

Service learning in South Africa: lessons learnt through systematic evaluation

This article is based on an evaluation report written for JET Education Services and covers a two-year period of an evaluation study of service learning courses (or modules) at five higher education institutions in South Africa. The article explores various models of service learning and considers the critical conditions for effective conceptualisation and delivery of a service learning course within an academic course. It also examines some of the key factors involved in the institutionalisation of service learning so that this form of community engagement can become a sustained and viable element of the normal academic offerings of South African higher education institutions.

Diensleer in Suid Afrika: lesse geleer uit sistematiese evaluering

Hierdie artikel is gebaseer op 'n evalueringsverslag wat geskryf is vir JET Education Services en dek twee jaar van 'n evalueringstudie van diensleerkursusse (of -modules) aan vyf hoërondewysinstellings in Suid-Afrika. Die artikel ondersoek verskeie diensleermodelle asook die kritieke omstandighede vir doeltreffende konseptualisering en lewering van 'n diensleerkursus binne 'n akademiese program. Dit ondersoek ook sommige van die sleutelfaktore wat ter sprake is by die institutionalisering van diensleer sodat hierdie vorm van gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid 'n volhoubare en lewensvatbare element van normale akademiese aanbiedinge van Suid-Afrikaanse hoërondewysinstellings kan word.

The Community-Higher Education-Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative aimed at promoting and supporting service learning (SL) in South African higher education was introduced by the Joint Education Trust (JET) in 1999. As part of this initiative, a different model to that developed in the USA was introduced; that of a three-way partnership. While the concept of the “engaged” university was retained for the South African model, it was expanded to include a service partner within each campus core group, as well as service sector involvement at SL course level.¹ The initial stages of CHESP were devoted to the establishment of a national network of SL scholars and practitioners as well as an extensive capacity building course. In 2001 the Evaluation Research Agency was commissioned to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of those courses being implemented at the five participating higher education institutions: Witwatersrand, Transkei, Natal (Pietermaritzburg and Durban campuses), Free State and Western Cape. This paper presents the lessons learnt from this evaluation process during 2001 and 2002.²

Although the evaluators conducted two annual site visits to each campus and met with course convenors, the primary data sources were a narrative report produced by the course convenor at the end of the course and a set of generic questionnaires aimed at students, academics, service providers and community members that course convenors were requested to administer.³ The narrative report had to follow a set of guidelines drawn up by the evaluators and attempted to be as comprehensive as possible in terms of the development, implementation and outcomes of each course. The narrative reports were treated as “primary” or “source”

- 1 The term “course” would be exchanged for “module” within the framework of outcomes-based education.
- 2 It is important to emphasise that the nature of the CHESP evaluation study was very much that of a “meta” or “secondary” evaluation. During 2001 a total of 36 new SL courses were implemented; in 2002 this increased to 60. From a purely logistical view, it was clearly impossible to study such a large number of courses at 6 different sites in any direct, first-hand manner. In a typical course evaluation, the evaluators would establish a close and continuous working relationship with the course, collect and analyse primary data in a collaborative and interactive manner and produce a report based on this.
- 3 In the end, only student questionnaires could be analysed as the number of other stakeholder questionnaires was too low.

documents in that they were electronically captured and subsequently analysed using qualitative software (Atlas/ti). In this way we generated a rich “qualitative dataset” of quotes which combined statements by course convenors as well as verbatim quotes of students and community members cited in the narrative reports.

The article is not intended to be exhaustive in its coverage⁴ but rather highlights some of the bigger issues pertaining to SL in South African higher education. Before discussing the main findings, we present a brief overview of the notion of SL.⁵

1. Notions of service learning

SL is a particular form of experiential education that incorporates community service. According to Eyler & Giles (1999: 77)

service learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves.

The distinctive element of SL is that it empowers the community through the service provided, but it also has powerful learning consequences for the students or others (for example academics, service providers) participating in the service provision.

Another key element of SL is its explicit connection to academic course work. This is reflected in Bringle & Hatcher's (1995: 112) definition of SL as

a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on service activity as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

- 4 The detailed evaluation reports for 2001 and 2002 are available on the CHESP website.
- 5 While eight universities initially participated in the course, this number has been reduced by the withdrawal, for a variety of reasons, of several of the pioneers. However, even those universities which have withdrawn retain a stated commitment to SL or “community-based learning”.

The Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges defines SL as

a teaching method which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community (<<http://www.compact.org>>).

The World Wise Schools Educators defines SL as a teaching method

that combines academic instruction, meaningful service, and critical reflective thinking to enhance student learning and civic responsibility. Service learning differs from community service or volunteerism in two distinct ways: The service activity is integrated with academic curriculum and content. Students engage in structured reflection of their service experience and apply their learning in real-life activities (<<http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/service/whatservice.html>>).

From these definitions, we may derive three general characteristics of SL:

- It is based on the experience of meeting needs in a community;
- It incorporates reflection and academic learning, and
- It contributes to students' interest in and understanding of community life.

It is also clear from this very brief overview of different notions of SL, that it encapsulates a very specific theory of learning. According to Ehrlich (1996) SL theories can be traced to John Dewey's emphasis on the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience. For Dewey students learn best not by reading the so-called great books but by being exposed to the experiences of everyday life. This emphasis on practical and real-life learning means that emphasis is placed on complementing classroom learning with service within the community which enables students to reflect upon and address local and national problems.

2. Models of service learning: multiple interpretations

A quick review of the SL scholarship (Langworthy 2003; Lucas 2000; Varghese 2003) reveals a wide range of models and how SL is understood and implemented in practice. If one keeps the obvious *caveat* in mind that South African scholars should not necessarily adopt American

or other external models, there is value in looking at two typologies of SL models. Campus Compact, one of the most influential SL organisations in the USA, distinguishes between six ideal types (<<http://www.compact.org/syllabi/intro3.html>>). We describe each in brief.

Table 1: Models of service learning

“Pure”	Discipline-based	Problem-based
Capstone courses	Service internships	Action research

- “Pure” SL

These are courses that send students out into the community to serve. These courses have as their intellectual core the idea of service to communities by students, volunteers, or engaged citizens.

- Discipline-based SL

In this model, students are expected, throughout the semester, to have a presence in the community and reflect on their experiences on a regular basis using course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding.

