



# Analysis of the research design used in a Tourism Management service learning project

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## Abstract

South African Universities of Technology have incorporated service learning (SL) in various curricula as a standard mechanism. SL is a curriculum based and credit bearing project linked to a subject(s) or course module(s), with the primary goal of benefiting participants or communities. By using the expertise of university faculties and departments, this community upliftment initiative focuses on promoting social responsiveness of students where forms of service learning reflections are not formalised. This article aims to critically analyse the research design used in a Tourism Management service learning project in order to contribute to the body of service learning research knowledge. To explore the achievements of the SL project for students as well as the social benefits for participating communities, action research was undertaken. A census sample was drawn to collect quantitative and qualitative data from participants. Post project reflections from all participants were collected immediately after each project completion. A period of 12 months post project completion was allocated before further probing was conducted. Triangulated data pointed to personal and positive business developments for participating communities and heightened entrepreneurial awareness in students. 80% of students gained critical business skills from the project, and 100% of the community participants responded yes to their businesses positively benefiting from the SL project. In sharing reflections of the SL project, this article will attempt to highlight the pros and cons of the research methods followed in this project. In action research planning pre-projects for the purpose of research must be meticulous to ensure the integrity of data to be collected post projects. Crucial elements that require researcher attention when planning projects will be discussed. As essential as planning for SL projects is, planning for action research is also critical to the project. In the planning of SL projects, coordinators must compile a research plan in conjunction with a project plan before any project commencement.

**Keywords:** community engagement, mixed-methods, participatory research, service learning, action research.

## Introduction

South African tourism skills-development and entrepreneurial skills development are still a crucial point of discussion within the tourism industry. The tourism sector is viewed by aspiring business owners as having low barriers of entry: people view it as a straightforward entrepreneurial venture which is easy to start and run successfully (Becton, & Graetz, 2001:110-112; Lyons, Young, Hanley & Stolk, 2015:1-2). The lack of understanding of the complexity of the sector has prevented many new start-up businesses from succeeding (Page & Connell, 2014:216). Private enterprises and small businesses contribute roughly 39% of the country's annual GDP as well as an employment contribution of approximately 54% between the 2006 and 2010 period (Brand, Du Preez, & Schutte, 2007:189; Mahembe, 2011:13-14), from an average of 27% to 34% during the 2001 to 2006 period (SA. DTI, 2008:xxix), while the contribution to GDP increased to 45% in 2014 (Zulu, 2014:1). With research indicating increasing economic impact from entrepreneurial development in terms of GDP, Rogerson (2004:767) warns that clear reporting must be conducted into the development of training initiatives for new incumbents and developing enterprises which require more focus.



Studies into the causes of business failure indicate the lack of management skills, limited financial knowledge and the unwillingness of business owners to develop and change, are some of the common reasons for business failure (Solomon, Frese, Friedrich & Glaud, 2013:256). These critical inhibitors of business success must be exposed and addressed (Herrington, Kew & Kew, 2010:15). Clear links are yet to be developed for tourism enterprise success at all levels (SME Toolkit South Africa, 2016; Phakathi, 2016). Higher Education (HE) institutions and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) can address the issues by exposing students to excellent entrepreneurial skills and technical expertise (Tourism Update, 2015).

### **Teaching and learning programmes in universities**

HE institutions use training models like SL in some Faculty programmes which could potentially improve skills of freshly graduated candidates which could result in the success of start-up enterprises. SL is a curriculum-based learning model in South African HE, a learning experiential programme that is credit bearing and takes place as an organised service activity (Fourie, 2003:32; Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999:384-386). In the engagement activities, reflection on service activities is regarded as an essential tool that improves learning and understanding of service actions by all parties involved in the projects (Council on Higher Education, 2006:16-18; Smith-Tolken, 2013:50-51). Additionally the experiences of SL fosters students' learning and improves civic responsibility (Sandmann, Kiely, & Grenier, 2009:24).

