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## A case study of a higher education institutional assessment on service learning

This article focuses on the various processes undergone by the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus (now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) to research the institutionalisation of service learning. The application of three different processes and tools for assessment is discussed and located within the international context of institutional assessment trends. The relative utility of each of these assessment tools is discussed with particular emphasis placed on the narrative produced by using the Furco Rubric, as this highlights the role of contextual issues in the institutionalisation process. It is hoped that the reflections on these assessment processes will provide insight into the factors affecting the establishment of service learning as a sanctioned part of higher education's academic and social agenda.

### Institusionele assessering van diensleer aan 'n hoëronderwysinrigting: 'n gevallestudie

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die verskillende prosesse wat die Universiteit van Natal, Pietermaritzburg-kampus (nou deel van die Universiteit van KwaZulu-Natal) deurloop het om navorsing te doen oor die institutionalisering van diensleer. Die toepassing van drie verskillende prosesse en instrumente vir assessering word bespreek en binne die internasionale konteks van institusionele assesseringstendense geplaas. Die relatiewe bruikbaarheid van elk van hierdie assesseringsinstrumente word bespreek met spesifieke klem op die narratief wat voortspruit uit die gebruik van die Furco-rubriek, aangesien dit die rol van kontekstuele kwessies in die institutionaliseringsproses uitlig. Nadenke oor hierdie assesseringsprosesse mag insig verskaf oor faktore wat die vestiging van diensleer as 'n aanvaarde deel van hoër onderwys se akademiese en sosiale agenda beïnvloed.

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South Africa, as a newly democratic country, is faced with the challenge of ensuring the greatest number of social, economic and political benefits for the greatest number of citizens. Achieving this has not been easy, with large numbers of the population living in extreme poverty, lacking basic services such as water and being unable to receive the kind of education needed to become a productive member of South African society. All sectors have come together to try to achieve these goals, and indeed there is acknowledgment that higher education institutions have a major role in the reconstruction of the social, cultural and economic fabric of South African society. The University of Natal<sup>1</sup> participated in this call for transformation and reconstruction, revising their position in the greater community, by undergoing a series of evaluation and planning processes. As well as a new set of Strategic Initiatives for the University, one of the major outcomes of this process was a revised University Vision Statement which stated that the university:

[...] aims to be a socially responsive university, reacting ethically and intellectually to the many problems of South Africa and the rest of the world [...] The strategic challenge for the University is to integrate development activities into the curricula so that our students are able to learn the lessons they need to play a meaningful role in the reconstruction of our society (University of Natal 2000: 2 & 4).

It is within this national context of the transformation of South African society (and indeed transformation of higher education institutions themselves) that a national initiative entitled the Community-Higher Education-Service Partnerships (CHESP) emerged in 1999 (JET 1999). Funded by the Ford Foundation and administered by the Joint Education Trust (JET), this project involved the participation of eight higher education institution “case studies” from throughout South Africa;<sup>2</sup> the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (UNP) was one of them. The CHESP project was given additional relevance by

- 1 As a result of the merger between the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal, the institution is now referred to as the University of KwaZulu-Natal. However, this research was conducted while still the University of Natal and thus references to the institution will remain as such.
- 2 The eight institutions included: University of Cape Town; University of the Free State; University of Witwatersrand; University of the Western Cape; University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg; University of Natal, Durban; University of the North, Qwaqwa (now incorporated with the University of the Free State).

the national Department of Education through its White Paper on Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Dept of Education 1997: 1), which emphasised that one of the national education goals in South Africa is the promotion of

[...] social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes.

The purpose of the CHESP project was to explore the potential that service learning (SL)<sup>3</sup> (as a means of achieving the “community service programmes” mentioned above) has as a viable means of providing the kind of academic curricula that would also achieve a degree of community development.

Prior to the CHESP initiative, various disciplines at UNP had been involved in SL in a variety of different forms and within a variety of disciplines. There is therefore a diversity of approaches to this teaching and learning pedagogy on campus — a diversity which has been encouraged over time. As a result of these diverse approaches to SL and the range of partnership arrangements that exist, co-ordination of SL activities has been and remains a challenge.

With the increasing emphasis on higher education institutions being engaged in the broader community, a range of processes and tools for establishing this information need to be developed and evaluated. Recent attempts to examine the extent of institutionalisation of one form of community engagement, SL, have posed a challenge because of the multiple components involved in establishing SL as a priority on a campus. In the international arena, approaches to this assessment process have focused on assessment of individual components, such as student learning, community impact or staff involvement (Gelmon *et al* 2001; Bringle *et al* 2004). Other approaches have taken a broader view of institutionalisation, taking into account the forces and factors that drive institutional policy (Holland 1997; Furco 2003).

