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Promoting equity in education for sustainable development through community-based learning and teaching

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Presentation abstract

Our presentation reported on the vital role of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2023) in fostering learners equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for a sustainable future. Despite the emphasis on inclusive and equitable human development through ESD, achieving equitable learning outcomes for all students remains a persistent challenge in the context of UK higher education. Our project explored the benefits and challenges of enabling all students to engage with ESD. We made recommendations for learning developers to effectively support students developing understanding and competencies for sustainability. We explored this through considering the challenges and gaps in inclusive pedagogies, professional development opportunities, curricula integration, and external partnerships.

The objective of the project was to address this issue by investigating how equity concerns in ESD can be effectively tackled through the integration of community-based learning and teaching (CBLT) approaches into university curricula (Salam, et al., 2019). Also referred to as service learning, the growing effort in implementing these approaches involves students engaging in organised activities benefiting local communities, enhancing academic knowledge, and fostering civic responsibility. This has important implications for learning

developers and the support students need to engage effectively in what may be an unfamiliar form of learning and development.

Collaborating with a student researcher, the project employed a multi-faceted methodology, including a literature review, mapping exercise using sustainable development goals (SDGs) and qualitative examination of module descriptions at University College London (UCL) and Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), both based in East London. In the presentation, we shared our existing practices combining ESD and community-based learning that included:

1) Our mapping of the integration of ESD and community-based learning in our university curricula.
2) Gaps and challenges in achieving equitable learning outcomes using a qualitative analysis of curriculum design and implementation.
3) Our initial recommendations for the learning developer community in supporting students to engage with ESD, and gain vital knowledge, skills and competencies for a sustainable future.

We also provided a short evaluation of our work as a research collaboration of learning development approaches involving students, academic developers and educators from two universities.

Keywords: community-based learning; equity and inclusivity; education for sustainable development; co-produced learning.

Background and context

The background and context of the presentation included details of collaboration across two universities with some outlining of key definitions provided concerning community service-based learning and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Community-based learning and teaching (CBLT) definitions are depicted below with the acknowledgement that these can take diverse forms, such as placements, consultancies, projects in the community and research.

Figure 1. Community-based learning and teaching.

Defining community-based learning and teaching

- In the US, service learning is defined as an educational experience in which students engage in organised service activities that benefit the local community, whilst also reflecting on the relevance of their course content to the given service activity (Bringle, 2000).
- In the UK, Community Engaged Learning 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).
- We use 'Community-based learning and teaching' to reflect the full range of different approaches and values, including diversifying the curriculum and potential for inclusive practice
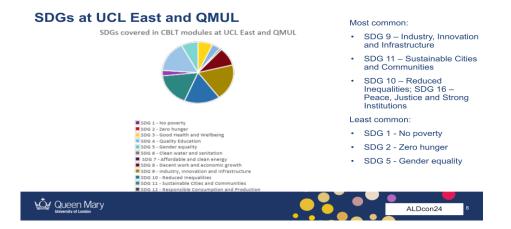
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Community response

The presentation was well received by attendees, and they appreciated hearing about the context and background of the collaborative project, which included an overview of two institutions and their demographics and the diversity in the student groups and communities within which the campuses were situated.

Attendees valued an opportunity to reflect on the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to consider the extent to which these were embedded in course curricula at both institutions, with key highlights from this shown below:

Figure 2. UN SDG embedding.

SDGs at UCL East and QMUL

SDGs covered in CBLT modules at UCL East and QMUL

- SDG 1 - No poverty
- SDG 2 - Zero hunger
- SDG 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing
- SDG 4 - Quality Education
- SDG 5 - Gender equality
- SDG 6 - Clean water and sanitation
- SDG 7 - Affordable and clean energy
- SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth
- SDG 9 - Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities
- SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities
- SDG 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production

Most common:
- SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities
- SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities; SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Least common:
- SDG 1 - No poverty
- SDG 2 - Zero hunger
- SDG 5 - Gender equality

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There were some surprises amongst attendees about UN SDG 13 (Climate Action), in particular within Education, with one attendee stating:

> Particularly interested to hear that Climate Action (SDG 13) was not necessarily at the top of the community-based learning and teaching (CBLT) agenda. It is very prominent within our institution - we have an MSc in Climate Justice and one in Sustainable Fashion Business for example, but that is within rather than CBLT. I am not sure how outward-facing such programmes are, so this is more a personal reflection.

It was evident from the presentation that UN SDGs were embedded well in sciences at UCL, but humanities at QMUL, which was an interesting and notable finding.