The SL project of the Tourism Management Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) is unique in design in that the tangibility of the outcomes of the project are based on paper results in the form of business plan-proposals for businesses to implement. Many of these projects focus on assisting impoverished communities with door-to-door education campaigns, about social ills, or by approaching non-profit organisations to help improve building structures (Keating, 2014). The Tourism Management SL Project is based on collaboration with business representatives (Easterling & Rudell, 1997) on creating proposals that the tourism enterprises can independently consult after the project is completed. Business owners view their businesses from an outsiders perspective, allowing them to assess the strengths and challenges faced by their organisations. Students are able to identify their skills limitations in understanding the operations of tourism enterprises (Groenewald & Schurink, 2003:2; Zwane, Du Plessis & Slabbert, 2014:2).

### **Benefits linked to service learning projects**

The primary role of SL in learning institutions is to link students' learning to life lessons and secondarily to solve dynamic community problems and effect social change (Kowalewski, 2004:131). The mentorship-type relationship in which students are able to learn entrepreneurial skills from the partnered business owners, encourage the development of networks and a sense of social responsibility (Giles & Eyler, 1998:65). Basardien, Friedrich & Parker (2013:287) are of the view that as students work closely with communities on projects, develop more courage to start their own enterprises after graduating from a university. In addition to the knowledge they disseminated to the broader community, the tacit or informal learning students were exposed to during site visits, at business meetings, and while interacting with the spell this out. In publishing we spell out abbreviations when we are using them for the first time small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs) all became part of their life-long learning (Hall, 2010). SL participation fostered by group work allowed students to create strong peer interaction (Gallini & Moely, 2003:6).

Historically, evidence of the benefits of SL for students has outweighed the benefits offered to communities (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005:135), although Lesser and Storck (2001:834-835) outline that these interactions hold measurable benefits for communities. Continuous studies on SL projects are essential to ensure that SL advocates keeping well away from self-serving



projects which only focus on the academic benefits of students and do nothing for the special upliftment of the communities (Watson, 2007:22-23).

For the small medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) SL participation improves partnerships with HE institutions. Partnerships in SL are based on collaboration where all parties involved have some form of knowledge to teach and learn (Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005:104). Jacoby (2003:4) describes this process as the exchange of knowledge and resources at a local, regional, national and global level, highlighting the growth potential for such collaborations.

SL project leaders and universities must enforce the collection of feedback from the participating communities. This lack of community-centred data has been blamed on practical issues such as limited time to collect data for research (Cruz & Giles, 2000:28), as well as political and intellectual issues. As the country's efforts on developing training mechanisms for the success of spell out. Same as above SMMEs, it thus becomes crucial to share best practices and build on the body of knowledge in the entrepreneurship development sphere. This paper outlines the SL project data collection plan, and shares methodological tools to draw the varied data to be collected per SL project (Sale, Lohfeld & Brazil, 2002:50-51). This article aims to critically analyse the research design used in a Tourism Management service learning project in order to contribute to the body of service level knowledge. The SL practitioners research methodology and procedures in a SL project will be outlined.

## **Methodology**

Community engagement projects are unique in nature (Butin, 2006:492). Action research adopts varied approaches as a result of (1) study variables, (2) SL project design and (3) forms of feedback required from SL participants. A Mixed approach was adopted for the project, qualitative methods were used to gather insights from the participants regarding their participation in the SL project, while quantitative tools were used to establish statistical reliability of skills gained from the project (Ahmad, 2015:23). Three varied research tools were used to collect data. All tools were specifically designed for students and SMTE participants. These included reflection comments, one-on-one and focus group interviews, as well as self-administered questionnaires, all split according to the student and SMTE participants.

The SL study population was 36 small medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs) and 178 third year students who participated in the 2012 and 2013 SL project. SMTE mark rubrics and student reflection presentations conducted immediately after the SL projects were recorded at the end of the projects, reporting perceptions of student performance during the SL project. Twelve months after the study completion, nine (23%) SMTE questionnaire responses were received and 25 of 178 student questionnaires were received, making the response rate 14%. Two SMTEs participated in one-on-one interviews and five students made up the focus group panel.

To ensure transparency within the research process, the sampling and data collection process must be made clear to all stakeholders (Bryman, 2012:406). The Western Cape Investment and Trade Promotion Agency (WESGRO), as the SL partner was a link for the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) to gain access to the SMTEs for participation. The agency has over 200 registered SMTEs on its database, all of whom were invited to participate in the SL project conducted during 2012 and 2013, with data collection completed in 2014. Approval to participate in the research project was requested from the agency and each participating SMTE representative. Ethics approval from the UoT research unit and the Tourism Management department was sought.