- Problem-based service learning (PBSL)

According to this model, students (or teams of students) relate to the community much as “consultants” working for a “client”. Students work with community members to understand a particular community problem or need. This model presumes that the students will have some knowledge they can draw upon to make recommendations to the community or develop a solution to the problem.

- Capstone courses

These courses are generally designed for majors in the final year of a degree course in a given discipline, and are offered almost exclusively to students in their final year. Capstone courses ask students to draw upon the knowledge they have obtained throughout their course work and combine it with relevant service work in the community.

- Service internships

Like traditional internships, these experiences are more intense than typical SL courses, with students working as many as ten to twenty hours a week in a community setting. As in traditional internships, students are generally charged with producing a body of work that is of value to the community or site. However, unlike traditional internships, ser-

vice internship has regular and on-going reflective opportunities that help students analyse their new experiences using discipline-based theories. Service internships are further distinguished from traditional internships through their focus on reciprocity: the idea that the community and the student benefit equally from the experience.

- Undergraduate community-based action research

A relatively new approach that is gaining popularity, community-based action research is similar to an independent study option for the rare student who is highly experienced in community work. Community-based action research can also be effective with small classes or groups of students. In this model, students work closely with academics to learn research methodology while serving as advocates for communities.

Given the lack of a strong tradition of SL scholarship in South Africa as well as the recent development of actual SL courses at most higher education institutions, one would expect different interpretations of and expressions given to the notion of SL. Our evaluation study has shown that there is neither clear consensus nor a dominant paradigm in SL writings in the country. However, one should add that although there might not be a long tradition of scholarly studies on SL *per se*, associated fields of interests such as community service, community development, experiential learning, situated cognition and workplace learning have received some attention.

The recent introduction of a national skills development strategy that places a great emphasis on learnerships and other forms of learning that integrate theoretical and practical (for example, the workplace) education and training has led to a renewed interest in these topics and has already generated widespread interest in SL as another means of bringing institutions of higher education closer to their surrounding communities and constituencies. As these development gain further momentum, it is likely that public discourses on SL will expand with a concomitant increase in debates about key notions and consequences of such courses.

Our analysis of over 100 narrative reports clearly shows that there is no single, generally accepted definition of what is constituted by a SL course. However, we do not think that this is necessarily bad. A very rigid approach to understanding the notion of SL is not necessarily helpful.

This section is therefore, not about what we have learned that could contribute to a single, consensus-like description of SL. At the same time, it is important to lay out the broad parameters of what is usually included or excluded in SL courses. Although one must be cautious in taking an essentialist approach to “defining” SL, there is an equally dangerous position which allows anything that remotely resembles SL to be included within the definition, especially for a funding agency such as JET.

In its commitment to promoting and supporting SL, JET had to adopt a specific definition — and “model” — of SL. This model, described below, defines the broad parameters of what is constituted in a SL course for purpose of its work. In order to qualify for initial and (later) continued funding, compliance with certain minimum criteria was expected.

3. The CHESP model of service learning

In the CHESP Implementation Grant Strategy (25 January 2001), it is stated that each course will address a community development priority; should integrate teaching, research and service; will be developed in partnership between community, students, academics and service sector agencies; should be an accredited academic course, and students should spend at least 20% of the notional hours of the course in community-based learning experience.

The CHESP model of SL places a strong emphasis on the partnership of the three stakeholders, for instance the higher education institution, the community and the service provider in the development and delivery of the SL courses. What emerged from the evaluation study revealed interesting interpretations, configurations and even deviations from this ideal type:

Above I speculated that the confusion between the two concepts ‘fieldwork’ and ‘service learning’ was aggravated by our failure to establish a genuine triad — a three-way partnership. Indeed as I write this we still lack a formal community partner within our course (UWC).

The following are some of the interesting results.

- In some cases one of the partners was absent, leading to a situation where the academic partner had to take over the responsibilities usually given to the service provider.
- In those cases where the full triad was present, it did not always mean that the relations of power were evenly distributed in the partnership. This was particularly true in the case of educational interventions where learners in a school were defined as the “community”.
- And then, there were numerous cases where no partnership existed at all. As the quote below shows, this was due, in one case, to no attempt being made to even establish a partnership. In the majority of the other cases, it was the absence of a community partner that led to the fact that no real partnership had been established.

In terms of the CHESP partnership model this course must be seen to have failed. No attempt had been made to set up a triad/three-way partnership. In the project-based learning model of community-based learning it is doubtful whether partnerships — as relationships based on equity and equality — between university-based practitioners and members of communities are a possibility. I would suggest that structural relations between highly educated, middle-class people and poor people living under conditions of livelihood insecurity, disease, lack of access to power, and so on, are so unequal that it seems highly unlikely that any relationship could lead to equal (even: different but equal) benefits. Further reasons for this model are given below.

In other cases, the research revealed that SL models other than the CHESP model had been developed. One course at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) reported on the development of two overlapping triads: academic-student-partner and partner-student-community. According to the authors of the narrative report on the course, this dual partnership model:

is more consistent with both a development economics model (where the partner, and not outside agencies, negotiate directly with communities) and with a business model (where businesses develop and guard their exclusive relationships with their clients).

Another model at the same university followed the so-called “cohesive curriculum” approach to SL. It is described as follows:

It foresees students and tutors from two or more disciplines or professional tracks brought together around a 'service opportunity'. Students serve in a field placement for a number of hours per week or semester and simultaneously study related academic subjects. The service learning becomes a group project in which students approach the learning and service from different disciplines (WITS Institutional Report 2001).

In trying to describe SL, course convenors very often relate the notion to other more familiar notions such as experiential education, apprenticeship, project-based learning and a cohesive curriculum. A convenor at WITS defined SL as being essentially:

an experiential education approach in which students receive academic credit for performing community service. It is closely related to volunteer service and internships, but may be distinguished from these practices because it is designed to benefit the provider and the recipient of the service equally (WITS Institutional Report 2001).

Also at WITS, another course convenor compared SL, *à la* Lave & Wenger (1991), with apprenticeships:

Newcomers, or apprentices, start as 'peripheral participants' in a community of practice, then absorb and become absorbed in the culture of practice. People learn as they become involved with a community or culture of learning, interacting with the community and learning to understand and participate in its history, assumptions, cultural values and rules (WITS Institutional Report 2001).

