
Research article

Making community-based learning and teaching happen: findings from an institutional study

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Abstract

Community-based learning and teaching in higher education, and other versions of it, such as service learning, are now part of many curricula worldwide. In the UK, there is a growing community of practitioners interested in student learning in partnership with local communities. With this expansion, however, there is little institution-based research which 'looks within', in terms of shared understanding and supporting this type of experiential learning 'at scale'. Within the context of increasing interdisciplinary interest by those developing curricula beyond the traditional home of engaged research and teaching (for example, in urban studies and sociology), we undertook an institution-wide study to discover the shared understandings of community-based learning and teaching, including the potential barriers to, and opportunities for, community-based learning and teaching approaches. In this article, we share insights from a series of 20 university stakeholder interviews, which involved academic teachers, engagement professionals and those

supporting learning and teaching. We used a ‘students-as-partners’ approach, where students interested in community-based learning took the leading role in the qualitative study. Our findings reveal the values and expectations, formal learning benefits and infrastructural considerations to implement this type of learning as part of future-facing curricula. We also provide recommendations for universities seeking to develop their own approaches towards facilitating community-based learning and teaching.

Keywords community-based learning; partnerships; stakeholder mapping; curriculum design; public engagement; work-based learning

Introduction

With the opening of an increasing number of regional-based campuses, UK universities are aiming to address, and even transform, the traditional barriers between research, teaching and engagement (Betts et al., 2022). This is accompanied by an overall shift in thinking, by those inside and outside campus walls, of the role of the twenty-first-century university and what its core business should be. Universities must not only have a focus on research and teaching, knowledge exchange and enterprise, but they must also demonstrate their role and value in society and with the various local communities with which they engage. These perspectives are not necessarily new; however, there is an increased prevalence of questions and commentary about regional growth and the role of the university in academic, policy and media contexts (Benneworth and Fitjar, 2019; Jongbloed and Goedegebuure, 2001; Laing, 2016; Taylor, 2020).

Engagement, in the broadest sense used here, means the configuration of the relationship between universities and their locality. An ‘engaged university’ is therefore one that ‘does not treat public engagement as an “add on” or fringe activity. It embeds public engagement into the way it approaches its work. Typically, engaged universities will have activities in place which incorporate public engagement into their research, knowledge exchange, teaching, and social responsibility’ (NCCPE, 2022: n.p.).

This article is concerned with one element of this activity: the embedding of engagement into the teaching at a new regional-based campus. It uses as a case study the large portfolio of taught postgraduate and undergraduate degree programmes at a large public research university in the UK. Teaching is not always neatly separated from the other core activities such as research or social responsibility. However, the key focus of our research is to address some of the challenges and opportunities arising in the development of community-based learning and teaching.

Our work was initially prompted by a need to better identify, listen to and respond to academics who were inspired by the prospect of launching community-facing and innovative interdisciplinary programmes for the university campus ‘at scale’. Despite there being a lot of interest and motivation to participate in this activity, moving from the traditional individualised approaches to embedding community-based learning and teaching in the curricula posed several questions. These were less concerned with the more traditional aspects of curriculum development, in terms of learning outcomes, assessment and curriculum structure, and more related to investment of time, nurturing proactive and productive relationships, partnership work support and vision building and sharing. This approach also became more important to us when we considered it alongside a broader piece of work being carried out within the university and the new campus on formal partnership building and external stakeholder management.

Background

Volunteering, internships and work placements are common examples in higher education whereby students are provided with opportunities to participate in community-level activities (Salam et al., 2019). In recent years, however, there has been a growing effort in implementing community-based learning and teaching in the academic curriculum through the teaching and research practices of universities (Salam et al., 2019). In the UK, this practice is generally referred to as community-engaged learning

(CEL), while in the USA, it is considered as a form of ‘service learning’. Service learning is defined as an educational experience in which students engage in organised service activities that benefit the local community, while also reflecting on the relevance of their course content to the given service activity (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000).

In the UK, CEL is used to describe an educational experience in which students engage in organised activities that benefit the local community as part of their academic curriculum (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000). Students also reflect on the relevance of their course content to the community-based activities, which not only strengthens their academic knowledge and appreciation of the academic discipline, but also enhances their civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000). Moreover, by applying theoretical concepts in a real-world environment, students develop vital employability skills, such as teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking (Salam et al., 2019). Additionally, community-based learning and teaching is described as encouraging students to interact and collaborate with diverse communities in a dynamic setting that fosters students’ social learning and personal development (Salam et al., 2019).

There is also a co-creation element to CEL that helps to distinguish it from service learning. With this key element, the focus is on collaboration and communities, teachers and students working together, not only to solve social problems faced by communities, but also to design, deliver and evaluate an educational intervention. Universities publish their approaches and activities on their web pages as part of their profile and educational vision.

In this article, we refer to community-based learning and teaching throughout to reflect our more general overall focus on the range of approaches adopted, and the values attached to them by individuals and groups of people in higher education. We are not necessarily looking at a specific practice, but at attitudes and perceptions at an institutional level.

