

# Student volunteer experiences as a way to advance teaching and learning: a call for community service<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper makes a case to advance community service through teaching and learning at higher education institutions in South Africa. In particular, it highlights the benefits of student volunteerism as one pathway to engagement and promotion of social responsibility amongst students. The data are drawn from a qualitative, exploratory study undertaken with a sample of 14 students at Durban University of Technology, who participated in volunteering at different community organisations and schools during their undergraduate studies. The study found that students benefitted from this experience and believed that the university had a salient role to play in community engagement. The article concludes with an argument for academics to reconsider communities as learning spaces and to begin to advance community engagement in other ways through teaching.*

**Keywords:** volunteerism, community, engagement, university students

## INTRODUCTION

It was Ernest Boyer who urged higher education institutions 'to serve a larger purpose' (1996: 22). Despite this, most universities have been slow to interweave teaching and research with community engagement (CE) (Bowers, 2018), thereby failing to pursue the institutional change required to align the core functions of higher education (HE) with the central premise of engagement (Bhagwan, 2017a). CE can occur through various teaching and learning initiatives such as service learning, community-based research, community outreach and student volunteerism (Driscoll, 2008; Jacob et al., 2015; Bradshaw, 2016). These initiatives are designed to enable students to develop a greater sense of social responsibility and help students to become more knowledgeable and active citizens of society (Bartkowiak-Theron & Anderson, 2014; Lozano et al., 2017). Community engagement activities integrate thought, action, reason and emotion with life by connecting student experiences with communities that interact with the university context (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011). Volunteering is one such activity that has been used to support the learning experiences of students abroad (Simha, Topuzova & Albert, 2011).

In South Africa, it was the Department of Education and Training that called for the transformation of HE, arguing that it should serve a new social order by responding to pressing societal needs locally

<sup>1</sup> Date of submission: 8 November 2019  
Date of review outcome: 26 March 2020  
Date of acceptance: 15 June 2020

(Department of Education, 1997). Prior to this notion, relationships between universities and society through student volunteerism and community activities received little attention (Thomson et al., 2008). The emergence of the Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) in 1999 further served to embed community engagement within the South African tertiary educational landscape (Lazarus et al., 2008). These previous initiatives served to advance scholarly work and a number of community-university partnerships as evidenced within the literature in the past five years in South Africa (Wood, 2016, Bhagwan, 2017b; Machimana, Sefotho & Ebersohn, 2018; Govender, 2018). This paper adds to this body of scholarly work by reflecting on the experiences of student volunteers and their views on the role of universities in communities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Community Engagement*

Globally, community engagement is defined as the university's use of 'knowledge and resources, to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good' (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2013 cited in Silva, White & Toch, 2015: 33). Similarly, Engagement Australia describes community engagement as a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and skills between universities and their multiple communities. This is a process whereby universities acknowledge community values, culture, knowledge and skills, and support the integration of engagement into learning and research activities that are socially inclusive and managed in partnership with communities so that engaged citizens, including students and graduates, are developed (Bartkowiak-Theron & Anderson, 2014). Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead (2006) noted that CE through teaching and learning can assume multiple forms of student placement, projects or workplace internships. This was in line with a call made by Newman (1985), whilst at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who asserted that 'the most critical demand is to restore to HE its original purpose of preparing graduates for a life of involved and committed citizenship... the advancement of civic learning' should therefore become HE's central goal (Prentice 2011: 842).

The study was accordingly guided by Ernest Boyer's 'Scholarship of Engagement' (Zlotowski, 2011) which incorporated the scholarships of discovery, integration, application and teaching to address social, civic and ethical problems. This influenced the scholarship of teaching and learning, which focused on community service as the core of HE institutions. Musil (2003) argued, within the context of Boyers model, for a civic leaning framework which emphasises the need not only for disciplinary competence, but civic awareness and purpose. Saltmarsh (2011: 32) added that 'civic learning illuminates the socially responsive aspects of disciplinary knowledge, those dimensions that expand the view of education to include learning and developing the... values of citizenship'.

