Fourie, 2003). In these engagement activities, reflection on service activities, improves learning and understanding of service actions by all parties involved (Council on Higher Education, 2006; Smith-Tolken, 2013). Additionally, the experiences of SL fosters students' learning and improves their civic responsibility (Sandmann, Kiely, & Grenier, 2009), while for communities, project participation improves their awareness of their own organisational operations (Mokoena, 2016).

The process of SL occurs in cycles where students learn theoretical knowledge in the classroom that is reflected on, and applied within, a particular problem in the community in which they are working (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005). These values are reflected in the CPUT policy on community engagement as it is a structured goal-orientated community engagement programme that is credit-bearing and closely monitored for progress (CPUT, 2008). It is against this definition that SL objectives are structured from student perspectives, while only providing a broad unspecific explanation from the communities' perspective. Netshandama (2010) warns that based on this definition SL project coordinators must guard against using communities to progress student benefits only and instead, use SL projects for reciprocal learning that would benefit all involved (Osman & Petersen, 2013).

The tourism sector is viewed by many aspiring business owners as having low barriers of entry: people view it as a straightforward entrepreneurial venture, which is easy to start and operate (Becton & Graetz, 2001; Lyons et al., 2015). The lack of understanding of the complexity of the sector has prevented many start-ups from succeeding (Page & Connell, 2014). Those tourism businesses that manage to survive and become tourism industry players make a significant contribution to the country's economy. Still, these enterprises face a large number of obstacles. A study by Vallabh (2012) highlighted the following challenges facing SMTEs in South Africa:

- Lack of key or focus market knowledge and marketing skills.
- Lack of education and training skills regarding low formal qualifications.
- Insufficient business management skills, and
- Poor financial management and background.

There are a number of demands that fall on tourism entrepreneurs, from requirements of clients, the ability to report on developments of the business, understanding the financial standing of their business, communicating to the right clients, and managing their client's expectations. All these responsibilities require acute business management skills (El-Kassar, Messarra & Elgamma, 2015). Studies of the causes of business failures reveal that a lack of management skills, limited financial knowledge, and the unwillingness of business owners to develop and change are the most common reasons businesses fail (Solomon, Frese, Friedrich & Glaud, 2013). Brand, Du Preez

and Schutte(2007) add that silo operations and lack of business infrastructure are additional reasons for business failure.

Many entrepreneurs who enter the tourism industry, are attracted by the life-style or the glamour, and not necessarily because they have the skills or experience required to start a business. Because entrepreneurs do not anticipate the struggles and stresses associated with starting and running a business (Peters, Frehse & Buhalis, 2009), many small enterprises in South Africa fail in the first three years of operation (Mahembe, 2011). Added to the complexities of daily operations, compliance must also be adhered to, like completion of financial undertakings of the business on a daily basis, and staff management.

University involvement within these communities can improve the social and economic welfare of the communities involved (Pickernell, Packman, Brooksbank& Jones, 2010; Warren, Kitagawa & Eatough, 2010). The national tourism sector strategic plan, takes cognisance of the SL projects within universities as part of capacity building for SMMEs. These projects can be regulated into the "one-stop-shop" systems that the strategy has highlighted in its action plan (DAC, 2011). Leadership at the National Skills Authority (NSA) could also adopt this viewpoint, and assist with partnerships and funding the community-university collaborations as additional and more cost-effective tools to existing institutions like Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (SETA) (Basson, Christianson, Dekker, Garbers, Le Roux, Mischke& Strydom, 2009). With dedicated funding structures within government, SL-type projects can become not only great knowledge-sharing vehicles among communities, but also excellent research focal points for sustainable solutions (Clifford, 2010). This phenomenon in South Africa necessitates studies of this nature for institutions of higher learning to implement courses where flipped- classroom pedagogies can foster learning in unlikely environments (McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck& Fitzgerald, 2015).

Research methodology

The course coordinator's involvement within the project as a researcher necessitated the enquiry to follow action research design, where researchers are involved with participants in identifying a problem, collecting data, and collectively taking action to resolve the problem (McNiff, 2013; Nieuwenhuis, 2011). The approach worked well for this study as it attempted to assess the current status of the SL project, while looking ahead to the improvement of future projects (Kothari, 2004), forming a common goal for all participants (Huan, 2010).