These varying operational definitions of SL produced a rather interesting tension — the interests of the funder of the CHESP initiative in supporting SL understood in a particular way and the interests of the academics in giving effect to their own understandings of what SL is:

Significantly, the theoretical framework of the practice they were engaged in suggested that development should emerge as a bottom-up, insider-led process. In the light of this, the students were 'outsiders', who did not come to bring anything, but wanted rather to foster an intentional relationship that opened up a dialogue about the struggles and potentials of ordinary people in the churches of Inadi. Clearly, the agenda for the struggles and potential for change would be set by the people of Inadi. However — and this is a big however — this desire for an open-ended insider-led agenda clashed with the 'outsider' agenda of CHESP. By becoming a CHESP pilot, the course had inadvertently taken on a set of expectations, objectives and outcomes that were driven by the needs of academics researching changes in higher education policy, rather than the needs of the people of Inadi. By noting this, I do not mean that the National CHESP leadership and the Joint Educational Trust (JET) were intentionally insensitive to

the community of Inadi, or unaware of the tension between their agenda and that of the community. What I do mean is that we must recognize the rather awkward clash of agendas in a course that seeks to teach students about issues of power and control in the planning and implementation (UNP).

This tension was even more widely experienced by other stakeholders. Our evaluation showed that not only academics, but other parties involved in the implementation of SL courses (community members and service providers), the intended beneficiaries (students) as well as the institution, all have differing understandings of SL. Two comments need to be made about this tension:

- First, we do not believe that this tension can or should be resolved. Different stakeholders have different interests in educational courses such as these. We will try to reflect the range of SL understandings in the remainder of this section.
- Secondly, different stakeholders will of necessity give privilege to and prioritise a specific understanding, in line with their own interests. In the CHESP initiative this often led to a situation where course convenors interpreted JET's approach to SL as a top-down, funder-driven model requiring conformity.

A related point to make at this stage is that the range of insider interpretations (specific to a particular grouping) of SL also displays interesting disciplinary and institutional differences. Academic disciplines vary greatly in terms of their relationship to everyday practice. The more vocational disciplines — such as social work, clinical psychology, nursing, architecture, education (teacher training), engineering — have well-established connections to domains of application, whether these be the workplace, the community, the clinic or the classroom. These disciplinary differences impact directly on the way in which SL is understood in these disciplines. Thus, it is expected that the notion of “service” in each of these contexts would be different. Institutional differences are no less important. The legacy of apartheid in South Africa and the accompanying divide between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions has led to universities positioning themselves differently *vis-à-vis* surrounding communities and associated constituencies. The rural/urban distinction is equally important. There is no doubt that a university such as UNITRA feels a special commitment to matters of rural

development and poverty alleviation given the widespread underdevelopment of the Eastern Cape. In a similar vein, WITS has accepted the challenge of contributing to various urban renewal initiatives in Hillbrow and surrounding areas.

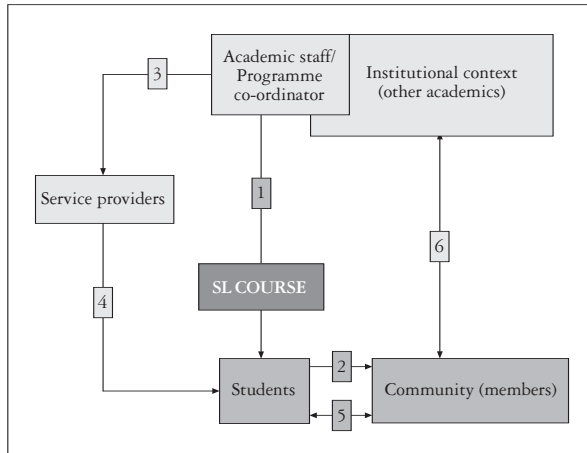
Rather than relying on theoretical definitions of what SL is or should be, another way to address this is to look at the kinds of tasks that students were required to engage in, in course descriptions. This not only gives a better sense of what is meant by “service provision” with SL, but it also presents us with an overview of the range of services and how these vary in terms of academic discipline. These activities can be roughly classified into at least five categories:

- Activities related to research and information management would include carrying out community needs analyses; undertaking socio-demographic profiles of the community; conducting individual and focus group interviews in the communities; the auditing of sporting activities and infra-structure, developing case studies, mapping areas as well as conducting evaluation studies.
- Life skills activities, where students gain valuable experience through inter-personal negotiations and mediation activities, running clinical psychological consultations; individual and group therapy sessions; hosting conflict resolution sessions, and communication workshops.
- Project management activities, including organising meetings and workshops; organising public forums; the development of a strategic plan and skills matrix for a workplace for the disabled, and the development of a capacity planning tool as well as cause and effect diagrams for work improvement.
- Community improvement and upliftment activities such as painting walls, mowing lawns, gardening, building a fence around a vegetable garden, re-organising a school library, development of book boxes for a rotating library, and so on.
- Producing goods, for example making furniture, development of an Open Space Framework for the Hillbrow/Berea region, making a video for use by the community, building a children’s playground, and so on.

4. The conditions for effective delivery: a framework

Effective implementation involves the delivery of course components as planned to all intended beneficiaries within the parameters of available resources. Whereas most university courses have one primary target group, the students, one of the distinctive features of SL courses is that other primary beneficiaries — most notably some community group — are also supposed to benefit from the course. There is no question that other stakeholders in the learning process, the service providers, the academic(s) delivering the course and other academic colleagues are also supposed to derive some secondary or subsidiary benefits from their involvement in SL. If these basic premises about SL are accepted, the relationships between primary (immediate) and secondary (intermediate) benefits may be visualised as in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Relationship between primary and secondary benefits



The notion of SL (service rendering through learning, and learning through service-rendering) logically implies two primary beneficiary groups: students who receive and experience learning through the standard lecturer input (1), their interaction with service providers (4), and through their interaction with some community group (5), and the community to whom the service is rendered (which benefits through learning but also by receiving a specific service such as teacher training, cli-

nical counselling, business development skills and increased knowledge of their human rights (2).

However, there are also secondary benefits and beneficiaries. In the delivery of the SL course, academic staff benefit directly through their partnership with some service-provider (3), and of course, through feedback from their students (1). Other academic staff draw indirect benefit through their normal interaction with colleagues involved in SL courses (the institutional context) and feedback given to the community in outreach forums and other mediating bodies (6). And finally, service providers also receive secondary benefits through their direct interaction with the students (4) and through indirect interaction with community members (5) in the SL course.