That said, it is important to characterise previous work in the area to gain a picture of where the current focus in higher education has come from. A notable effort to promote community-based learning and teaching in UK higher education is the Beacons for Public Engagement initiative, which operated from 2008 to 2011 in 23 universities (Bringle and Clayton, 2012). At UCL (University College London, UK), for example, the Beacons project resulted in the establishment of a public engagement unit within the university and an increase in the funding schemes for public engagement projects (Hussain and Moore, 2012). Although there was little emphasis on community-based teaching practices, the Beacons initiative inspired community-oriented action in the research field. The initiative led to the establishment of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), which provides universities with resources to develop and execute their strategies (UKRI, 2021). At a conference in 2021, the NCCPE developed a vision for public engagement and discussed the actions needed to achieve it (UKRI, 2021). A key idea in the report was to recognise engagement as a central, rather than additional, part of research in order to meet the needs of the community. The report also stressed the importance of developing sustainable funding strategies for community-based research, where the most relevant communities are involved at all stages of the research (UKRI, 2021).

A 2016 study on the implementation of community-based learning and teaching in the UK found that although there was a high motivation across universities for establishing university–community partnerships, the predominant means of doing so were volunteering and internships, rather than community-based curriculum design (Shiel et al., 2016). Only one of the nine universities in the study had partially implemented the learning aspect of community engagement. The university was running collaborative curriculum projects between 3D design students and the Plymouth in Bloom community group to create a public garden space in the city (Shiel et al., 2016). This project demonstrated how a course’s learning objectives could be incorporated in a practical project, not only to benefit the community, but also to strengthen students’ academic knowledge, skills and civic responsibility.

More recent research has focused on developing a generalisable implementation guide for community-based teaching for educators (Tijsma et al., 2020). A systematic review in 2020 compiled a set of design principles, including aligning the course objectives and format of community-based learning experiences, defining a clear reflection and evaluation strategy, and establishing a sustainable relationship with the community partner(s) (Tijsma et al., 2020).

A recent example of the successful integration of community-based learning and teaching in the engineering education curriculum is the University of Galway, Ireland, which has executed more than 300 community-based projects since 2010 (Goggins and Hajdukiewicz, 2022). Evidence shows that engineering students reported a greater sense of ownership of their learning and a higher recognition of the long-term value of engaging with community partners (Goggins and Hajdukiewicz, 2022). Moreover,

reports from community partners showed that partners appreciated the students' contribution, and they also expressed their willingness to collaborate with students again (Goggins and Hajdukiewicz, 2022).

Examples of community-based learning and the disciplines

Some of the most recent topics available to students in higher education demonstrate the breadth and depth of community-based learning and teaching through a range of interdisciplinary approaches.

Health

In the discipline of health, it has become more accepted that community health and personal health should be considered alongside each other. Community health is a rapidly evolving field that greatly benefits from community-based learning and teaching in higher education. Students who apply their academic knowledge in projects with community partners are better equipped to understand and work towards meeting the health needs of the community. Examples come not only from the fields of medicine and medical sciences in the form of 'top-up' courses, but also from interdisciplinary approaches such as Creative Health (UCL), Youth and Community Development (Liverpool John Moores University), Planetary Health (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) and Health Economics (University of Aberdeen).

Careers and employability

Community-based learning and teaching help students to navigate their careers in a specific direction and they form a relatively new approach to the traditional 'placement' or 'internship'. When students are allowed to put their academic learning into practice, they build professional expertise from working with community partners, while also identifying their own personal strengths and developing a set of transferable skills. Examples include Find your Future (UCL), Active Communities: Placement (Durham University), Career Development Module (Newcastle University) and Work Placement Module (St Mary's University).

Public history

Local communities play a central role in the field of public history. Public historians concern themselves with community memory, heritage, history as business and policy, and other means through which history operates in society. Community-based learning and teaching in public history expose practitioners to working with real-world partners and organisations, such as governments, museums and businesses. Examples include Place and Community (University of London), History in Practice (University of Greenwich), and Heritage, Community Action and Public Engagement (Cardiff University).

Citizen science

The field of citizen science works towards increasing public participation in scientific research, and it is consequently becoming increasingly relevant in various scientific disciplines, ranging from astronomy to climate science. Community-based learning and teaching in citizen science encourage the active participation of local communities and partners in collecting and processing data for vital scientific enquiry. Examples include Introduction to Citizen Science and Scientific Crowdsourcing (UCL) and AI for the Study of Environmental Risks (University of Cambridge).

Defining the research problem and research questions

Our thematic areas can be grouped into three broad categories: values and expectations; graduate outcomes and employability; and infrastructure. These areas are markedly different from more traditional focuses in university curriculum development, which are more concerned with components of learning outcomes, syllabuses and assessment. However, these were the areas that were highlighted repeatedly by those working in community-based learning and teaching in both education and support roles, as well as being reported by community organisations themselves who work with our university stakeholders.

As student and staff stakeholders ourselves, our daily discussions across the ecosystem of university engagement have shown that there is a range of individualised approaches that are premised on teachers' time to develop the kinds of quality relationships needed to work in partnership with communities, while also supporting students to do the same. There are also questions about the so-called democratic nature of university–community relationships when external partners are involved in the education of students.