3 The authors understand service learning to mean academically-based community service activities.

## 1. Application of tools for institutional assessment

In this article a case study approach has been utilised to reflect on the application of three tools for institutional assessment. This “exploration of a ‘bounded system’ [...] over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell 1998: 61) is intended to highlight issues that may be relevant in other contexts. As Patton (2001: 335) has warned though, a critical principle is to “maintain the contextual frame for lessons learned, that is to keep lessons learned grounded in their context”. These “lessons learned” need to be tested through application in other contexts.

Over the last five years there have been a number of attempts to assess the level of institutionalisation of SL at UNP. Three procedures are presented here: the Institutional Audit (which involved a survey and in-depth interviews); the CHESP/Monitoring Evaluation Research Programme (MERP) process (an externally driven, national research process); and the Furco Rubric (a USA model for self-assessment of institutionalisation) (Furco 2003). All yielded important insights into various aspects of practising SL at UNP. The following section highlights the “lessons learned” through application of these assessment procedures, with particular emphasis on the results yielded by the Furco Rubric, as this highlights the UNP context.

These tools were selected upon the basis of a variety of criteria. In the case of both the Institutional Audit and the CHESP/MERP process, they were mandated as part of an externally funded programme. In the case of the Furco Rubric, this was selected voluntarily in order to participate in an international comparative opportunity. In all cases, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections, several factors contributed to the perception of value of these tools. Ease of use, compatibility with programme goals and philosophy, and flexibility in structure and in application all assisted in the perception of the tool as valuable. The kind of information generated also contributes to the assessment of the value of the tool. Where tools generate data that is reliable and meaningful, there is much more interest in their use. Data that is easily interpretable and usable will be of much greater value than data that requires considerable sophistication for analysis. The nature of the information generated also needs to be of appropriate depth and breadth

to meet the needs of the programme participants, as well as institutional leaders.

## 1.1 Institutional audit

An institutional audit was completed in 1999 as part of the CHESP Programme (UNP 1999). The institutional audit was intended to provide an indication of the nature and extent of SL type activities on campus and thus provide a foundation for the institutionalisation of SL.

### 1.1.1 Tools and procedures

A survey was constructed asking key questions regarding community engagement. This was mailed to a sample of academics. The audit was conducted in a focussed manner with an initial screening letter to heads of schools and directors of disciplines to establish which participants would be more suitable for the survey. Despite having an individually selected target group, there was a very poor response rate to the survey — only 20 out of 59 of those targeted responded (34%). The original survey was followed by a qualitative study consisting of 23 in-depth interviews with University staff involved in SL. The sample was drawn from the list of staff selected for the survey. Members of the executive, deans and heads of schools were targeted. Further, certain survey respondents requested a follow-up call or visit on their returned questionnaires; these staff members formed the core of “champions” where the interview process began. These “champions” were asked to recommend others who should be interviewed, resulting in the final sample 23 staff members.

A semi-structured interview format was used which explored the following questions:

- What SL or community-based activities are you currently engaged in?
- How are communities selected or targeted?
- Which students are involved in this work?
- How do you find doing this kind of work in the University system?
- If a SL office was to be established, what would your reaction be?
- What functions could this office perform that would assist you with your current work?

The responses received from staff were clustered around a series of common themes. References were made to lack of staff recognition and reward within the institution for people participating in this kind of teaching and learning pedagogy. Many people expressed concern at their own lack of capacity for SL and felt there were no structures offered by the institution to solve this. Further, the perception was that the administration was inflexible in terms of accommodating activities that fall outside of the “traditional”. Staff also highlighted a number of factors that they felt the institution should address to facilitate SL: logistics (particularly transport); partnership development with various off-campus bodies; staff development and capacity building as indicated above; student support; and research and publicity.

### 1.1.2 Strengths

The audit was a useful first step in “taking the service learning pulse” of UNP and revealed a great deal of activity that may not otherwise have been recognised. The information that was gathered painted a picture of the experiences of SL practitioners. The mail survey resulted in invitations for future conversations, which ultimately assisted in identifying SL “champions” at UNP.

### 1.1.3 Limitations

The low response rate to the survey is of concern. There are possibly numerous activities that have not been identified. Future audits will have to be backed by authority (originating from an executive member) to ensure they are taken seriously and to improve the response rate. The collected information remains a “database” if it is not acted upon.

### 1.1.4 Utility at UNP

The major use of the institutional audit was to serve as a catalyst for gathering SL practitioners and encouraging conversation. As a measure of institutionalisation it was limited. The institutional audit could, and should have been used more fully to inform the way in which SL was developed at UNP. In particular, the identification of a range of discipline-based initiatives with established links to various communities could have formed the basis for strengthening existing community partnerships. Thus, this procedure had the potential to both measure

the extent of SL activity as well as to inform institutionalisation activity. However, the audit did not result in consolidation and development of activities. The CHESP project decided to shift its focus to a single specific geographic community (with whom no one had previously worked), instead of building on the findings of the institutional audit, which had identified multiple community and service provider relationships that had been built across the various disciplines. Another difficulty was that the CHESP project funded a small number of selected modules, which meant that the broad range of SL-type work across schools and programmes that had been identified in the institutional audit was not built on through the project.