Although the distinction between primary and secondary benefits is purely analytical, it remains useful to distinguish between those benefits for which an intervention is primarily designed and implemented; and those benefits that accrue to other stakeholders who are involved in the delivery of the course.⁶ Stated differently: the success or failure of a course should be measured in terms of whether the primary benefits have been achieved. One would most certainly not claim the success of a SL course if neither the students nor the targeted community has drawn benefit (even if everyone else has benefited in some way). This does not mean that the secondary benefits are unimportant. In fact, we would argue that in a well-designed SL course, one would expect both primary and secondary benefits. We will elaborate on this idea below.

The distinction between primary and secondary benefits allows us to introduce another useful term when analysing educational courses, for instance conditionalities. We define conditionalities as those factors and processes which are necessary conditions for the successful delivery and outcome of a course, for example those factors and processes which are contributing conditions in achieving the intended outcomes and benefits of a course.⁷ One way of addressing such conditions is to

6 This distinction is not a distinction between intended and unintended consequences. In well-designed SL courses both the primary and secondary benefits are intended.

7 We define "success" in course delivery simply as implementation that produces the desired course outcomes. The factors that constrain successful delivery, and thus outcome, are discussed in Sections 6 and 7 below.

ask oneself why interventions fail. Understanding failure in course delivery very often is more effective than trying to establish success since it focuses our attention on the mistakes made in course design and delivery; the errors that creep in despite our best planning efforts.

The course evaluation literature (cf Rossi *et al* 2001) shows that there are basically four reasons why courses fail:

- The course is inappropriate for the problem at hand (the intervention is not addressing the real problem);
- The course is appropriate, but implementation is poor in various respects (problems of poor quality delivery). The course is appropriate and of high quality but not all members of the target group receive the intervention as planned, or not all members of the target group receive the same intervention (problems of inadequate coverage and lack of standardisation);
- The course is appropriate, implementation is good but insufficient (the problem of diluted intervention or insufficient dosage), and
- The course is appropriate, implementation is good and sufficient, but the target group is not receptive to the intervention (a problem relating to the minimum necessary conditions required for positive change).

Each of these reasons for failure addresses a different challenge for staff when implementing courses. We can refer to them simplistically as the issues of course design, course delivery and coverage, course intensity and course reception.

In the remainder of the article we discuss the empirical findings of our evaluation study under these headings.

5. Course design: conceptualising and developing a service learning course

Academic course development has become a substantive industry in South African institutions of higher learning. Although academics have always been required to systematically develop courses and courses, the White Paper on Education (Dept of Education 1997) has formalised course development to a large extent. Universities soon realised that former *laissez-faire* approaches to course development would not be sufficient to

meet the requirements of the Department of Education. Since then, the new academic policy as well as the quality assurance audit framework of the HEQC has generated more extensive criteria to which all course developers have to conform. Key principles of course developments such as a focus on learning outcomes, internal coherence, vertical and horizontal articulation, responsiveness to society and national goals have become part and parcel of the new academic discourse.

As part of the clarificatory evaluation process in 2001, course convenors were required to apply the logic model framework to make explicit the structure of their SL courses. This exercise had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, course co-ordinators articulated and structured their courses according to accepted conventions of course design. It also revealed the extent to which course co-ordinators gave sufficient attention to these matters in their original course design.

One of the criteria for the JET pilot courses is “identification of a community development priority” (CHESP Implementation Strategy 2001: 5). How this community development priority is identified was not always clear from the information given in the narrative reports. The following are some of the main findings regarding this issue:

- Identification of a community development priority seems to imply carrying out a needs assessment in the community to be served but is not equivalent to this.
- Even when a needs assessment has been carried out prior to the implementation of a course, the degree of rigour is not always clear.
- Higher education institutions and service providers also have needs to be addressed to transform the curricula and the way in which students are prepared, and SL courses are certainly a means of addressing these needs;
- Community and service providers’ needs are in part linked to those development factors which are described in the reports as external to the higher education institutions, for instance South Africa’s development needs;
- The lack of information on the issue of needs assessments in the reports is of concern to JET Education Services and the CHESP evaluators, and

- A connection exists between the lack of needs assessments and the lack of collaboration when courses were conceptualised.

Many of the courses existed prior to the CHESP initiative and have been modified where necessary. Changes made included moving the research element outside of the university into the community, adding an additional practical session, and other changes made to promote compliance with CHESP requirements.

From the comments in the narrative reports it is clear that the CHESP initiative had two kinds of positive effect on the development of courses. Even where courses with a practical or experiential component had existed prior to the initiative, the involvement of CHESP heightened the awareness of SL on the campus and encouraged the course developers to reflect more specifically on the SL content. In some cases, CHESP prompted the academics to design a brand new SL course:

However in the form in which it has been offered as a CHESP exemplar or pilot, it is an entirely new course and has been designed with the CHESP concerns in mind. Thus, for example, the key element of the location of the experiential learning at Inadi, was easily provided through the work that CHESP had already undertaken (UNP).

Some of the difficulties raised by course convenors when discussing implementation can be associated with the modifications made to existing courses (academic courses which previously had no community engagement element), for example, moving beyond the confines of the university and into communities.

Our evaluation thus far has identified the following critical factors related to initial conceptualisation and design: inadequate initial needs assessment, lack of collaborative course design and insufficient feasibility analysis.

4.1 Needs assessment

Two different issues are covered under this heading: whose needs are being addressed (the question of the primary target group) and what methods have been used to identify and assess such needs.

As far as the former is concerned, the issue of the target group touches upon a core premise of SL, for instance the necessity of taking into account the needs and expectations of all the partners in the partnership.

Clear from the institutional reports is that some courses had been developed primarily to address the needs of exclusively one partner or constituency. More often than not, this turned out to be the students. In other cases, the needs of the community were regarded to be of paramount importance. But, as the author of the UFS report writes, the dominant approach in higher education still seems to favour the privileging of student needs to the exclusion of the other partners.