In South Africa, the Centre for Higher Education Transformation also stated that community engagement is a systematic relationship between HE institutions that is 'characterised by mutually beneficial interaction in the sense that it enriches learning, teaching and research and simultaneously addresses societal problems, issues and challenges' (Centre for Higher Education Transformation CHET, 2003: 4). HE institutions should therefore become participants in a highly complex learning society where discovery, learning and engagement are integrated activities that include different sources of knowledge generated in diverse settings (Holland 2005).

### *Towards a new way of teaching and learning*

The task of academics to include engagement activities into instructional practices, in order to enhance student learning, is embedded in the notion of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Ciccone &

Meyers, 2006). Good teaching and deep learning are predicated on active learning, which cannot draw exclusively on cognitive development, but should also include affective experiences. In other words, teaching and learning should place education within students' 'lived experience' (Zlotkowski, 2011: 123). Equally salient is the importance of contextualising teaching within a set of urgent contemporary issues. Hence, whilst it is important to master disciplinary content, the ability to develop within students a sense of agency in addressing real-world problems is an important part of the scholarship of teaching and learning. HE has lost its relevance to contemporary society, and in order to re-establish its relevance, it will have to recognise that in addition to 'foundational' and professional knowledge, it has to create and disseminate socially responsive knowledge. This means we can 'no longer perform our teaching role without paying close attention to the impact of that role on the communities that surround us' (Gardner, 2011: 143). According to Gardner (2011), community service enables students to gain a better understanding of themselves and their involvement in that community, become more aware of issues in the community and develop a sense of responsibility in terms of addressing these issues and become more aware of diverse communities and engage their preconceived notions regarding diversity. The volunteerism project within the context of this study had these goals. According to Bringle and Clayton (2012), civic learning occurs through volunteer opportunities, as students acquire knowledge related to the complexity of issues in society and understand ways to contribute to communities and society. He added that these experiences teach students communication and listening skills, the importance of and ability to work with others from diverse backgrounds, and sensitivity towards diversity in a pluralistic society.

#### *Student volunteerism*

Student volunteering coincides then with a greater emphasis on the democratic and public purposes of higher education, in cultivating undergraduate personal and social responsibility (Reason & Hemer, 2015; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Globally, millions of people dedicate themselves to providing help to people and groups in need, by way of social support, physical assistance, organising and advising, or acting on behalf of causes or movements. Universities in particular have a large potential of student volunteers at their disposal (Van den Berg, Cuskelly & Auld, 2015). These volunteers can provide crucial help at schools, clinics, animal shelters and various other community organizations (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016). Service learning (SL), which has been a popular pedagogical tool to advance learning and community service differs slightly from volunteerism (Domegan & Bringle 2010; Waterman, 2014). SL is a course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organised community service activity that fulfils identified community needs. Students have to reflect on the service activity to gain a deeper understanding of course content. Volunteerism differs from SL in that it is not credit bearing but, like SL, can enable a deeper appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Kogan & Kellaway, 2004). It can be regarded as a community service activity that supports community engagement by virtue, and that is linked to care, citizenship and social responsibility.

Student volunteerism is a distinct form of volunteerism in that it occurs within the structure of universities. This structure provides for two types of volunteering, i.e. (i) volunteer-driven, student-led societies and (ii) off-campus volunteering in partnership with community organisations (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014). Student societies catalyse change at universities and actively pursue a 'cause in a domain such as culture, politics, or social action' (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014: 410). Recently, short-term, episodic volunteer day-long events have been effective to support graduate involvement in the community. A 'Day of Service' involves students engaging in any form of voluntary service activity, in any community organisation or context; hence, internationally a 'Day of Service' approach has been used as a co-curricular strategy to involve students in short-term volunteer experiences (Hahn et al, 2015: 2). Episodic volunteering is a newly recognised form of volunteering and has been described as a specific 'short-term task with clearly defined boundaries and responsibilities for the volunteer' (Hahn et al, 2015: 2).