Further conversations and discussions with academics, those supporting learning and teaching, and those working directly in the public engagement area helped us to expand on some of the issues initially raised, and to refine the parameters of the research. Notably, the outcomes of an online discussion workshop on barriers to implementing community-based learning used questions made available in Connected Communities (2016) projects resources. It highlighted that there were several unanswered questions and shared understandings about the motivations of different stakeholders in community-based learning and teaching. The inclusion and exclusion of key voices, the sustainability and relationship investment over time and the learning benefits of the experience, as well as infrastructural topics such as funding and coordination, were prevalent issues. These initial discussions helped us to refine our own motivations and methodological approach to the research.

We formulated the following research questions (RQs) based on a grounded approach to supporting institutional reflection and learning, and which we designed to give voice to those working within the university ecosystem.

RQ1: According to stakeholders in the university ecosystem, what is expected from community-based learning and teaching as an institutional activity?

RQ1 refers to university stakeholders' views on the key activity of community-based learning and teaching, and it was designed to address the values and expectations of those working at different institutional levels on engagement with communities as a key educational activity of the university.

RQ2: What do stakeholders in the university ecosystem think are the employability-related skills to be gained from community-based learning and teaching?

RQ2 refers to university stakeholders' views on the key activity reflected throughout initial discussions with stakeholders about the purposes of community-based learning and teaching. Employability, an area which brings many of the educational purposes together, focuses on more than graduate destinations, and it is defined as: 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2004: 6).

RQ3: What logistical processes and documentation does a university require to effectively implement community-based learning and teaching?

RQ3 is one which covers the whole breadth of activity within a university to enable various institutional voices to come through around consistency in the conduct and operational support in community-based learning initiatives.

Methodological framework

Students as partners

We used a 'students-as-partners' approach, where research students interested in community-based learning and teaching took a leading role in the qualitative study. Current research students with an interest in, but little knowledge or experience of, institutional-level community-based learning and teaching were key partners, and they were invited to collaborate as part of a paid internship.

There were several reasons why this approach was adopted. The concept of students as partners is well known, and it permeates particularly in higher education in UK, US, Canadian and Australian contexts (Healey et al., 2014). It is an approach that aims to develop practices of involving students as

co-producers and co-designers, within contexts directly relating to their education and learning. The concept of students as partners is defined as a 'collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 6–7).

A students-as-partners approach aims at authentically bringing student voices into the work. As opposed to education being 'done to' the student, students play an active role as key stakeholders and beneficiaries of the educational process, and of their own development. By engaging with students as partners, we sought and encouraged students to proactively and positively displace the notion of ownership. For example, this was a way to enable what were thought to be more authentic and open conversations between us as the research team and various university stakeholders.

Moreover, one area in which a students-as-partners approach is less considered is the value of student partnership beyond general curriculum consultancy and feedback. Our methodological approach sought to provide the opportunity for the benefits and challenges of community-based learning and teaching to be considered from multiple perspectives. Having students as leads in the research process promoted positive disruption of the typical student–researcher dynamic, where students are typically the subjects of the educational change and improvement, rather than active participants.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews

We used qualitative methods to gather data on university stakeholder perspectives on the implementation of community-based learning and teaching. We used semi-structured online interviews (Newcomer et al., 2015). These were designed to focus the research on the highlighted thematic areas, and to enable new related themes to emerge based on what the participants raised with the interviewer (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Each interviewee was provided an interview guide, which the team had prepared and agreed on prior to the interviews. The questions used with different stakeholders varied a little according to their role and interaction with community-based learning and teaching; however, in general the interviews used the thematic guide shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic guide to interview questions

Common question themes	• Current role, key activities • Experience and knowledge of community-based learning and teaching • Current challenges in the planning and delivery of community-based learning and teaching • Improving planning and delivery • Benefits to graduate success
For specific participants	• Academic student support: skills and employability • Academic teacher: educational design, planning and preparation • Engagement consultant: community benefits and public engagement

Each interview lasted for up to an hour and was recorded with the permission of the participants using the online video conference platform Microsoft Teams. We used screen recordings as well as accompanying automatic transcriptions to bulk up our corpus. Ethical consent was granted by all participants, and procedures adopted used British Educational Research Association standards.

Thematic analyses

As is common with qualitative interview methods, we carried out thematic analyses to provide a more detailed analysis through the identification of thematic codes to help answer each of the three proposed RQs (Braun and Clarke, 2012). These were obtained by grouping responses to interview questions posed to each of the stakeholder group participants into common themes centred on each RQ.

Participants

We invited a range of stakeholders working at the university to participate in the research. The participants were identified through their role and job title, and based on existing connections with the members of the research team (Table 2). Student partners also highlighted specific stakeholders they felt were important, and on the basis of web-based research and recommendations. As research sought to look within in terms of scrutinising current practices from an institutional perspective, we did not engage the participation of external community partners on this occasion. Representation of student voice is embedded in the article itself through members of the research team. We discuss this in more detail in the 'Limitations' section.

Table 2. Stakeholder participants in the university ecosystem

Stakeholder group	Number of participants (Total 20)
Academic teachers	7
Engagement professional	8
Academic student support	5

Findings

Our findings are presented in the RQs and address the themes revealed in the analysis of our university-based stakeholders' views and perspectives.

Themes aligned with four key beneficiaries: (1) academics, who provided the opportunities for learning; (2) students, who were recipients of the teaching opportunities afforded by community-based learning and teaching; (3) community partners, who played diverse roles as both recipients and providers of the affordances of community-based learning and teaching; and (4) the university.