## **Data Collection instruments**

As illustrated in Table 1 three categories of data were identified as A1 indicating the SMTE questionnaires and A2 student questionnaires. The second category, B1 was one-on-one



interviews with SMTEs and B2 the focus-group interview. The third category of data was the reflective comments, C1 were the SMTE rubric comments and C2 the comments from student group reflections:

### *Self-administered questionnaires*

Two different sets of questionnaires were designed for the students and the business representatives to assess each groups' reflections and perceptions of their SL experiences. All questionnaires were assessed by two different staff members in the CPUT Tourism Management Department as well as being reviewed by an administrator at the WIL centre to assess the difficulty of questions and degree of understanding of the questions. A statistician at the CPUT research centre assessed the questionnaires in comparison to the objectives of the study. These processes were completed in preparation for the questionnaires being sent to the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences Ethics Committee for approval to continue with the study.

#### **A1 - Self-administered questionnaires for SMTEs**

Questionnaires for SMTEs followed both the quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The close-ended questions were followed by an open ended motivation section for further probing of the answers provided (Oppenheim, 1996:114). From an ethics perspective, the questionnaires included a cover page stating the reasons for the research and communicating that participation was voluntary (Denscombe, 2010:332-334). The sections dealing with perceptions consisted of attitudinal scales following a five point Likert scale which was varied with statements including strongly agree to strongly disagree, very bad to very good and a five-point percentage weighting scale (Welman & Kruger, 2002:149-151).

The second form of questioning was based on a series of Yes/No answers relating to perceptions of the process of the SL project from start to conclusion. Each Yes/No question was also coupled with a motivational question to allow respondents to clearly support their answers (Oppenheim, 1996:114).

#### **A2 - Self-administered questionnaires for students**

The student questionnaires followed a quantitative approach aimed at probing skills requirements of SL projects for participating students. The questionnaire section included the geographical data section, followed by close-ended question sections, asking about the students' perceptions of the SL experiences. The question design in the later sections of the students' questionnaire included a 5-point Likert scale. The scales ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire also included a cover page explaining participant's voluntary participation in the study.

### *Interviews*

The second phase of data collection was the participant interview. SMTEs were invited to one-on-one interviews, while students were invited to focus group interviews. The interviews are discussed as follows:

#### **B1 - In-depth interviews with SMTEs**

All semi-structured interviews were conducted after questionnaires were collected. All interviews were conducted with permission to record each session from the interviewees. The cover page of the interview schedule was also read out to the interviewees reminding them of the aim of the study and their voluntary participation.



## B2 - Focus group interview with students

A period of a month, from mid-August 2014 to mid-September 2014 was set aside to conclude the interviews with students. The semi-structured interview followed a list of topics which were covered in the questionnaire to probe the students' reasoning on the answers that were provided in the questionnaire (Bryman, 2012:471). The flexible approach of the focus-group interview allowed for questions to be added during the process arising from new themes that developed from the conversation.

### *Reflection comments*

The final day of the SL project was designed as a presentation day where the student groups presented the marketing and/or business plans to the panel of assessors. The reflection tools are discussed below.

## C1 - Mark rubric comments from SMTEs

Qualitative research allows for collection of people's perceptions of events as they occur (Burton & Steane, 2004:160). Once the SL project was concluded, students were expected to present the Business Plans and Marketing Plans to a panel of assessors and community members. The presentations were assessed by all panel members including the community members. The comments from the rubrics were submitted on the day of the presentations and provided insight into the SMTE representative's perceptions of the student feedback and performance during the SL project.

## C2 - Student reflection presentations on service learning

Selender (1997:7) emphasises the importance of using a combination of appropriate research tools within qualitative research to gather valuable data. At the end of the SL project, and as part of the learning experience, students presented their SL experiences based on the following framework: SL reflections, learning experiences, and students' perceptions of the influence of SL participation on their life experiences, and recommendations to participating SMTEs for operational improvements. For the purpose of this study the presentations provided a deeper view into the students' experiences of their involvement in SL projects and how beneficial they thought the project was. This data will be used to inform the type of learning that occurs during future SL projects.