Service-oriented functions, which encompass volunteer activities, include hospital services and immediate services such as providing food and accommodation for the homeless. Other ways to classify volunteer functions are those who help or serve the elderly, underprivileged children, disadvantaged women or other special populations such as ethnic minorities or persons with disabilities (Demir, Khanna & Bowling, 2015). The current paper focuses on episodic volunteering, amongst a group of undergraduate, Child and Youth Care students at Durban University of Technology, with similar populations to the ones listed before.

Volunteers in the university context are a significantly under-researched population (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010; Gage & Thapa, 2012; Williamson et al. 2018; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). There have been several studies, however, that provide evidence that volunteer activities have a number of benefits for undergraduate students (Stroup et al., 2015; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). The National Survey of Student Engagement (Prokess & McDaniel, 2011) in the US found that students involved in community volunteer activities derived greater levels of personal development as compared with those who were not involved in community activities. Specific benefits reflected life skills development, political and social awareness, and a greater sense of civic responsibility amongst students (Colby et al., 2000; Seider, Rabonowicz & Gilmore, 2010). Research also revealed that the pro-social actions of volunteers not only benefitted volunteers but communities as well (Snyder, Omoto & Dwyer, 2016). CE also helps students develop and nurture institutional and individual relationships with community organisations, activists and local community members (Thomson et al., 2008). Scholars have emphasised the social and transformatory potential of volunteering, since it enhances opportunities for skills development and the development of employability profiles, whilst contributing to social good (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014: 2).

In South Africa, research on student volunteerism is sparse, except for a few scholarly articles (Perold, Caraphina & Mohamed 2006; Surujlal & Dhurup; 2008; Van den Berg & Cuskelly, 2014; Joseph, 2016). Understanding the experiences of university students as episodic volunteers will add to this area of study and strengthen the scholarly work needed to advance community engagement in HE in South Africa.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The current study was linked to an NRF Research Project on community engagement, which sought to understand how community engagement was conceptualised, theorised and implemented at HE institutions in South Africa. It was part of one of the investigations that fell under the broad umbrella of community engagement within the NRF Project. The ethics number for this project is IREC 088/15 Project.

Although the NRF Project ran from 2015 to 2018, data for the present study were collected in 2018. Fourteen Bachelor of Technology students, who were registered for the Applied Development subject from the Child and Youth Care Program, DUT were recruited to participate in this study. This was after they had been engaging in voluntary work during that year.

Students were free to decide where they wanted to volunteer as well as the nature of their voluntary work and if they wanted to continue after their studies. They engaged in activities at the following organisations: Live Village and Little Hearts pre-Primary School, Aryan Benevolent Home, Child Welfare in Chatsworth, Masisukumeni Women's Crisis Centre, Tholuwazi Community Centre, Isibindi Child Care Centre (Kwa Dukuza), Sinozwelo Resource Centre, Luthuli High school in Port Shepstone. Much of the voluntary work centred on care for disadvantaged children, orphans, women, the elderly and those physically challenged. Their activities focused on fundraising, initiating food gardens in communities affiliated with these organisations and initiating of social or recreational programs for those at these organisations or in communities affiliated with them. Child and Youth Care, the Degree for which the students were registered, has as its focus the care, upliftment and empowerment of needy children, youth and their families. Hence,

their choice of the aforementioned organisations inevitably created exposure to situations linked to their professional preparedness as child and youth care workers.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology was used to guide this study. The data were collected using both semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with BTech students (N=14) from the Child and Youth Care Program. Interviews were between an hour and an hour and a half, whilst the focus group discussion was for approximately an hour and a half. The interviews and focus group discussion were conducted by the Principal Investigator of the NRF Project, who is also a qualified social service professional. She was assisted during the focus group discussion by a qualified Child and Youth Care Practitioner, who is pursuing a postgraduate study on student volunteerism. In accordance with DUT ethics protocols, students were assured of their anonymity in terms of participating in the study and all participation was done voluntarily.