RQ1: According to stakeholders in the university ecosystem, what is expected from community-based learning and teaching as an institutional activity?

Figure 1 illustrates the key themes linked to expectations and values in understandings of community-based learning and teaching.

Impact

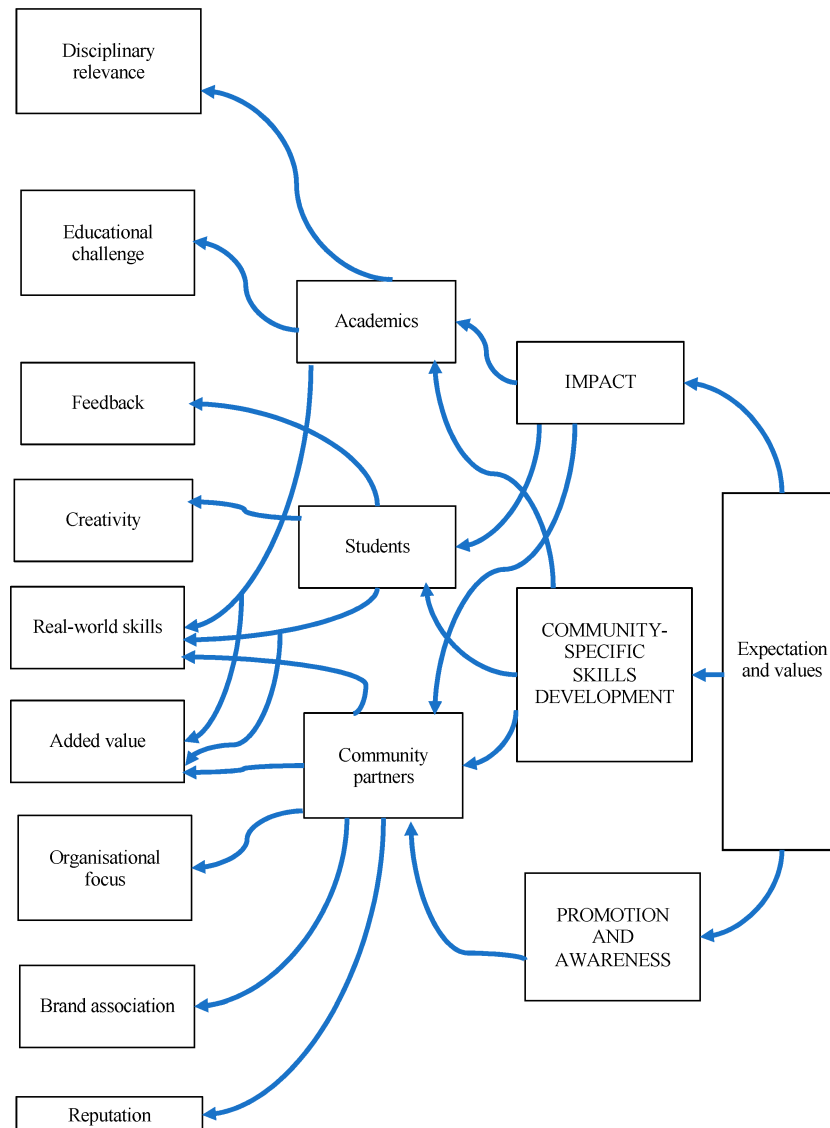
We found that each of our university stakeholders considered impact to be central to the activities of key groups involved in community-based learning and teaching. They reported that academics, as key facilitators of community-based learning and teaching, derive: 'immense satisfaction of involvement in activities to generate impact and spread awareness around their subject' (Participant 1).

This was raised both by academics themselves and by engagement and student support professionals working within the university. Academics also reported being eager to create a tangible impact beyond the promotion of their disciplinary areas by contributing, with the help of their students, to real changes or improvements within the communities with which they partnered.

As for students involved in community-based learning, the stakeholders regarded it as an opportunity for them to: 'showcase their creativity on a project with measurable impact, and gain positive feedback from an external organisation' (Participant 8). Moreover, they claimed that the subject expertise

of students provided community partners with an additional resource to add value and knowledge to their research projects at minimal cost. The findings from these projects would in turn enable the partner organisations to play a pivotal role in highlighting various pertinent issues faced by local communities.

Figure 1. Themes for expectations and values linked to understandings of community-based learning and teaching



Community-specific skills development

Each of our stakeholders also commented on the expectations of academics, students and community partners, which were centred on the development of community-specific skills occurring as an offshoot of community-based learning. Academics were noted to be more concerned with the learning outcomes, knowledge exchange and general employability skills gained by their students (see RQ2 below). In fact, participants from our academic teacher stakeholder group stated that they relished ‘the opportunity to develop relatively complex projects that would enable students to stretch and hone their creative skills’ (Participant 3), by promoting the application of theoretical knowledge to practical situations. They were also highly desirous that their students develop a sense of professionalism and responsibility from their management of external projects with community partners.

For students, however, stakeholders saw benefits geared towards gaining an understanding of the application of research in a 'real-world' context within the community (as a subset of workplace learning) 'beyond the confines of a university degree', while also obtaining valuable employability skills through an 'in-course internship-like' workplace-learning experience (Participant 4). According to our engagement professional stakeholder participants, local community partners expected students to require less 'hand-holding', to manage tasks efficiently and to deliver project work promptly. Consequently, this would allow them to assess the skills developed by the pool of students involved and to identify potential future graduate employees for their organisation.