The study population was 36 small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs) in the Cape Metropole, who responded to the call for project participation, and participated in the 2012 and 2013 academic years. The small size of the population necessitated census sampling for the study (Kothari, 2006). Self-administered questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data for this study. Nine SMTEs responded to the questionnaires, and two interviews were conducted after questionnaires were returned. The project entailed students working with the SMTEs to develop business and marketing plans for the SMTEs, resulting from a situational analysis that was conducted, and sharing of background information about the company. Data for this paper was extracted from a bigger SL study which comprised various sets of sources used to gather data from each SL group (students and SMTEs). As the focus of this paper is on community feedback, only SMTE feedback will be assessed.

The research design followed is beneficial in the ability to adapt data collecting procedures, and grounded theories allow for data that could present itself during and after the research process (Welman& Kruger, 2002) to be scrutinised. This form of adaptability allows researchers to draw on forms of data produced during the SL project and during stages of the research, which is essential (Banks, Monday, Burgess & Sellitto, 2010). Close-ended questionnaires were designed to assess the level of use of the submitted business plans post the SL project (Billig, Root & Jesse, 2005), which were analysed using SPSS.20 statistical programme to produce frequency tables. The thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted on the ATLAS.ti07 programme to constructively code the data. A complete assessment of themes was prepared, and conclusions were made on similar or

contradicting themes. The aim of this study was to assess the perceptions of the benefits of SL by participating communities. Data in the discussion is presented in tables to quantify responses while recording comments of each respondent. Qualitative data from the interviews was transcribed and is presented in a form of narrations quoted within the discussion.

Results and discussion

SL research that includes community participant feedback guides against unfounded conclusions being made by SL coordinators, about the experiences of the communities post projects (Tokin & Quiroga, 2004). Reliable data of these experiences needed to be collected to provide a true reflection of the exercises performed to justify the resources, time and effort placed on these projects for students and participating communities. This feedback will guide the planning of future projects. The data presented in this paper from SMTE participants, collected through interviews and questionnaire-tools indicated a balance of benefits for community members in raising their self-esteem, as well as visible benefits for the businesses. The detailed feedback is presented in two main categories investigating the benefits of SL, including the types of benefits experienced from the project, as well as assessing potential interest of participants in future SL projects. Results of the questionnaires and interviews are discussed in each category. Interview respondents are coded as SMTE1 to SMTE9 in the discussions tables.

Benefits of SL participation for the individual business representatives

Questionnaires included closed and open-ended questions, enquiring about benefits experienced through SL participation. One of the questions in the questionnaire enquired about individual benefits of SL participation. On assessing whether SL participation was beneficial on a personal level, eight (89%) of the nine SMTE respondents said "yes", while one responded "no", as depicted in Table 1. A study by (Balčiūnienė Mažeikienė, 2008) depicted communities having a sense of emotional satisfaction from sharing knowledge with students. Qualitative answers to the question revealed a trend indicating that although the SMTE representatives were answering in a personal capacity, the business benefits also featured prominently in their answers. This is based on a view that with small and medium organisations, owners find it hard to separate themselves from their business, similarly to a study by Morrison & Teixeira (2004), which indicated personal-business attachment.

Business owners personalising the management of their business emerged as one theme during the SL project, and it seemed that those SMTE representatives who were resistant to change did not allow students any room to advise them on any aspects of the business. Based on experience from previous projects of this nature, this type of behaviour from the participating SMTEs was anticipated (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Project coordinators would then mediate in these situations to find harmonious solutions for all parties, as students worried about how these actions would affect their performance at the end of the project.