The vast majority of the reports did not touch on the issue of conducting a needs assessment. This is not surprising as it is not common practice amongst academics in conventional courses to undertake regular needs assessments about course contents. With SL the situation changes — at least in theory, as the number of stakeholders who have an interest in the course is higher. More specifically, academics are expected to know what the specific needs of community members and service providers are. Perhaps this can be linked to the evidence relating to collaboration as there were indications that conceptualisation (of which needs assessment is an element) had been done in most instances, by faculty members alone.

Out of all the reports that had been analysed, only a few reported that they had conducted a needs assessment prior to implementation. Some courses reported that needs assessments were carried out on a continuous basis, for example the report on the strategic management course (UFS) stated that the needs of the community are identified through a democratic and ongoing process.

4.2 Collaborative conceptualisation

Even if a systematic needs assessment had not been carried out in the original design or redesign of the SL course, the CHESP partnership model requires that all partners collaborate as far as possible in the ongoing conceptualisation and refinement of the course. In this regard, another distinction is important: between those courses which had previously existed as SL courses and those which were entirely new SL courses.

As reported previously most of the pilot courses were modifications of existing courses rather than new ones and this has many implications. A report from UND succinctly describes two of these:

Mouton & Wildschut/Service learning in South Africa

The fact that the pilot project was centred around an existing academic course meant that there was an imbalance in terms of knowledge and experience between the project group members about the existing course and the artefact — the course template — required for the pilot to be granted financial support by JET. It was thus difficult to adhere to the partnership principles adopted by CHESP Durban, particularly that principle mandating 'meaningful involvement of all partner groups at all stages of a project' (UND).

The academic partner has the benefit of prior knowledge and experience (of at least the academic component). However, collaboration did occur within partnerships during conceptualisation of the pilot courses. Three reports describe the unfolding of this process:

Collaboration occurs

It was decided in early discussions that all three partners would be equally involved in the design, implementation and assessment of the University course. A number of meetings proceeded at which time the course structure was decided on in collaboration. The course content, lecturing responsibilities, mentoring/supervision responsibilities and method of assessment were decided on (UND HIV AIDS).

This process was a guided one — there were workshops that were run at the Valley Trust. These workshops formed the basis of the conceptualisation phase. The team found this an important and illuminating exercise. It was good to note that it was not only the academic partner who was responsible for the conceptualisation of the course. Inputs from all partners were considered, discussed and agreed upon. Although this was a tedious process, it paid off. For the academic partner it was even more useful — coming up with the course content that is reflective of what (community and service) require. This was an important learning exercise. All partners were given homework to do (which involved thinking carefully about the needs, expectations and benefits that the course could bring) (UND isiZulu).

But there were also instances where there was a clear lack of collaboration or very one-sided collaboration in the conceptualisation process. The main reasons for this were the following:

- Community and/or service provider not consulted
- Lack of participation of community/ service provider
- Collaboration occurs within higher education institution only
- Faculty member takes responsibility for conceptualisation.

The conceptualisation of the course was the responsibility of the faculty member. Only one other faculty member in the school showed any serious interest in the initiative, although a handful expressed their support or opinion that it was a 'good idea'. It was therefore, the role and responsibility of the assigned faculty member to conceptualise and develop the service learning components of the courses in their entirety (WITS).

Both service providers also need to be more involved in the initial planning stages of the project. To this end, we have already scheduled a planning meeting with both service providers to discuss and plan next year's project. More time and energy needs to be spent in getting the community partners (the schools) more actively involved. They need to see themselves as active partners rather than passive recipients in the partnership (UWC).

Many of the pilot courses seem to have been conceptualised and developed by the academic partners alone. This may be related to the fact that a great number of the courses are modified as opposed to new. The issue of limited collaboration seems to occur when the academic partner is the main driving force of the course. However, the lack of commitment on the part of community or service providers is also a contributing factor to lack of collaboration. A coherent approach to the CHESP initiative at a higher education institution (for example, within one community or via existing forums such as the Valley Trust) seems to allow for greater collaboration at the conceptualisation stage. The course content also seems to have an impact on collaboration (UNP Institutional Report). The UNITRA institutional report provides extensive evidence of the value placed on collaboration, ongoing dialogue and the development of meaningful partnerships during the conceptualisation and course development process.

An important consideration that seems to affect the ultimately successful implementation of the course, involves the degree to which other colleagues in the same department/faculty get involved in the conceptualisation process. The authors of the WITS institutional report highlighted this as a crucial matter to be taken into account.

5. Issues in course delivery and coverage

Course delivery entails bringing the course to the intended target group(s) or beneficiaries as designed. Successful delivery or implementation of a SL course implies that the students receive the full intended benefit of the course as do all the other beneficiaries — the community, service providers, and so on. Delivery fails when there is insufficient planning and preparation, when there are inadequate resources (human resources, funding, materials, infrastructure and time), when the course components and activities (courses, materials, work sessions, community visits) are of poor quality, when there is a mismatch between course

content and community service activities. The latter occurs when not all members of the target group(s) receive the course or receive it only in part. Against this background our research has identified the following as being the most critical factors producing success or failure in course delivery:

- Student readiness and preparation;
- Established partnerships;
- Appropriate placement of students;
- Preparation of community for SL intervention;
- Alignment of student capabilities and community demands;
- Proper logistical and resource planning and allocation;
- Integration of theoretical and SL components, and
- Reflection on SL.

5.1 Student readiness and preparation

It is absolutely essential that students be properly briefed about what is expected of them once they start interacting with the community and service providers. The evidence shows that this was not always the case. It is not merely a matter of the students receiving the appropriate knowledge and skills which could benefit the community, but they also need to be prepared emotionally and politically for interaction with community members. As far as the latter is concerned, differences between students and members of the community on grounds of class, race, language and culture, may mean that students are often ill-prepared for the challenges that await them.

However, it was not only students who commented on the fact that they were ill-prepared for their community service. As the following quotes show, some lecturers were also aware of this:

As previous sections have indicated, we assumed students had certain skills, such as group facilitation and project management. This sometimes turned out to be an erroneous assumption. While this course allowed students to develop in these areas, we had to recognise that, although not reported, communities may have been short changed in the process (UND).

Students inexperienced in research methods: there are several dangers in letting loose an inexperienced bunch of students in the community; raising false expectations, wasting people's time, insensitivity to political context, inadequate preparation (UFS).