**Table 1: Process of data triangulation**

Data identification table							
	1. SMTEs data	2. Student data					
A	Self-administered questionnaires	Self-administered questionnaires					
B	One-on-one interviews	Focus group interview					
C	Mark rubrics	Reflection presentations					
Steps in data analysis							
<u>Step 1: Data analysis</u>	<table style="border: none; margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 10px;">A1+A2</td> <td rowspan="3" style="font-size: 3em; vertical-align: middle;">}</td> <td rowspan="3" style="padding-left: 10px;">results</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B1+B2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>C1+C2</td> </tr> </table>		A1+A2	}	results	B1+B2	C1+C2
A1+A2	}	results					
B1+B2							
C1+C2							



<u>Step 2: Data triangulation</u>	$\left. \begin{array}{c} \text{SMTEs} \\ \text{Students} \end{array} \right\}$ A1+B1+C1 results A2+B2+C2
<u>Step 3: Comparative analysis</u>	Step 1 Results + Step 2 Results

**Source:** Researcher's construction

As the researcher was the SL coordinator, close interaction with study participants took place during the SL project. The impact of past projects were applied to future SL projects from which further research will be conducted. The action research approach followed a qualitative and quantitative approach where various research tools were used to collect data. Transcribed interview recordings were constructively analysed and coded using the ATLAS.ti programme. The quantitative data was analysed with the SPSS.20 programme to produce frequency tables.

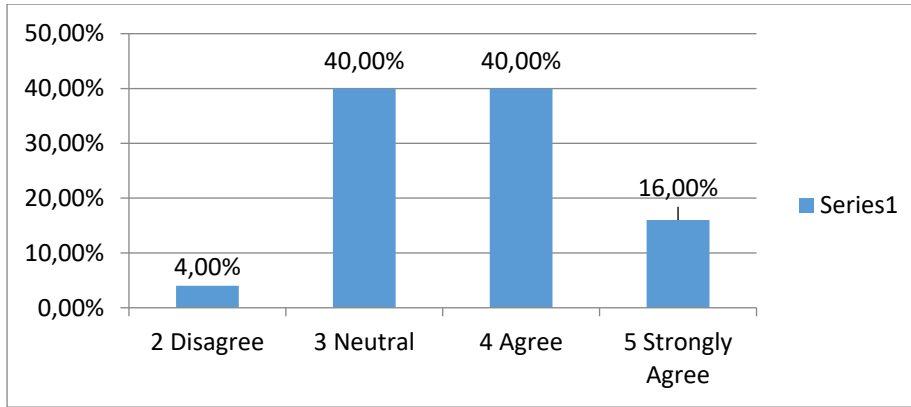
Data triangulation was conducted and data sources for each research group were compared for similarities or contradictions. The SMTE data was also compared for recurring themes. A complete assessment of themes was prepared and conclusions were drawn at this stage and compared to the objectives of the study, drawing out similar or contradicting themes. At this stage, the results were put through a comparative analysis where all themes developed from the SMTE and student were assessed and compared.

## Results and Discussion

The intention of the service learning project was for venture improvement of the participating SMTE community. It was meant to bring about positive social change, provide new ideas for businesses and build future plans to cement the success of the business. Students integrated information learnt from the classroom to help develop business or marketing plans with participating ventures. The students documented new ideas into business plans that were handed over to participating SMTEs after the completion of the project. Results will be presented to assess participant experiences from the SL project, followed by a discussion of the effectiveness of the results based on the data tools used.

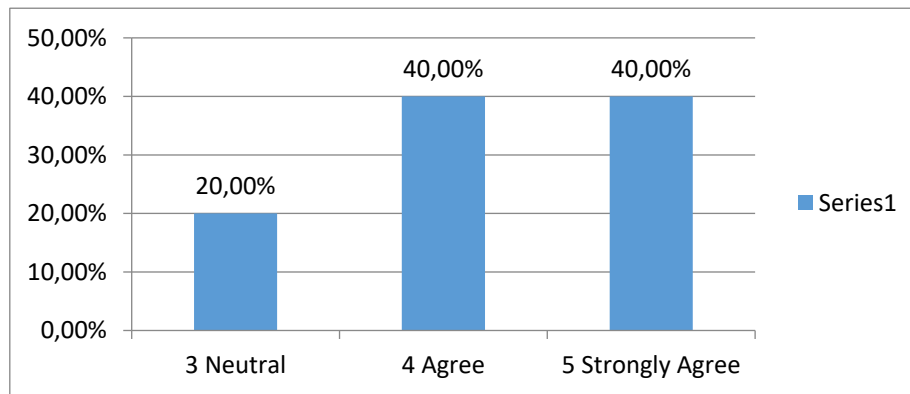
### Did students acquire life skills?