The research questions focused on how students conceptualised voluntary work, what values they had used to guide voluntary work, and how they and the communities in which they volunteered had benefitted from the volunteer experience. Transcripts from both the interviews and focus group discussions served to form a rich understanding of the students' volunteer experiences. The researcher was able to distil several themes for discussion from the participants' responses. These themes emerged from subjecting the data to thematic analysis as outlined by Terry et al. (2017). The analysis followed the following phases:

- Phase 1: Each transcript and the data from the interviews and focus group discussions were read and re-read carefully to obtain an understanding of the participants' views.
- Phase 2: The researcher generated labels to link the data to the research questions so that the data could be coded.
- Phase 3: The data and codes were examined. Broad patterns were identified, and notes were made during transcription, which translated into themes.
- Phase 4: The themes were reviewed against the dataset to determine if they tell the story of the data and if they answered the research questions. This enabled the researcher to identify patterns and check if they reflected the meanings in relation to the data.
- Phase 5: A detailed analysis was done for each theme and each theme was given a name. This was done to further refine the themes.
- Phase 6: The researcher interpreted the data and their meanings and contextualised the analysis in relation to the existing literature.

Following the analysis, member checking with the participants was undertaken to ensure that the analysis corresponded with their responses during the interviews and focus group discussion (Birt et al., 2016). This was to ensure trustworthiness.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The researcher followed the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality, and informed consent. All participants were assured that their identities would be kept anonymous and that their responses would not be used without their prior consent (Arifin, 2018). No coercion was used in the recruitment of participants and they were informed that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the study. The study was granted ethical clearance by the institution's research ethics committee (IREC 088/15).

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Theme 1: Understanding volunteerism

Volunteerism is to do something good for others, example children, the less fortunate and elderly people. It is something that is not forced but comes from within, meaning that one must do it wholeheartedly.

Volunteerism is offering your services for free to a person .... [it] is unpaid for.

It is basically doing things like doing things for other people that will benefit them with no intention of getting something in return.

It is helping out a person or people without expecting anything back or monetary value.

The students' concept of volunteerism, as illustrated by the quotations, mirror volunteerism findings as being non-compulsory, unpaid, externally oriented, formal activities taking place inside and outside the university setting. Demir, Khanna and Bowling (2015: 104) categorised it into four ways, namely: mutual aid or self-help, philanthropy or service to others, civic participation, and advocacy or campaigning. According to Penner (2004), volunteerism is non-obligatory helping or altruism, which is the act of helping another without expecting any reward (Hussin & Arshad, 2012).

The literature illustrates both the benefits of volunteerism for students and grounds notions in the data that volunteerism is very much a selfless activity. Horn (2012) wrote that students showed an increase in prosocial value orientation after engaging in community service for humanitarian organisations only when they were not explicitly pressured to do so. The ideal of active citizenship assumes then that volunteering is a choice, and the selfless volunteer who contributes to their communities is valued not just on the basis of his/her unique contribution, but because their contribution is given willingly without compulsion (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014).

### Theme 2: Values guiding volunteer work

Be accountable for whatever happens in the organisation for the work that you're doing.

Have compassion when you're doing it, do it whole heartedly.

Whenever you are going out there to volunteer, you must respect diversity of the people you're going to be working with.

You're going to meet people who have illnesses such as HIV and tuberculosis and we need to not make them feel as though they are different and distance ourselves.

I think maybe conscientise yourself with the cultural community because in that way you would know exactly what to expect and what not to expect and then you would know some little principles around culture.

As evidenced in the quotations above, respect for human diversity, empathy and being accountable were the crucial values underpinning volunteer work. Of significance was the fact that these values were similar to those underpinning child and youth care work in South Africa; hence, the volunteer experience to some degree exposed students to working with similar populations as those in their field. This was important as it strengthened professional preparedness to work without prejudice and discrimination and to demonstrate

empathy and care which are key attributes of child and youth care practice. Saltmarsh (cited in Battistoni & Longo, 2012) defined a set of civic learning outcomes for students as being based on three elements, namely: (i) civic knowledge, (ii) civic skills and (iii) civic values. The civic values acquired as evident in the data affirms the potential learning outcomes for students engaged in service activities such as volunteerism.