5.2 Placement of students

The issue of student placements concerns both the “where” as well as the negotiation process that needs to take place in the selection of the best sites. The participating universities employed different approaches to the issue of where to place students. In most of the cases, there were prior agreements and arrangements in place that facilitated such placements. At the UFS, a long-standing agreement with the Mangaung community meant that a large proportion of students were placed in the Mangaung township. Similarly, most students at WITS were either accommodated at the WITS Rural Facility in eastern Mpumalanga or in Hillbrow: in both cases, the university had an ongoing relationship with these rural and urban communities respectively. Not surprisingly, the placement of students at the rural facility was seen as a very costly and resource-intensive approach although the study also showed that many students experience their learning in the rural areas to be particularly useful.

Irrespective of the site, our research seems to confirm the importance of proper and due negotiation processes with leaders in the respective communities. Even where university-community partnerships were in existence prior to the advent of CHESP, it was still felt that care had to be taken to negotiate student access and placement in those communities. This was clearly easier in those cases where there was a functional and effective partnership in operation:

Already established links and relationships with most of these organisations ensured that they were happy to have the University students work with them. Where there were no pre-existing links or relationships with these sites, open communication and letters stating our objectives facilitated an opening for the students to enter the sites, this was the case with the three high schools (UND).

Street Law representatives spent a lot of their initial time discussing the project with the various departments of education and participating in several education forums such as GICD [Gauteng Institute for Curriculum Development], the Forum for Democracy and Human Rights Education. It is as a result of these various meetings and forums that schools wish to establish partnerships with the Street Law course (WITS).

5.3 Preparation of community for service learning intervention

It is not only the students who have to be prepared for their “exposure” to the community. It is equally important that community members who are going to be a part of the SL intervention should also be properly briefed and prepared for the intervention. We present two quotes by students which both highlight — although in slightly different ways — the dangers in raising false expectations on the part of the community:

I feel that it often gives communities false hope and there are so many far more positive ways to make a difference. This is just another one of many of our projects which interrupted people’s daily lives without making a major difference (Male student at WITS).

At our level we are being exposed to the community, but cannot really help them. We are not yet qualified enough (Female student at UFS).

Lecturers also recognise that, in some cases, the community briefing was inadequate:

[...] the community members needed a pre-visit meeting to introduce them to CHESP’s objectives, their expected partnership role, and how they were to be identified. This would have informed them that they were part of a learning experience, and not as the recipients of the university’s service as they had thought (UND).

5.4 Alignment of student capabilities and community demands

The demands that community service place on students are varied — especially in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society such as ours. There is always the very real danger that our students do not have the required level of knowledge, skills and competencies for the demands that arise from an involvement in the community. This is not a matter of preparation only, but also of ensuring that the level of students (for example emotional maturity) is commensurate with the community needs and demands. As a lecturer at WITS wrote:

We have decided that the second year students are not mature enough for service learning assignments as currently structured. We will keep service learning at the postgraduate level, and develop separate service learning courses for the rural and urban areas at third year level, as current third year course instructors are reluctant to incorporate the service component into their classes.

A lecturer at the University of Natal (Durban) expressed a similar sentiment:

Perhaps our most significant learning in connection with students' skills was that, because the students were now in their final course of the three-year course, we had presumed that they would apply what they had learned in previous courses — for example, project management. This turned out to be an erroneous assumption! In future courses, we shall endeavour to ascertain more accurately the students' ability to apply existing knowledge and modify the content of the class sessions accordingly.

5.5 Proper logistical and resource planning and allocation

As the comments below show, the logistics of transporting students to and from the community sites of SL posed serious problems:

In future it is suggested that much of the planning around the sites take place prior to the commencement of the entire course so as to avoid last minute rushes which was a problem in the implementation of this course (UND).

Community based education needs careful planning. The responsibility of transport costs of students is an issue that has to be clarified for future planning. Supervision and facilitation for community based education is labour intensive (UPS).

Coupled with timetabling difficulties which arise because students are off-campus, these factors seemed to produce some of the biggest headaches to students and lecturers alike. One must remember that most conventional forms of university teaching do not involve (sustained) off-site learning. The fact that SL requires students to spend time within communities suddenly raises a host of new issues to the lecturer: issues that had not previously featured in his or her course preparation and planning. It is therefore not surprising that these very practical matters were frequently mentioned in the campus narrative reports during both years of the evaluation study.

5.6 Integration of theoretical and service learning components

As we have seen in our review of the literature on SL, the integration of theoretical and service experiential aspects is essential. Our survey of student opinion has produced comments that reflect the obvious value of this integration. The following is a small selection of these comments:

Well, I think going into the community is one of the best modes of learning and it should be frequently done as it helps the learner to apply the theoretical knowledge that they have and see where they must improve on their skills (UFS).

Learning that takes place in the community is much better than sitting in the chairs for 12 months without any practical work and we don't know what's happening in the community, instead it changed the students to be more modern (UNITRA).

One needs to be involved in a community setting in order to draw on the practical experience when teaching other children. I certainly learnt a tremendous amount and also learnt not to take material for granted. I learnt more than just sitting in a lecture (WITS).

The results from the structured survey support these qualitative comments: 84% of the students (N=122) who answered the question agreed that their SL course enabled them to integrate theory and practice.

5.7 Reflection on service learning

Continuous reflection is supposed to form an integral element of all SL courses. Structured reflection on the course should occur (using planning documents, for example a logic model); partners need to reflect on the course separately as well as jointly, and student reflections should form part of their learning process. It is therefore essential that sufficient opportunities and a range of formats for reflection need to be incorporated into the actual course.

Our evaluation has shown that reflection with students increased to a large extent, in the second year of implementation and many courses indicated that student reflection was a critical part of the course. However, joint reflection (among all partners) took place a lot less frequently. The quotation below is an example of a joint reflection session as a “mutual learning session”:

The community and service provider (HBRI) as well as members of the community with whom collaborative planning was undertaken, and GJMC officials evaluated learner findings during lengthy informal presentation/workshop sessions, and two jury sessions — members of the WITS CHESP team were invited to these juries, to promote interdisciplinary co-ordination within the University, and to ensure constant feedback with the WITS CHESP team. These sessions provided a platform for interactive mutual learning, not only between the students and HBRI, but also between students and community, students and the WITS CHESP office. Evaluation sessions resulted in amendments that were once again assessed by HBRI (WITS).