Do you think SL project is beneficial to you as an individual?			
	YES	NO	Please motivate your answer
SMTE1	1		<i>"it brings change to an individual which is necessary because you will change for the better as you gain knowledge which is power"</i>
SMTE2	1		<i>"allowed me insight from the perspective of an outsider"</i>
SMTE3		1	No comments received
SMTE4	1		<i>"It motivates me to educate myself and stay afloat of trends and developments with the industry."</i>
SMTE5	1		<i>"I enjoyed the interaction with the students-they were a pleasant bunch. Some of their questions posed got my own thoughts going. I enjoy the youth and one of the learners still keeps in contact via Facebook."</i>

SMTE6	1		<i>"It has allowed me the time to focus on other aspects of the business, but also to encourage those to use their creative minds"</i>
SMTE7	1		<i>"It helps one to get to know more people with a view to the future of building up strong relationships"</i>
SMTE8	1		<i>"The work place is an evolving place and new blood brings with it new ideas! Which are beneficial for the individual."</i>
SMTE9	1		No comments received

Table 1: SL projects benefits for individual SMTE participants (n=9)

Source: Mokoena (2016)

A direct question to determine if any benefits were derived for the business from SL participation was posed. In line with the previous question on personal benefits, seven participants (78%) responded "yes" to SL benefiting their business, while only two (22%) of the respondents said "no" (Table 2). The qualitative responses in the table indicated that external participation from the students allowed for new business ideas to be formulated. An outside view allowed SMTEs to place aspects of their business into perspective, and this is true of the outcomes of SL-reflection that external mentoring improves business focus (Garcia, Nehrling, Martin & SeBlonka, 2009).

Feedback on Tables 1 and 2 revealed that although benefits of personal interaction with students were enjoyable, some of the responses regarding benefits for the business were negative as indicated by SMTE5 in Table 2. SMTE responses in these two instances where one participant indicates not getting assistance from the students, might be attributed to possible misunderstanding in communication between parties, or a case of inter or over-dependency on certain parties. Other SMTEs exhibited roles of seniority in the project, where they were the mentor, as they had been in their business, or that expectations of university students input were higher than expected. Relationship management is essential, and so is involvement of communities in the planning process to alleviate such problems from surfacing during projects. To achieve this task, continuous feedback from communities may be planned in the SL project, so that reflection is continuous and not only left to the end of the project, where no useful changes can be effected.

Do you think SL project is beneficial for the business?			
	YES	NO	Please motivate your answer
SMTE1	1		No comment received
SMTE2	1		<i>"They made suggestions we hadn't thought of"</i>
SMTE3		1	<i>"The group did not assist me"</i>
SMTE4	1		<i>"I have an updated business and marketing plan to work with"</i>
SMTE5		1	<i>"I don't believe that the learners did much research as most of the information presented was what I actually gave to them. I don't believe the project was interactive enough i.e. between them and I, as we didn't meet often. Perhaps the individuals did not understand me or perhaps they didn't understand the market sufficiently enough to make a meaningful contribution to my business".</i>
SMTE6	1		<i>"I used the information in my business quite successfully"</i>
SMTE7	1		<i>"It helps one to see one's own company from a different perspective and ones flaws is easily picked up"(sic)</i>
SMTE8	1		<i>"The work place is an evolving place and new blood brings with it new ideas! Which are beneficial for the individual"</i>
SMTE9	1		No comment received

Table 2: SL benefits for the SMTE business (n=9)

Source: Mokoena (2016)

In SL projects, community reflection of SL experiences is geared towards satisfaction with students' performances, and the usefulness of the SL projects for their environments (Eyler, Giles, Stenton & Gray, 2001). In this enquiry seven of the nine participating SMTEs exhibited positive feedback about the experience, regarding the innovative input by students for their businesses. Added to this feedback the opportunity to work with young minds allowed for new ideas to be explored by the business owners, which were implemented successfully. A response by SMTE4 (Table 2) indicates that students' ideas were incorporated into the business after the project.

Assessment of the business and marketing plans from the SL project

One of the SL project outcomes was for the student groups to present SMTE representatives with an updated business plans on completion. Although the process was collaborative, students were responsible for conducting a situational analysis of each business with the SMTE participants, take the feedback and recommend improvements where they viewed the business lacked. It was vital to assess how the SMTEs perceived the quality of the documentation they received from the SL project.