Scholars have concurred saying that the first function that volunteering serves is to allow people to express humanitarian values (Veludo-de-Oliveira et al., 2015). Empathy was also found to be related to one's willingness to become involved in volunteer activities (Atkins, Hart & Donnelly, 2005). This notion was evidenced amongst students who argued for compassion and empathy when working with disadvantaged communities, which was reflected in the data. Azuero et al. (2014) asserted that students who volunteer also gain in aspects related to racial concerns and tolerance, a commitment to disadvantaged communities, leadership abilities and social values. To this end, Butin (2003: 1677) states 'those doing the serving should be respectful of the circumstances, outlooks, and ways of life of those being served'. In the same vein, Banks and Butcher (2013) argued for the importance of respecting diverse individuals and communities and counteracting any form of discrimination and oppressive attitudes and actions during interactions with community members.

### **Theme 3: Learning from the community**

It should be a mutual process because either way, both the community and the institution as well as the students, are all benefitting from it.

Especially in the area that I was working in its deep rural so if we are going out to a certain place and you need to find out things from the chief of that place.

It actually taught me the simple basics of life which I didn't know how to do, like going out in the garden and actually learning about cultivating crops, watering them, it's something that you/I didn't learn in a degree.

Because what I also found there the people might not have degrees and diplomas but they've got a lot of experience, experience that you don't learn when you go to university, something that you have to experience for so many years in order to have that particular skill or that way of dealing with things.

I think like the university isolates us from the community. So when we go back we feel like we are better, but I'm isolated from my community like 3-4 years and then when I go back I cannot interact.

I was able to grasp what the community values are. I might not have had all the knowledge and I might have a DUT qualification, I didn't know much about the rural area but I was there and also learnt from them.

What we learn here is something that can actually be taken out to our communities and what we learn there, is something we can carry with us into the institutions.

You need to be teachable.

A very important theme that emerged was the awareness that the community was a rich learning space and that students could derive knowledge from their interactions in the community. The students opined that the learning within the community was more empowering and beneficial than the knowledge gained at university. It was Ramaley (2002: 14) who noted that 'university outreach can change society and outreach

can change the university', the mutuality of this transformation being the core process of engagement. Students' affirmation of the community as a learning space filled with contextually relevant knowledge is aligned with Weerts and Sandmann's (2008: 77) argument that challenged traditional notions which held that knowledge was only found, produced and distributed within the confines of the university.

Engagement then locates the university within an ecosystem of knowledge production, requiring interaction with other knowledge producers outside the university for the creation of new problem-solving knowledge through a multidirectional flow of knowledge and expertise. In this paradigm, there are richer opportunities to learn cooperative and creative problem-solving behaviours within learning environments in which faculty, students and community members deliberate on issues and learn together (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011: 21).

One of the crucial functions of volunteering is its ability to promote new learning experiences and to gain a better understanding of the world, society, different cultural contexts and the self (Veludo-de-Oliveira, Pallister & Foxall, 2015). This was evidenced in the excerpts above. Scholars have suggested that some of the reasons people perform voluntary service include that they may receive the benefits of self-development and knowledge (Ryan, Kaplan & Grese, 2001; Walter, 2005). Research has documented that those who have engaged in volunteer activities have indicated increased knowledge and skills which relates to the welfare of the community (e.g., solving real-world problems and understanding people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds) (Harnish, Bridges & Adolph, 2016).

More importantly, research has found that exposing students to voluntary projects changes their perspectives on social responsibility, the meaning of life and their commitment towards community engagement (Azucero et al., 2014). This is particularly true given that one of the participants lamented that the university has 'disconnected' them from communities. This suggests that if enhanced engagement between universities and communities are nurtured, students and community members will become more involved in the co-creation of knowledge. Hence, more dramatic shifts in the way academics advance community service within teaching and learning is crucial.