Promotion and awareness

Our university stakeholders also highlighted the consequential value of engaging in community-based learning and teaching for the key stakeholder groups vis-à-vis raising awareness of the vital community issues faced by society, as well as promoting the work of organisations striving to tackle them. For academics, this was primarily found to be achieved through the dissemination of reports and contributions to existing research literature on the challenges being encountered by local communities. Moreover, engagement professionals revealed that community partners would gain from brand association and affiliation with reputed universities and institutions, which would subsequently help them boost their own internal clientele. Exposure to the academically robust methods employed by students and university academics would also serve to improve and enhance partner organisations' own understanding of community issues.

RQ2: What do stakeholders in the university ecosystem think are the employability-related skills to be gained from community-based learning and teaching?

In the presentation of our findings so far, it is evident that there are important values and expectations placed on community-based learning and teaching as directly benefiting community skills development. While this links to employability overall, RQ2 was intended to unearth stakeholder views about the broader topic of skills, understanding and attributes that contribute to students' likeliness to gain employment, whatever their chosen sector, as well as what the acquisition of those skills may do for community organisations themselves.

Figure 2 shows the key themes linked to graduate outcomes and employability in understandings of community-based learning and teaching.

Soft, hard-to-learn skills

All our stakeholders felt that students participating in community-based learning and teaching would acquire vital employability-relevant interpersonal skills, such as 'communication, teamwork, problem solving, entrepreneurship, time management and professional networking' (Participant 1).

In addition to this, they would gain a sound knowledge of drafting written reports, delivering oral presentations and reporting key findings to various target audiences. Our academic stakeholders also commented on how students developed 'a sense of confidence and empowerment' (Participant 11) by working on meaningful projects within realistic constraints involving time, money and limited resources. Learning to manage and nurture relationships with an external community organisation would in turn enable them to become more responsible and accountable in their work ethic.

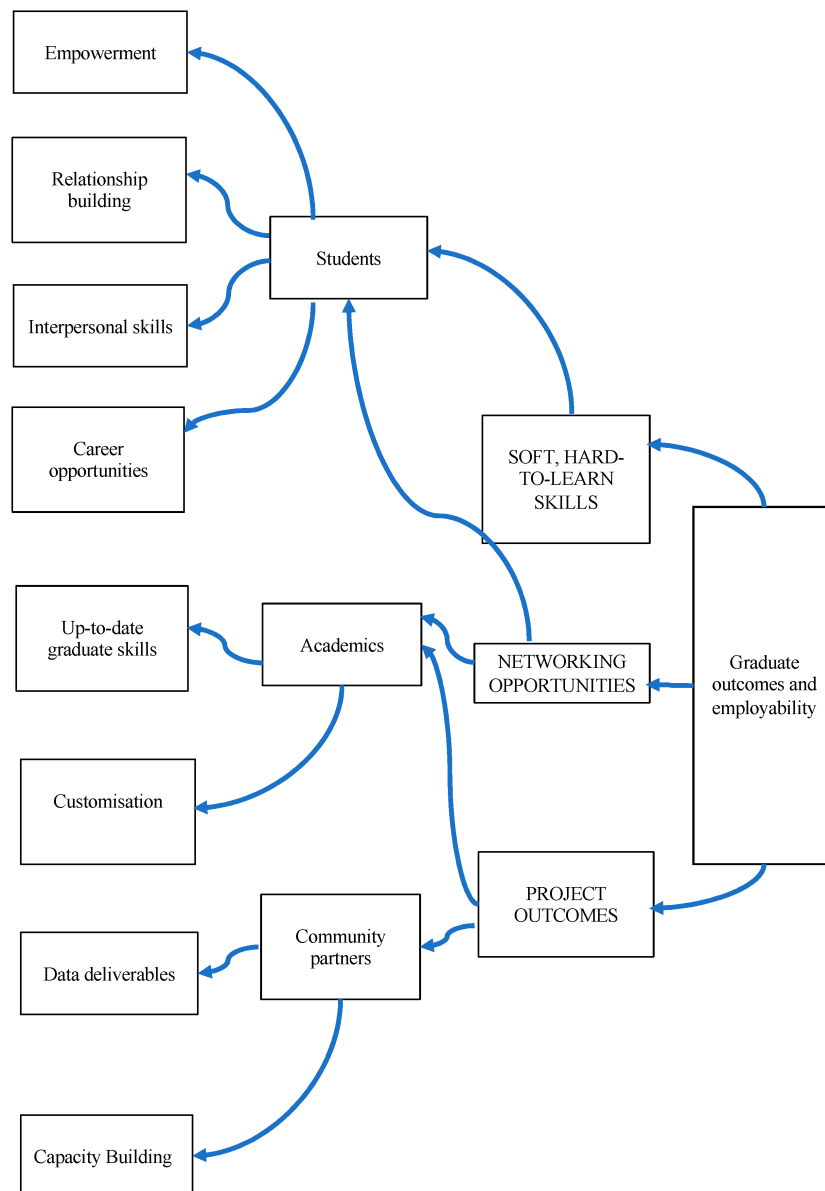
Project outcomes

While students gained valuable employability skills from community-based learning, we found from our stakeholders that both academics and community partners also benefited significantly from the outcomes of such projects. Academic module and programme leaders were provided with an opportunity to 'customise, tailor and embed higher education employability frameworks' (Participant 14) within their own courses, in line with the accreditation requirements of professional organisations.