Respondents were asked to assess whether the final document they received at the end of the project met their expectations (Table 3). Eight responses were received on this question, and six (75%) were positive; indicating that the document met expectations, while two (25%) responded the documents did not meet their expectations. Similarly to feedback in Table 2, SMTE3 withheld a response to this question and SMTE5 exhibited dissatisfaction with the document, sighting inferior work from the students.

Did the final document you received meet your expectations?			
	YES	NO	Please motivate your answer
SMTE1	1		"The final document was above my expectations. It was professional, self - explanatory and easy to use"
SMTE2	1		No comment received
SMTE3	-	-	No comment received
SMTE4	1		"This was never supposed to be completely replacing my current business plan and I was expected to fine tune the document into my working format"
SMTE5		1	"I expected a higher level of work and research and more innovation"
SMTE6	1		"In the end, we all (including myself) provided information that was presented in the document and I am satisfied with it"
SMTE7	1		"It is workable and done in a very professional manner"
SMTE8		1	"Well I feel that the group focused on the book/theory approach and struggled to build plans on practical and real time plans"
SMTE9	1		"I was very happy with the business plan"

Table 3: Perceptions of final SL documents (n=8)

Source: Mokoena(2016)

SMTE8 who had indicated personal benefits in Table 2 was not satisfied with the feedback for the business, sighting that the students could not think out of the box with business ideas, sighting theory, rather than practical advice. This feedback indicates both partnership opportunities and challenges that partners and project coordinators need to be aware of. The debate in the South African sphere of entrepreneurial studies is that students do not have a practical experience of business management (Ramdhani, Jamaluddin & Aulawi, 2012), indicating that more innovative ways of teaching entrepreneurial skills to university students are required, to expose them to the realities of business. Contrary to this statement, Kellet and Goldstein (1999) warn that withinSL

projects, expectations on university students must be carefully managed by SL coordinators, to ensure that all SL partners involved are aware of their roles and responsibilities during the SL project, to curb participating parties developing unrealistic expectations of each other.

Linking to results from Table 2 on perceived benefits of the project, feedback on the documents students submitted were perceived in both negative and positive terms by SMTEs. SMTEs who viewed the project as not having a big impact on their business projected dissatisfaction with the business and marketing plans. This could be as a result of resistance to external influences forcing changes on their organisations. SMTE preferences of student's level of involvement in their organisations presented challenges for students who needed to complete tasks for assessment credits. This feedback indicates challenges of perceived interference into personal business by students. Contradicting responses from 8 of the participants, in Table 4, indicated students' ideas as innovative, practical, and well thought-out for each participating business. Questions in Table 4 investigated practicality and level of innovation of the documents received after the project.

Statement	Strongly Disagree / Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree / Agree	Total
Reflection on the ideas for the business				
The student's ideas were innovative	0	2	6	8
The student's ideas were practical	1	2	5	8
The student's ideas were relevant to the business	1	2	5	8
I could implement the ideas the students suggested	2	1	5	8
The student's ideas were clearly thought out	0	1	6	7
The student's ideas were immature	4	3	0	7
I have used some of the ideas the students suggested	1	2	4	7
I have not used any of the ideas the students suggested	5	1	1	7
I have used some of my ideas in the project	1	1	5	7
The student's ideas were out of context	5	2	0	7

Table 4: Assessing the use of SL Business and Marketing Plans (n=8)

Source: Mokoena (2016)

Some of the student's recommendations for the organisation were implemented in the business models. Six (63%) of the eight respondents indicated that students' ideas were innovative, with a correlating response of five of the four (57%) responses in Table 4, reporting to have implemented some of the student's ideas into their business operations, after the SL project was completed. This is a positive indicator that the collaborative SL process does have long-term benefits for participating businesses. It also highlights challenges regarding the involvement of students being limited to a superficial level only, like being limited to submission of written business operational recommendations only. SMTEs exhibited some resistance to student involvement at a deeper level, like decision making within the business operations.