Volunteer programmes within community organisations strengthen opportunities for work experience, internships, and other practical learning and research experiences for academic programmes (Sachs & Clark, 2017). More particularly, in a teaching and learning context, volunteer efforts can strengthen discipline-specific knowledge and skills, critical analytical and integrative thinking, problem solving and research capability, and creativeness and innovativeness amongst students (Sachs & Clark, 2017). One of the most important aspects of volunteerism, however, is that it is predicated on reversing the established academic practice of using the community for the university's own ends. Volunteerism revolves around community service as opposed to other forms of engagement, such as community-based research which may be based on an imbalance of benefits and responsibilities between the university and its community partners (Zlotkowski, 2011).

#### **Theme 4: Benefits of volunteerism**

You know the centre I was in, the Women Crisis Centre, the cases and everything that is happening there you kind of like ask yourself, why haven't I been doing this?

I've managed to find my ground it's kind of like kept me going truly what I have to do. I rather not do anything else but offer my services to other people.

It was self-fulfilling because going to the children's home... they make you feel like you've made their day.



And you also get happiness and when you go to these children's homes.

Working with these women especially in deep rural areas taught me something. It taught me that there is a strength in women, made me appreciate myself even more because of the things they've been through and the strength, looking forward to another day you will sit with them and listen to their stories.

It grew me emotionally.

It gave me experience as a student. I know what to do, I gained through experience. I'm not going to go out there with just knowledge. I also have experience.

The aforementioned excerpts draw attention to the importance of the civic dimensions of education, which not only emphasises the need for the development of disciplinary mastery and competence but also for civic awareness and competence. Civic learning illuminates the socially responsive aspects of disciplinary knowledge, those dimensions that expand the view of education to include learning and developing the knowledge, skills and values of democratic citizenship (Saltmarsh, 2017). Civic learning includes knowledge that is historical and political as well as civic knowledge that arises from academic and community sources. It also includes critical thinking, communication and public problem-solving skills, civic judgment, civic imagination and creativity, collective action, coalition building as well as key values such as justice, inclusion and participation (Saltmarsh, 2017).

In addition to this, volunteerism amongst undergraduate students brings with it the opportunity to broaden students' experiences of service and helping others and to simultaneously provide work-related experience (Johnston, Acker & McQuarrine, 2018). This was true of the current sample, as participants are being trained to work with vulnerable children and youth and their families. Their volunteer activities at childcare facilities and shelters for abused women provided greater exposure to the contextual realities they will face when they join the workplace as professional child and youth care workers. Volunteer experiences in deep rural spaces were even more crucial to create active learning experiences and to better appreciate the socio-economic realities that the majority of vulnerable families and communities endure in South Africa.

Hence, volunteer work with disadvantaged and marginalised people, within their real-life settings, offered students the opportunity to interact with community members in a more authentic space. Hollander and Meeropol (2006) expressed that organised, developmental approaches to service learning raise students' consciousness of poverty issues through service. They added that whilst one-on-one volunteer work may create an eye-opener for students about how socially excluded communities live, the introduction of other learning activities beyond this experience can help achieve a deeper and more long-lasting effect with regards to important discipline-specific academic issues.

Community engagement brings with it the awareness of how social justice issues are embedded within the legacies of racial, ethnic, class and gender discrimination. Those who do community service at universities are generally young people who have more advantages than those they are serving. This being the case, concerns about racism and other biases, injustice, oppression, and unearned privilege should become part of classroom discussions related to community service (Nieto, 2000). As Nieto (2000) said, challenging students to reconsider assumptions made about society and the people they interact with during community service can help them move beyond their stereotypical notions of difference. This can provoke a deeper structural analysis of the origins and causes of social inequalities and move community service 'from an individual feel-good experience to social responsibility' (Nieto, 2000: xi) as part of learning. These issues formed the crux of discussions post their volunteer work.