Local community partners, however, were found to be able to engage with universities and students to obtain 'concrete data deliverables' (Participant 5), such as initial project evaluation reports identifying

crucial key performance indicators culminating in formal, written documents at the end of each project. These could be particularly useful in aiding and developing the skills of smaller organisations such as charities to secure grants and funding to provide additional financial support for their work.

Figure 2. Themes for employability-related skills linked to understandings of community-based learning and teaching



Networking opportunities

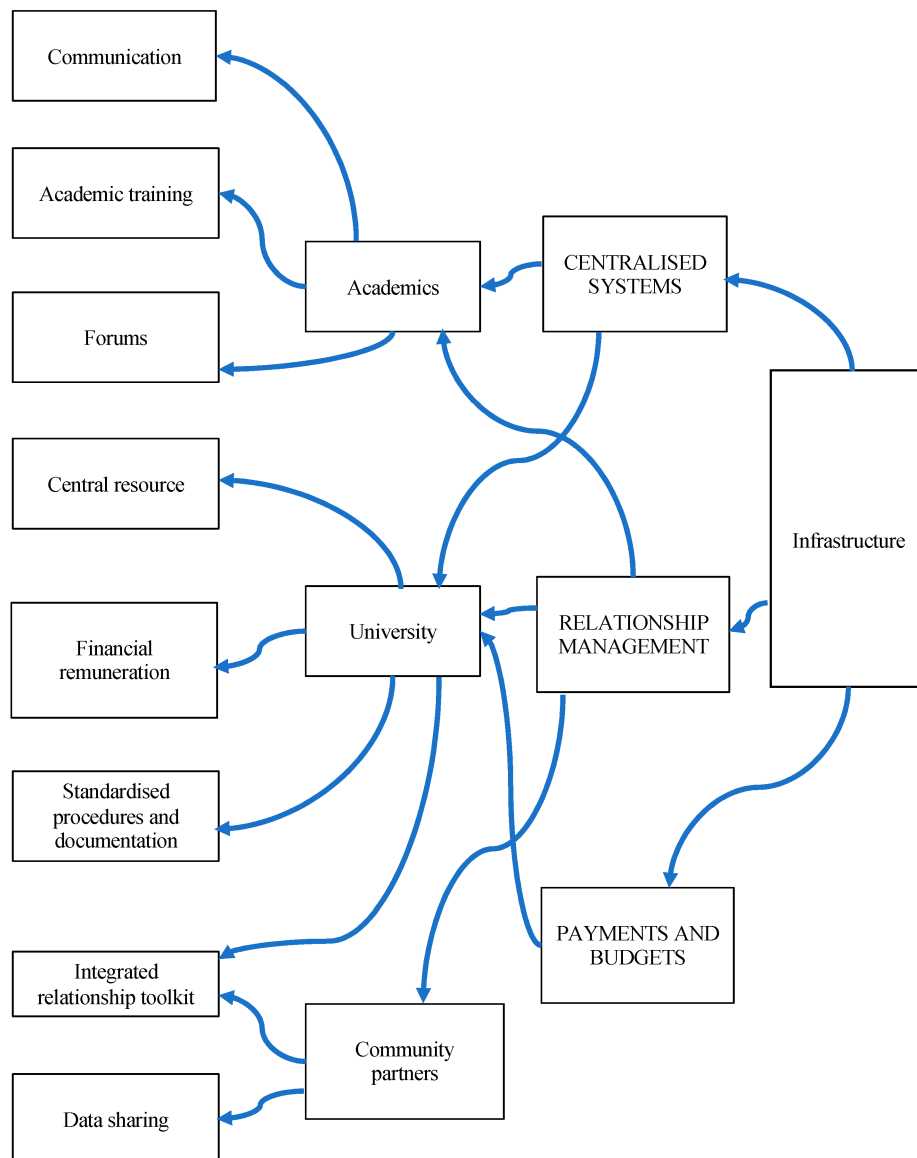
Our stakeholders also identified several networking opportunities provided to both academics and students as a result of establishing contact with community organisations. For academics, this offered them a chance to bring their own students into contact with relevant external community partners, from whom they could 'gain valuable feedback regarding discipline-specific skills required of recent graduates moving to the workplace' (Participant 5).

For students, it provided them with useful insight into connections and networks within industry sectors, which they could make use of when exploring future career opportunities.

RQ3: What logistical processes and documentation does a university require to effectively implement community-based learning and teaching?

Figure 3 shows the key themes linked to infrastructure of community-based learning and teaching.

Figure 3. Themes of infrastructure linked to understandings of community-based learning and teaching



Centralised systems

A common theme that emerged from the responses of our stakeholder interview participants was the need to 'establish a central communication platform between academics and university engagement professionals' (Participant 13) in order to disseminate accurate information to the right people and avoid significant time delays in the implementation of community-based learning projects. To this end, they proposed setting up a dedicated and readily accessible website that would serve as a centralised reserve and could be periodically updated with a list of the community partners that work with the university, along with details of all their partnership projects. Several of our academic stakeholders also emphasised

the need to create specific training sessions and forums for new staff to engage with community-based learning and teaching on a university-wide, as well as on a departmental, level.