In another case, the lecturer indicated that informal reflection formed part of the course especially as it has to inform the continuous assessment of the students:

As the lecturer of this course it is a regular activity to reflect on my practice. Reflection occurred throughout the course particularly after Wednesday lectures, visits to providers and end of course meetings and functions with students, service providers and community members. Having to assess the students' examination equivalent assignments was a two-week period of intense reflection on the service learning experience (UND).

In conclusion: From an overview of the various narrative reports, it is clear that a large variety of reflection formats were used for student reflection in the CHESP courses, including reflective papers (UNP), personal journals (UWC, WITS, UNP, UND), diaries (WITS), evaluation sessions (UFS, UNITRA), focus groups (UFS), weekly reports (UNP), interviews (UNITRA), and student presentations (UNITRA).

Although this large range of data-collection methods was used by academics, very little primary evidence (although requested) was cited in most of the narrative reports. This makes it difficult to get a good sense of the extent of ongoing and systematic (self) reflection on the part of the various members involved in the SL course.

5.8 Constraining factors arising from the imperative of having a partnership

Service providers were not always accommodating due to their own heavy workloads. Partnerships were seen as time-consuming affairs with difficulties such as the non-participation of partners being highlighted. Some of the factors identified in the narrative reports that impact on the success of partnerships are the following:

- The fact that relationships are governed by the academic year and are not sustained throughout the year (WITS);
- Significant differences in the organisational culture and management styles used in academic institutions and in service and community organisations (WITS);
- HEI structures to enable a more co-operative, negotiated approach to curriculum development are not in place (WITS);

- A genuine partnership is not in place (WITS);
- People appointed to facilitate community access have become gatekeepers (UNP);
- Roles within the triad are not spelt out clearly enough (UNITRA);
- Meetings were not held on a regular basis (UFS);
- Insufficient time to set up relationships and insufficient time of academic staff members (UFS);
- Lack of communication between community members (triad) and the community (UND);
- Changing personnel within the service provider (UNITRA) and (WITS), and
- Changing academic members (UNITRA).

To summarise: Many of the challenges cited here concern the implementation of an innovation which takes students beyond the walls of the university into the social reality beyond. The difficulties described relate to the new demands placed on the following:

- Students — in terms of both skills and knowledge usually offered in the academic aspect of the course;
- Curriculum — in terms of weighting, balance and integration of theoretical and practical aspects;
- Communities and service providers — in terms of their contribution to the learning process, and
- Academic staff — in terms of organising the logistics of allowing the two worlds to meet effectively.

6. Course benefits

Although our emphasis in the first two years of the CHESP evaluation study was on clarification and process evaluation issues, we also began collecting primary data on student attitudes and experiences towards SL. In addition, we also requested course convenors to report on the benefits to student, community and service providers because of their involvement in SL. The latter request produced some useful results, although we found that very little was reported on community and service provider benefits. It is only towards the end of the second year that

more systematic data was being collected from communities through, for example, focus-group sessions and even then very little of this primary data was reflected in the narrative reports.

Our analysis of student responses to questionnaires distributed before and after the courses shows an overwhelmingly positive reception of SL. Table 1 summarises the results with regard to the students' attitudes towards and experiences of SL. Large percentages of the nearly 400 students surveyed indicated that their course helped to improve their relationship skills, leadership skills and project planning abilities. As significant is the fact that these courses also benefited them in terms of their awareness of cultural differences and opened their eyes to their own cultural stereotypes. These more structured responses were supported by a large number of rich comments of which we have a selected the following:

I acquired important life skills through this course. Through the facilitation skills acquired I have become empowered to such an extent that I now no longer fear to facilitate workshops (UNITRA).

I think it is a great opportunity to be able to work in the community, with the many diverse cultures as well as it helps many realise the reality of working as a doctor. I look forward to learning many new things during the course (UFS).

Table 1: Student experiences of and attitudes towards service learning

	N	% agree	% neutral	% disagree
All university courses should involve a community component	393	84	13	3
The course helped to develop my relationship skills	166	78	18	4
Community participation helped to improve my leadership skills	395	76	19	5
The course helped to learn how to plan and complete a project	393	74	20	6
I benefited with community members from a different cultural background	396	74	22	4
Community work made me aware of some of my own stereotypes	395	71	22	7

The students also reported very positively (Table 2) on how their experiences in the SL course affected their future orientation and decisions about career choices. Although there is most likely a degree of social desirability built into these responses, the general pattern shows that students found the courses useful in confirming their decision to, for instance, become a social worker or medical doctor.

Table 2: Effect of community involvement on future

	N	% agree	% neutral	% disagree
Community work helped me to define my personal strengths and weaknesses	393	78	16	6
Work done in this course has made me more marketable for a profession	393	63	27	10
Community work helped to clarify career choices	393	55	26	19
Community work helped to clarify what major to pursue	393	49	35	16

Students were on the whole, very positive about their involvement with the community (Table 3). The majority indicated that they thought that their involvement was of some value to the community, despite some of the reservations about spending too little time and creating community expectations. Again, these structured responses were borne out by many qualitative comments:

This course helped me to have a better understanding about community and showed me how can I become involved in the community. I would like to gain more in this course so that in future I will be helpful to my community (UNITRA).

Community learning is empowering and it helps one integrate better with people of different socio-economic status and gives a clear picture of what a medical student expects in the future as a GP or during clinical years (UFS).

Table 3: The student and the community

	N	% agree	% neutral	% disagree
Community participation showed me how I can become more involved in community	395	90	8	2
The community appreciated university involvement	396	72	23	5
The community work benefited the community	395	74	18	8
I won't volunteer or participate in the community after the course	393	15	18	67

In what ways, if any, did the communities benefit from their involvement in SL courses? Although the evidence of actual benefit or impact is weak (insufficient data was gained through the narrative reports) and therefore inconclusive, some narrative reports begin to give an indication of the kinds of benefit that accrued to some communities:

- Increased awareness of and knowledge of health hazards (UFS Concepts of Health and Disease);
- Received counselling and changed way of thinking and how to cope with stress (UFS Course Development and Community Psychology);
- Children heard and spoke more English (WITS Community in Education);
- Youth received recognition (WITS Town & Regional Planning);
- More comfortable work environment (WITS Operational Management);
- Read the Bible in useful ways, talk about matters and think about addressing them on their own (UNP Biblical Studies), and
- Renewed their interest in community vegetable gardening (UNP Community Resource Management).