Service learning projects link students' learning to life lessons while solving dynamic community problems or effecting social change (Kowalewski, 2004:131). From the students' perspective SL offers a mentorship-type relationship in which students are able to learn entrepreneurial skills from the partnered business owners. As they work closely with communities on the project, they may gain courage to start their own enterprises after graduating from a university due to the first-hand experience provided by such projects (Basardien et al., 2013:287).



**Figure 1: Did the students acquire some experience in the operations of a tourism business?**

On a personal level, SL may help boost students' confidence in building relationships within the working environment and may also increase their sense of social responsibility (Giles & Eyler, 1998:65). There is no evidence to indicate that students gain knowledge and confidence to start their own small tourism business.



**Figure 2: What were the benefits of SL for communities?**

Feedback from participating communities indicated a 80% satisfaction of the benefits sought from the SL project, indicated as personal benefits form the interaction wit students and knowledge parted on the students. For the organisation benefits Included input on from students and staff on limitation on the operational side of the tourism business and an updated business and or marketing plan.

### **Interview feedback relating to benefits for participating SMTEs**

On relating if the SL project was beneficial for the business or for the person involved, the responses differed between the two respondents. Both participants reported positive benefits to themselves and the business, as Resp1 indicated that "...*personal aspects it was very good, because it builds on oneself from business and management perspective*". The interview with Resp2 however, highlighted benefits for the business and not on a personal level. She indicated that the students emphasised two essential developments that the business required, saying "...*students highlighted a need for more marketing was pointed out*" and "...*extra facilities that can augment the business*".

Interview feedback indicated some level of confidence in the students' abilities but highlighted limitations on their practical applicability of the recommendations in business or marketing plan documents. Starting with the comments on the students' abilities to positively influence



changes in companies, the feedback was positive. Resp2 had mixed feedback between the students' performance and level of maturity, indicating "...I think they were on the spot with their suggestions. They were spot on and it was those small things and not major things [referring to some of the students unrealistic recommendations like the guesthouse having a 100% occupancy rate all year-round]...they had done their homework as a group". Feedback from Resp1 was also varied, stating that "...there was very good points from the business aspect from what they had put forward, which to me was quite good". He added a strong note in the end stating that he had confidence in the students' capabilities "...I have got confidence in them and I have a lot of faith to say they got the ability..."

### The focus group interview with students

The focus group interview focused mainly on topics pertaining to the students' experiences of the SL project and feedback on perceived skills learned. A clear outcome from the discussion was that there is a clear indication of learning that takes place from the SL projects.

**Table 2: Skills learned during SL participation**

Identified skill	Comments by students
Interpersonal skills	"...I think I gained interpersonal skills when you learn to work well with other people. Before then I was the type of person who, I like to do things by myself." (FP3)
Conflict management	"...and another thing I was working with groups, when others don't get to do their part and you got to say things..." (FP2)
Leadership skills	" my first year project is used to avoid being the leader because I know as a leader you have to take charge and that you are doing most of the work....it was a bit difficult" (FP1)
Communication skills	"...it was a bit difficult, but I had to deal with everyone". (FP1)

An analysis of the discussions highlighted an important aspect of the project, which was conscious awareness of personal development and self-actualisation in the students. The focus group interviews occurred 12 months after the project. The level of experience satisfaction from the responses indicated how SL projects can be a useful tool for UoTs to use in building personal attributes of students, than focusing on industry skills to be learnt from the projects.

### Rubrics on the Reflections by community participants

Immediately after project completion, SMTE participants completed reflection SMTE comments on their coordinated efforts with students. SMTE representatives on the mark rubrics reflected on their perceptions of the students' presentations, and the students' efforts during the project:

"...I would like to state that working with group 4 could have been more successful if we had more communication between the two groups. The amount of pages is also too much (56) and for applications I will have to scale it down to an acceptable amount. However there is still room for improvement."