Payments and budgets

The issue of whether payments were to be made to community organisations for their work on partnership projects was found to be handled differently by academics and engagement professionals, primarily stemming from the varying budgetary constraints of each of these stakeholder groups. While academics highlighted the fact that communities recognised the impact created by the partnership projects, and therefore had no expectations of receiving any financial payment for their work, the engagement professionals stated that all community organisations for their projects usually received some form of financial or non-financial remuneration. In light of this, each of our stakeholders stressed the importance of 'adopting a more standardised procedure as set by the university with regard to payments made to communities' (Participant 5), in line with the budgetary allocations available for each project.

Relationship management

Our stakeholders recognised the need to 'effectively manage and maintain long-term sustainable partnerships with community organisations' (Participant 19) as part of the successful implementation of community-based learning. To aid this, they suggested setting up an integrated relationship toolkit within universities, which could be used as a database, not only to record existing community partners, but also to find new organisations with which to work on potential future projects.

With most stakeholders currently having to prepare their own versions of university–community partnership agreements for each individual project, the need for having available a 'draft of a generic formal written partnership template' (Participant 11) that may be tailored by different staff members to suit the needs of their own project was echoed by all our interview participants. To sustain and strengthen the relationships with community organisations, our university stakeholders also suggested the 'sharing of more qualitative data through narrative case studies and anecdotes' (Participant 5) on the websites of the university and/or community partner for the monitoring and measurement of impact following the completion of a project.

Discussion

Our findings point to several recommendations for institutional practice, including our own institution, where approaches aim to move beyond individual approaches and perspectives to support community-based learning and teaching. These considerations can support broader initiatives, particularly in universities where education and community-based partnership work is not established, and can address barriers between research, teaching and engagement.

Invest in inclusive impact training

In the area of academic development, our findings highlight an opportunity for institutions to promote more (and possibly better) training for academics and students in areas relevant to impact. As a key driver for engagement with communities, we propose that institutions can ask themselves to what extent academics and students at all levels have access to: (1) understanding what impact is; (2) how it differs from one-off activities; and (3) how to encourage reflection, and subsequently improve how community partnerships are maintained and nurtured? Student-based community projects are often carried out over time, where the nature of change is clear, and the community beneficiaries are specified. This suggests that our students are doing more than just getting a degree or passing an assessment. Academics, by the same token, are doing more than knowledge transfer and 'getting students through modules'; they are brokering important and hopefully long-lasting relationships to benefit their institutions as well as their students.

Training in important areas of impact is an investment that universities can make to support community-based learning and teaching for all involved. This includes improving the impact that academics and students make on the community partner organisations themselves to help organisations promote and raise awareness of local issues and challenges. This could also be pushed further in terms

of frameworks, such as the Knowledge Exchange Framework, which assess the ability of universities to translate knowledge, that is, 'knowledge exchange' (Research England, 2022): to what extent are module-based student–community engagement efforts and impacts recognised as part of frameworks such as the Knowledge Exchange Framework?

Recognise and support the value of work-based learning experience in community settings

For student learning more specifically, our research also points to the added value of community-based learning and teaching for work-based learning experience. Community-based learning experience, we believe, is currently under-recognised and undervalued. This is at a time when industrial and competitive-based internships and placements are in high demand for graduate success agendas (Atfield et al., 2021). Viewing community-based learning and teaching as integral parts of work-based learning is a way in which embedding employability in degree programmes can be achieved, as part of a more student-centred and collaborative approach. Examples of activities from the University of the West of England demonstrate that there are many creative ways to boost student learning through community-based projects (Darwen, 2021), although there is still a focus on this as an extra-curricular activity, as opposed to credit-bearing and validated approaches to degree programmes.

Gaining work-based learning experience through community-based learning and teaching is an arguably deeper learning experience, with a more focused attention on developing authentic relationships because of the localised and personalised context of the activities in which students are engaged. Students can engage in local social, historical and cultural issues, providing challenging but rewarding interpersonal skills and competences.

Furthermore, in the institution used in this case study, it has been found that a large proportion of students engaged in formal and informal learning with communities are from widening participation backgrounds, as well as local to the areas in which they participate in community-based activity. The benefits to graduate outcomes are therefore a lot wider than may initially be assumed. Universities can actively participate in opening up curricula to more relevant social, cultural and ethical issues, where students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Community-based education strategies have the potential to engage marginalised first-generation students more than traditional pedagogies. For example, Conley and Hamlin (2009) found that community-based learning and teaching can help first-generation students to bridge two communities which may be seen as incompatible – home and university. Rosenberg et al. (2012: 174) also found that engaging first-generation students in work that brings them closer to communities helps them 'build stronger relationships in communities'. However, this is not about making students from widening participation backgrounds 'fit better' into universities, but about encouraging our higher education system to change its teaching and pedagogies in response to diversity and inclusion.