Research has shown that there are several benefits to undergraduates' participation in community engagement. Soria, Nobbe and Fink (2013:119) stated that undergraduates who participate in community service are more likely to discover 'new perspectives on the world through the development of connections with others'. McGowan et al. (2013) said that when students experience diversity through community service and engagement, it can serve as a catalyst for reflective experience, particularly with regards to self-questioning of assumptions. Williams, Soria and Rickson (2016) said that such changes in their interpretation of others bring a greater appreciation for diversity and reduction of negative stereotypes. Community engagement was also found both to enable identity development, civic knowledge, dialogue across difference, and to promote communication and a sense of belonging at institutions (Williams, Soria & Rickson, 2016).

Findings from the study provided both a richer understanding of what volunteerism is and of the key values of human empathy, respect for diversity and care, which were exemplified in the data. More importantly, the findings revealed that community spaces where volunteer work occurred could also act as spaces of learning, as students were exposed to different cultures and ways of life, alternative types of knowledge such as growing crops, and working through cultural gatekeepers or the chiefs of villages in order to undertake work. As indicated, students had the opportunity to transfer knowledge and skills acquired through formal university education back into the community as well. This became more visible within the context of the data in the final theme on the benefits of volunteerism as students gained exposure to the realities of issues in women's shelters and childcare organisations. Finally, what was found was deep support for the university to promote volunteerism so that students could find ways to support and care for both people and organisations who deal with issues of abuse, neglect and poverty.

### **Theme 5: Role of university in promoting volunteerism**

All faculties and departments... it should be like a university thing like a community-based programme like volunteering where you recruit students to actually go out there and volunteer.

There is so much the students can actually give to people and communities. We need to understand that institutions are not in isolation from our communities. We need them for instance there are organisations that cannot even afford a single administrator so if we can help these institutions, like DUT working together with our communities, I hope that it can actually help to uplift these communities.

I think it will be wise if an institution maybe had a programme that definitely goes for volunteering where we have students that actually go out there into the communities and volunteer.

In South Africa you don't really hear much you get websites where people must volunteer, but universities there's not actually a programme that says we have to volunteer. So that's something that should be changed.

It's mandatory for every student to have a year of community service so why don't we do it?

What emerged within the data was strong support amongst students for community engagement to become entrenched within HE institutions and for community service initiatives. Musil (2003) concurred that civic learning must be academically based. She added that responsibility for this must occur through volunteer community centres on campus and civic engagement should become rooted in the heart of academy through its courses, its research and its faculty work. She concluded that educating for democratic citizenship should be conveyed also through what is learned in the curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

Volunteerism not only benefits the students in terms of an increased skills portfolio but also an enriched educational experience, increased social capital and deeper socio-political awareness. It also inculcates a sense of responsibility in giving back to society (Sahri et. al., 2013). The notion of an engaged university challenges academic departments to rethink their teaching role so as to create greater opportunities to advance community engagement and social responsibility amongst students. It compels academics to also reconsider the evolving relationship between university and community and how community partnerships form new relationships for both students and academics. This paper shed light on one potential way in which to strengthen the incorporation of engagement into an academic department through volunteerism. Community engagement is emerging slowly alongside teaching and research in HE in South Africa. One possible reason for this is a lack of understanding with regards to how engagement may be integrated into the academic programme through service learning, community outreach and community-based participatory research. Encouraging student volunteerism is one way in which academic departments can become more engaged, as evidenced within this paper. As found not only are civic graduate attributes enhanced, but students were able to learn values that prepare them for professional practice as well. Hence, it reflected how engaged practices enhance student learning and documents the important role that communities can play in effective teaching and learning, thereby grounding developing notions of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Cicccone & Meyers, 2006).

Teachers need to create opportunities for engagement through service learning and volunteerism and create opportunities for deeper classroom discussions around such experiences. In so doing, both the classroom and community spaces will enable students to have a greater voice around community issues. Battistoni and Longo (2012: 210) concluded that teaching and learning can be enhanced by 'immersing students in the communities that surround campus so that they can learn to listen eloquently to themselves and bring the voices of the community campus, as they themselves deliberate on key community issues'. Student volunteerism creates the potential for this to be achieved.

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