"...What transpired according to me is that there was no group cohesion (not working together) which culminated very poor presentation and ultimately they failed to produce something that can be useful to improve the marketing of my business."





“...I found the students very eager to learn. They were friendly, knowledgeable and professional. They worked together as a team. Everyone participated and this is evident when they did the oral and in this speed point presentation. In my opinion as students they delivered high quality material. However there is always room for improvement and one has to keep abreast of ever- changing technology. Thank you”

“...My compliments to the lecturer as the students were very professional and well advised.”

“...I was somewhat disappointed by the feedback as it seems that the students presentation and study was based almost entirely on my business plan document which I gave to them. The study was based on suggestions which I made to them. I would have liked to have more of their own independent thoughts and research. Otherwise it was great to be part of this project and I thank CPUT for the opportunity.”

“...It was a good experience for students to spend time in real business, in order to be better prepared in-terms of starting a job in the tourism Industry”.

“...Well presented information. Definitely drew attention to some things that we had overlooked. Job well done.”

Feedback from the above rubrics indicated the following challenges; issues with group dynamics, student over-reliance on the communities and lack of quality from the students feedback. Contrary positive achievements of the project alluded to; development of leadership qualities in students, satisfaction with student recommendations, appreciation of university mentorship. This compared with data from the SMTE interviews indicated correlations in feedback.

The various data collection tools; questionnaires, interviews (one-on-one and focus groups) and reflection comments were used to extract data from all SL participants. The analysis of the data collected uncovered similarities in the data and themes that emerged from the various data sources. The emergence of the themes indicated the reliability of the data collected from the participants (Morrow, 2005:254).

More profoundly the use of mixed- methods, and varied data collection periods allowed for more comprehensive data on the study to be collected at a later stage, rather than immediately after project completion. The reflection presentations which were compiled immediately after the project was completed provided critique on the processes of the SL project, than being reflective on the achievement of any planned benefits of the project. This could be due to the fact that at the end of a long-term project all participants will be irritated and longing for project completion. Based on these assumptions any perception data of experiences may be overpowered by irritability with processes and thus become skewed, making the data unreliable.

The unstructured SMTE rubric feedback collected, immediately after project completion allowed for constructive feedback of the project to be communicated. Both students and community feedback at this stage was critical of processes rather than experiences. Thus action researchers may consider following the qualitative process of collecting unstructured reflections before any other forms of data can be collected. This process will allow for critical information of the project, to be used in the planning process of upcoming projects and for improvements to be implemented.

The SL project was a six-month programme. Time allocated post the SL project allowed for reflecting learning to develop and for the experiences to become appreciated. This process can be beneficial in obtaining rich data based on reflections and social or behavioural change which could augment or reinforce perceptions of the SL experiences (Lowe & Kerr, 1998).



Collecting voluminous data all at once after a long tedious project, may negatively influence the data to be collected due to respondent fatigue.

## Conclusion

This paper discussed the methodological process used in the case of the SL project in the Tourism Department of a UoT. Various feedback of the SL project based on varying times of data collection was essential. Reflection comments were collected directly after the completion of the project. This feedback was an analysis of students' performance during the SL project. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted twelve months after project completion. The participating organisations required time to review and decide which aspects of the business plan would be effectively integrated into their organisations. This feedback assessed the ideas compiled in the business plans and the exercise allowed for a reflection on what participants felt was valuable experiences of the SL project.

Researchers must be cognisant of time allocations for collection of data collection, and emersion of experiences in timing data collection for SL projects. The results of the SL study outlined the importance and timing of data collection to maximise the meaningfulness of collected data. Limitations of this Challenges of long periods allocated after the completion of a project must be outlined, as participation in the research may dwindle and tracking of participants becomes difficult.

## Recommendations for future research

The critique of the mixed methodology data collection of these projects must have been planned from the start of a project, with a clear research plan post a service learning plan, for effective data collection to take place. Recommendations for universities are for Faculties to ensure that SL project plans include considerations for SL research. Coordinators planning their department community engagement projects must draw up a comprehensive research plan in conjunction with their SL project plans.

Issues with a number of SL research is the case-based format and varied forms of data collected from these projects, with results that cannot be generalised. A systematic review of SL research papers needs to be considered for future research to assess the assumption of respondent fatigue on the type of data collected.

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