One of the more intangible, but no less important benefits to communities involved them having the opportunity to express their needs and priorities to the academics and students. Giving a voice to the community is of no small significance given the high rates of illiteracy, inaccessibility of rural communities and the remaining legacy of apartheid. Some of the most telling quotes are included below:

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Community members had the opportunity to express their opinion about the services rendered and the referral system [...] Community members see that the Patients' Rights Charter is implemented due to the fact that they can voice complaints and opinions about the services and it is addressed (UFS).

The benefits were mainly to the community representatives and the Street Law project, as they saw the TV crew as a channel to get publicity for their organizations and the project (WITS).

However, many reports refer to a lack of community outcomes or difficulty with assessing these. Echoing some of the sceptical comments made by students about the real value or benefit of the SL course to the communities, academics also referred to a lack of benefit in some cases:

The communities seem to have benefited less from this course on Food Security than the students have because the course offered them limited contact. Some community members were contacted three times by the students and the triad leaders on the course: at the initial stage, the needs assessment interviews, and at the workshop. Furthermore at these three encounters the students were the main drivers of the sessions. The community members merely responded to the needs assessment questions asked by the students (UNITRA).

The only possible benefit to the community of this project is that it may have given them a sense that somebody is interested in them. The fact that there is no real service given and no real benefit to the community makes this project, in my opinion, a failure as a service learning course (WITS).

Thus, although the evaluation study focused largely on conceptualisation and implementation matters, the evidence about course outcomes strongly indicates that the students were the main beneficiaries of these courses. Based on some of the qualitative comments made by students in the surveys, it seems that some of them are somewhat sceptical about the long-term and sustained impact of their involvement in the communities. In many cases this is attributed to the fact that there was simply not enough time spent in the community to produce a discernible impact. Other factors, which have been mentioned, point to unequal relations of power in the partnership, the lack of adequate preparation of both students and communities and the lack of a critical mass of students within a course.

7. Service learning courses: the challenge of institutionalisation

In order to create a situation where SL courses are sustained and viable elements of the normal academic offerings of South African higher education institutions, they need to become an integral part of the institution's philosophy, policies and practices. In a word, they need to be institutionalised and seen as part of the mainstream teaching, learning and research missions of the university or university of technology.

Although it is a clear and explicit goal of JET to assist institutions in the process of mainstreaming SL through the CHESP initiative, the reality is that "institutionalisation" means taking ownership for SL. Although the CHESP initiative can encourage, promote, support and advocate for more emphasis on SL, it remains the responsibility of the institution to design, implement and maintain SL courses as a part of their normal processes and academic offerings. What then does "authentic" institutionalisation involve? Based on the narrative reports, we have identified the following critical conditions:

- There should be a clear commitment to SL which must be articulated in the mission and philosophy of the institution;
- The institution should have an explicit SL policy and clear rules/regulations about SL courses;
- The institution should have a SL office/ officer or committee that is dedicated to the promotion of SL on campus;
- The institution should commit itself to earmarking funds and other resources for the dedicated use of SL initiatives, and
- The institution should provide support and capacity-building to SL staff.

Not surprisingly, the evidence shows differing degrees of institutionalisation. Overall there are some institutions (notably UNITRA and Free State) that have an explicit commitment to SL which is reflected in official policy statements. There is also evidence from our research that the involvement with CHESP has led to a more positive institutional image for universities:

In spite of the number of difficulties and problems of partnership-oriented community-based learning, the positive outcomes for the University in its relationship with the partners outweigh the negative ones. In its role as a partner it is recognised as an active, relevant institution

Mouton & Wildschut/Service learning in South Africa

in the society and its image as an ivory tower institution is lessened (UNP Institutional Report).

According to the campus co-ordinator at the University of the Free State (UFS Institutional Report), the introduction of CHESP has already led to an increased awareness of SL within the university as well as a change in attitudes:

The pilot courses also contributed to a greater level of acceptance by the community of the university and its service activities. Important groundwork has been done by course co-ordinators and students concerned in identifying important principles for service learning through their practical experience and, having taken the initiative, provide the examples that other service learning projects in future can learn from.

At the University of the Free State this commitment to SL has also already been translated into practice as the following quote shows:

The fact that the Executive Committee of the University of the Free State as well as the Council of the University has decided to take money out of the central budget of the University in order to stimulate community service activities as an integrated part of the University's functioning, is extremely important in order to promote the principles underpinning the development and implementation of the service learning courses, community service, partnership development, community development and regional development.

However, some narrative reports were also quite critical about the real extent to which SL is widely adopted in the institutions. At one level there are committed (but often junior) members of the academic staff who are passionate about SL and are driving the SL courses. At another level one finds vice-chancellors who express support for SL and who would like to see policy in place that ensures that SL is promoted at their institution. However, it seems that the gap between executive support and very junior (level of academics) participation is not really filled. In many cases, there is very little support from senior academics, deans or heads of schools. The quotes below indicate there is very little sustained and institutionalised support for SL at the lower levels of certain institutions:

The fact however remains that there are various hindrances and barriers that range from inadequate resources to a lack of philosophical foundation which results in very few service learning courses being developed [...] Without university incentives for these projects it would appear as though very few academics are going to pursue this manner of teaching, learning and research irrespective of its benefits. Therefore it could be asserted that buy-in from the University is required for

this kind of learning and this could possibly be formalised by the development of a civic engagement policy that highlights service learning in order for us to have sustained and successful partnerships and therefore courses. We need to connect the notion of service learning to the University's mission and its notions of civic responsibility (UWC).

Many of the 'champions' have felt that so far this advocacy has been predominantly rhetorical; support in the form of resources and recognition have been slower to materialise (UNP).

This has prompted some course conveners to emphasise that a real need remains to raise the status of SL at their institutions. In most institutions there are few if any rewards for SL. It still does not form part of the performance appraisal system at most universities. Unless this situation changes, there is very little incentive for an already overburdened academic community to invest in SL.

In conclusion: In addition to the essential commitment from the top (executive/management), it is clear that SL will only become part and parcel of the mainstream academic work of our higher education institutions if it is developed, driven and nurtured from "below". We ultimately need scholars who actively promote and implement SL as a viable and necessary end in itself — not merely a means to some other end.

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