Perceptions of business and marketing plans resulting from the SL project

At the end of the SL project, results of the interactions between SMTEs and students were submitted in the form of business and/or marketing plan documents. Two copies of the final documents were required, as was prescribed in the project brief. One copy was to be handed to the community members and one copy to the subject lecturer for assessment. The information in these documents included the student's interpretation of the six-month interaction with the SL communities. Students would have met with the company representatives as many times as required during the project period to discuss observations and input, where-after the students would then compile a document based on this process. Resp 2 highlighted this fact in her response indicating that:

"...you know students they have wild [exaggerated] ideas, (laughing) so they will come up with wild ideas but you as a business owner you know what would not work and what will work. Like they suggested something like a spa, you know massage and whatever, whatever".

This statement emphasised the feedback from the SMTE questionnaires, indicating the impractical nature of some of the students' recommendations. This observation indicated that the business owners had set plans and targets for their business before participating in the SL project. The second observation was that the community members realised that, although the students had good ideas, they were still not familiar with the history and the nature of the business they were placed in, to make any intelligent decisions. This form of feedback from the community as prospective employers, offers lessons on limitations of students learning for refocusing teaching and learning strategies, to improve graduate attributes (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Resp2 made a follow-up statement which indicated that she did not disregard the students ideas highlighting that *"...it's not a bad idea, it's a good side business, but the practicality of it is just not there yet"*. Her view on the probable long term project indicated that she was aware that although the students' recommendations could not be implemented within the short term, they would become a beneficial improvement on the business over a longer term.

Feedback on the technical aspects of the business and marketing plan documents was varied, where individual businesses had unique interests and perceived outcomes, based on the nature of each business. Respondents alluded to the students being able to highlight some of the business weaknesses they [owners] were not aware of, and some of which they were aware, and required another perspective on. For this reason results on this data, although important to this particular study, are difficult to generalise, the feedback on other studies for comparisons (Osman & Petersen, 2013).

Table 4 highlights some of the technical aspects the students advised the participants on. A guesthouse owner, Resp2, indicated that the students conducted a competitor-analysis and highlighted service gaps in her business, saying:

"...and also pricing, there was a comment about pricing, and comparing it to other establishments they had visited around. Also they commented on the pool. There is a pool at the back and there was no water at that time, so they felt why is there no water when there is a resource like that."

These aspects highlighted the weaknesses which the organisation could address after the completion of the SL project. The result demonstrate a positive impact from the outside-in view from students during the SL project, which allowed participating SMTEs an alternative view of their business situation.

Conclusions

This paper assessed perceptions of the benefits of SL by participating communities. Results in the questionnaires and interviews indicate that participating SMTE experienced benefits from the SL project. On further probing what the benefits meant, experiences outlined some emotional benefits on what the projects meant personally for the participants, on being able to impart knowledge on students. For the business participants alluded to appreciating the "outside-in" views students offered the organisations. The feedback allowed for companies to assess how their organisations are viewed by prospective clients and competition, thus improving on weaknesses.

Although the study was directed at SMTE participants, SMTEs also indicated satisfaction with the level of the students' education, indicating that students are well trained and ready to enter the work environment, as the project afforded SMTEs the opportunity to learn what students do at universities in tourism studies. Feedback also pointed to student limitations on lack of articulation in the written documents students submitted, which alluded to immaturity from a strategic view-point. SMTEs appreciated what the SL project meant personally, indicating their appreciation of the space the project afforded them to impart their knowledge on the students, indicating to the symbiotic learning relationship of SL projects (Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005). The engagement with students indicated to student readiness for employment, but clearly articulated limited knowledge of business

management by students, meaning that they were not sufficiently trained to become entrepreneurs, which the SMTEs viewed as a big limitation.

Implications for future SL projects suggests that developed partnerships from projects must be leveraged as vehicles for graduate recruitment. Continued participation by SMTEs in future projects will improve university and industry partnerships, in dealing with the current issues of graduate industry readiness (Agbenyegah, 2013; Jennings, 2015). Closer working linkages provide prospective employers with a better understanding of the profile of UoT graduates. In planning for future projects participating communities must be included in the initial planning stages of SL projects, to get informed advice on what project expectations. As SL project practitioners and research produce large volumes SL operations and perception studies post SL projects, pre-tests of SL projects are limited, which could assess SL community expectations of SL projects, to assess if inclusion in initial planning stages does improve participation, and how experiences impact on level of interaction with students during projects.

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