Investment in training to further support students to apply disciplinary, as well as graduate, skills from 'classroom to community' is needed, as well as an acknowledgement on the part of student and institution that 'community' is one 'industry' that can form part of graduate destinations, and a place where networks can be established. Community-based learning and teaching need not just be 'nice to have', but may hold value in connecting students with future career planning. Opportunities such as Find your Future at UCL (2023a: n.p.) provide a dedicated module where students develop:

A systematic understanding and critical awareness of the latest careers and employability theories, current research around the future of work, the nature and meaning of work and diversity and inclusion in the workplace based on at least 70 hours of work as a placement or project in community organisations and local campus consultancy projects.

Provide infrastructure and equity of involvement

To support and effectively implement the ideas shared above about student and staff learning, there is a need to address the disconnect in operational processes in the form of centralised systems of support for communication and the creation of standards and principles to ensure equity of involvement. Many universities, and certainly those larger institutions with numerous faculties, will be aware of the replication of activity, and even burden, placed on community organisations to form activity partnerships.

There can also be gaps where more marginalised communities miss out as key community stakeholders (such as informal community groups, and those who exist with next to no funding and social capital). From a student perspective, this also has an impact on the equity of student experience. One of the biggest practical issues that this article highlights is the lack of stakeholder management models, which also include community-based learning and teaching at their core, alongside more general partnership agreements for research. This means that partners are often contacted many times by different people in the same institution. The same organisations may have collaborative arrangements with different institutional colleagues, sometimes even covering the same topic areas. This is not to say that bespoke and personalised approaches should not be used, but our institutions can support internal collaboration better to make processes streamlined for all and to better facilitate student learning opportunities.

One proposal, which may also serve to help maintain the flexibility of collaborative arrangements, is the establishment of a professional community of practice (CoP). A number of higher education institutions are now adopting CoPs as a way of bringing people together from across an organisation – particularly in the case of large organisations – who work in defined practice areas and need to build similar capabilities.

For example, at UCL (2023b: n.p.), CoPs are based on a grass-roots model, run for their members by their members to help staff ‘collaborate and improve their practice areas, share best practice, and enhance service delivery’. More attractive for community-based learning and teaching is the fact that CoPs such as these bring together staff from both central services and local academic areas, regardless of line management structures. This enables them to collaborate, share knowledge and solve shared problems where the focus is on practice. A CoP based on community-based learning and teaching has the potential to break down barriers, to show which practice is more or less successful in different areas, as well as possible reasons for this, and to address gaps and tensions in current provision, and possible ways of overcoming them.

One possible stumbling block is that CoPs are wholly institutional organisms, with external members only being invited to participate as guest speakers, as they are somewhat on the periphery. Equity of involvement is another area raised by our stakeholder work. Universities pride themselves on the reciprocal relationships they set up as part of their knowledge-exchange activity. When we move into the area of student provision, there is a further disconnect. It is not only community-based learning and teaching that needs to be better recognised and valued as an approach to graduate education; so too do community organisations. The ‘free work’ done by students as part of their participation in community organisations is often equated to the amount of input provided by the organisation to the student. Our work highlights that this assumption, coming from the university side, does not sufficiently reflect what plays out in reality. As our stakeholders point out, some smaller organisations do not have the capacity to support student involvement and collaboration without some form of reimbursement. Current university systems are set up to financially compensate external contribution to learning and teaching only if a memorandum of understanding, agreements or even formal contracts are in place. (The NCCPE offers some advice for building better recognition of community partnerships and fairer payment [NCCPE, 2015].) The current set-up in many universities fails to acknowledge the type of formal learning experiences of our students, which are embedded in their community experiences. The overarching issue may be one of relationships of power (Post and Ruelle, 2021), and if this is not addressed in the practicalities of partnership work, authentic reciprocity may never be achieved.

Conclusion

Using insights offered by 20 university stakeholders, we engaged in an institution-wide study to address the barriers and opportunities offered by community-based learning and teaching. Our intention was to contribute to a broader shift in what the core business of a twenty-first-century university should and could be, by drawing on the value of reciprocity gained from embedding student participation in community engagement into teaching at a new regional-based campus. We used a large public research institution as a case study, not only because we were motivated to see what lessons could be learned from stakeholders working within the framework of teaching, research and engagement, but also because we were keen to ascertain what the implications might be for others in similar settings. Our contribution offers recommendations in three key interrelated areas concerned with values and expectations, graduate outcomes and employability, and infrastructure creation.

While many university colleagues may assume that these areas are being addressed in their own institutions, we want to highlight through our work, and the stakeholders to whom we spoke, that this may not always be the case. To better support community-based learning and teaching 'at scale', studies such as ours are a very valuable activity for building evidence-based institutional practice and we encourage readers to do the same.

Limitations

We acknowledge that a related limitation of our work at this point is that we chose to examine our own practices, rather than to incorporate the broader views of community partners through our interviews and stakeholders. While it could be argued that this limitation might restrict the impact of the research produced, we deemed that in this specific context, our focus was on one part of the ecosystem, rather than on drawing comparisons between community values and expectations. The inclusion of existing community partners in how institutions evaluate their practice is something which should be considered at the beginning of any community-based learning and teaching activity, and it also offers an important avenue for future work in this area to explore and build on.

Nonetheless, there are many institutions that are proactively engaging with community-based learning and teaching, and we hope that this work helps to support their, and our own, quest to demonstrate the role and value of higher education in society and with the local communities with which we engage.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with British Educational Research Association standards.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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