Career readiness, employability and wellbeing were recognised as central to the CBLT agenda, with an attendee highlighting this and the value of this work:

> CBLT strikes me as offering lots of opportunity for career readiness and employability skills and importantly, wellbeing - your interim analysis for first-generation students suggests some very positive outcomes are possible. Our experience of our career plays a huge part in our overall well-being. CBLT has huge potential to uncover career paths students may not have considered and may not be readily visible to them. Thank you for this presentation, it has provoked lots of ideas for further consideration.

The exploration of culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusivity was illuminating for attendees, and this is defined in Figure 3:

Figure 3. Defining Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

This holistic and student- and community-centred pedagogy resonated with one attendee who stated that:

> Your idea of exploring culturally responsive pedagogy really resonated with me. This phrase seems to encapsulate not only students working in their community, but also the sense that the university also has a responsibility to adapt and shape itself to the communities it serves. Too often, I feel like employability skills are cited as an end in themselves; university is there to prepare its students for industry and the development of the individual is everything. Your presentation provided a much more authentic and generous perspective, that perhaps those skills - and university - serve a greater purpose, that learning extends far beyond the individual.

This perspective was shared by another attendee who appreciated this presentation for providing a spotlight on important contemporary issues of social justice:

> This presentation really highlighted clearly some of the gaps in the embedding of UN SDGs into courses. It was evident that the value of Education for Sustainable Development was amplified in some areas

more than others. It raised important issues about how universities can extend beyond their walls through a transformative learning pedagogical approach and sharing innovative practice across universities.

Editorial comment

Culturally responsive pedagogies and transformative learning pedagogies can potentially provide opportunities for learning which extend beyond the university and hold value for students, communities and the development of transferable employability skills. There were clear differences in regard to the extent to which the UN SDGs were embedded across different institutions through CBLT and it would be useful to explore this through further research.

Next steps and additional questions

The authors shared their reflections and posed a number of insightful questions following on from their presentation:

- It is clear that Inter-disciplines are starting to show trends in promotion of CBLT and ESD, however questions were raised about whether or not some areas are more equitable than others. An example of this that was apparent in the presentation was that UN SDGs were embedded well by sciences at UCL, however embedded more within humanities at QMUL.
- As SDG 13 (Climate Action) was not at the top of the CBLT agenda, this prompts further questions about whether there is a need to do more to promote this important issue.
- Further explorations of why SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) is closely aligned to CBLT are needed.
- Within the wider higher education sector, there are some interesting questions to be explored further about whether or not some institutions are promoting more SDGs over others, for example, UCL versus QMUL and why this is the case.

- The interactions between the SDGs merits further examination to explore the potential benefits this has for promoting curriculum development and equity.

- The discussions raised questions about the extent to which hands-on community projects which expose students to real-world learning and give a chance to make a tangible contribution to societies are less commonly used and indeed whether institutions are maintaining more traditional approaches.

- The presentation analysis suggested that the institutions discussed seemed to have a 'flavour' of CBLT, with UCL favouring 'research projects' and community projects done 'in groups' and QMUL favouring 'research projects' and 'cases'. Further exploration of the rationale behind this and the resulting impact on equity within these different approaches is needed.

- Inclusive support is needed for students to engage in CBLT and develop competencies for ESD which warrants further exploration to explore how this might be embedded for all students across a range of institutions.

Next steps

Further qualitative analysis and considerations of findings are needed, specifically in relation to the following:

- Extent of Community Involvement.
- Extent of learning development from the community-based settings themselves.
- Implications of the UN ESD competences.
- Integrated problem-solving, Collaborative, Normative, Strategic thinking (Pritchard et al., 2021).

Further work on co-designed workshops is needed and the development of recommendations in the following areas:

- How to best integrate effective community-based learning and teaching approaches into ESD practices at both institutions.
- How to effectively support all students to engage in these opportunities and in developing competencies for ESD.

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Authors' reflection

As a cross-institutional team working with populations of students that come from rather different and diverse backgrounds, we have an interest in pedagogies that enable our students to step outside their immediate comfort zones and reflect on their broader roles and identities as citizens, community members and scholars who want to make their mark on the world. We also share the view between us that although students have an interest in sustainability themes, sometimes they just cannot tangibly engage with how their learning at university connects them personally to address sustainability challenges. CBLT has immense potential to give students first-hand knowledge of how their learning can have an impact on the world around them. We are particularly motivated by the fact that first-generation students who often attend higher education close to home can benefit from working with their own communities as part of their formal educational experience. This kind of activity is not just reserved for volunteering or extra-curricular initiatives but should be at the heart and core of their holistic learning development.

Acknowledgements

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