## 1.2 CHESP/MERP

The initial monitoring and evaluation of SL at UNP was largely driven by an externally controlled Monitoring Evaluation Research Process (MERP), which was initiated by the CHESP Project. One of the aims of the MERP process was to gather standardised data from the eight participating campuses to provide evidence to lobby the national Department of Education to prioritise SL in higher education.

### 1.2.1 Tools and procedures

SL staff participated in the completion of templates and logic models. (Templates described the intended learning outcomes of each SL module, while the logic models set out the approach for analysis of the potential outcomes for each of the parties involved.) SL staff further administered pre- and post-module implementation questionnaires to students, off-campus partners and themselves. Where possible they conducted interviews or ran focus groups with their off-campus partners. Finally, narrative and financial reports were completed for each module at the end of their implementation cycles. These provided a narrative on experiences derived from the individual module as well as an indication of the running costs of such a module. The narrative reports were then meta-analysed in an attempt to provide a picture of the institutional state of SL. The institutional report (UNP 2002) provided feedback to the funders on UNP's progress with respect to:

- conducting an audit and analysis of community service initiatives at the university;

- the development of effective pilot SL programmes;
- building the capacity of community, academic, and service sector persons involved in SL;
- acquiring resource materials to support the development and research of SL;
- monitoring, evaluating and researching SL programmes;
- creating a university based research group;
- informing and implementing university policy and practice on community engagement and SL, and
- monitoring costs related to the development and implementation of SL modules (adapted from CHESP 2002).

### 1.2.2 Strengths

The MERP approach to institutional assessment encouraged a level of rigour and reflection from staff that may otherwise not have occurred, given its time-consuming nature. More specifically, the instruments (templates, logic models) require one to analyse SL in terms of the outcomes for all parties involved. The process further encouraged systematic data collection through questionnaires, interviews or focus groups.

### 1.2.3 Limitations

The instruments themselves stemmed from a positivistic research paradigm, which may not be the most appropriate for SL research, where knowledge is often seen as socially constructed. Further, the instruments were unsuitable for some populations either due to illiteracy or irrelevance (for example, some modules' off-campus partners were bereaved children or illiterate farm workers). Interviews and focus groups are time and labour intensive. Therefore most module co-ordinators opted to use the questionnaires, which did not provide the same depth of data.

Beyond the level of individual modules, this process revealed little about "institutionalisation". The institutional report did little more than report on UNP's compliance with the funders' requirements and was not used within the organisation as a tool for reflection and planning.

#### 1.2.4 Utility at UNP

This process therefore had little utility as a measure of the institutionalisation of SL in the institution. Some of the instruments may have been useful at the level of the individual discipline, but overall they seemed to burden staff members who were already stretched by their SL activities.

In terms of the gleaning information needed to inform institutionalisation of SL at UNP, the utility of this process was limited by the “one size fits all” model for assessment. There appeared to be a conflict between the standardised assessment methods intended to serve multiple modules at multiple institutions in a uniform manner, and the potential for attention to unique and distinct characteristics of individual components and contexts. These unique and distinct characteristics may, in fact, be more important as explanatory factors in understanding and analysing institutionalisation.

Further, the MERP focus on evaluating individual modules did not facilitate an exploration of a programme-wide approach to SL, or the integration of the work into disciplines and schools, and indeed the institution. In future, mechanisms would need to be developed that would balance the needs of a national research project (MERP) with the desirability of decentralised research and discipline-based publication. Some experiences with achieving such a balance are described later in this article. In addition, alternative procedures and instruments for use with diverse populations and perspectives need to be explored.

### 1.3 The Furco Rubric

In 2003 a decision was taken for UNP to discontinue its involvement in the national CHESP project. It seemed appropriate, then, to reflect on the status of the institution with respect to SL, without the impetus provided by an external funder. Two members of staff who had participated in the national CHESP project<sup>4</sup> decided to use the well-known Furco Rubric (described below) to guide this reflection process. This

4 Two of the authors, Mitchell and Trotter, were two of the three staff members identified as part of a UNP team (“core group” consisting of academic, service provider and geographic community representatives) chosen to participate in the CHESP project from 1999 to 2002.

reflection was conducted with the assistance of colleagues from the US and Canada and formed the basis for an international comparison (Gelmon *et al* 2004). In addition the university executive member who had been responsible for overseeing SL was asked to participate in this assessment process.

### 1.3.1 Tools and procedures

The “Furco Rubric” (Furco 2003) was designed to provide a consistent assessment tool to assist institutions both in self-assessing their progress in the institutionalisation of SL and to serve as the basis for strategic planning and implementation of enhanced SL and related activities. It builds upon earlier work initiated by Washington State Campus Compact in the USA (Kecskes & Muyllaert 1997), and draws upon lessons learned through research conducted through the Western Region Campus Compact Consortium (Furco 2002).

The framework of the Rubric consists of three stages of institutionalisation and five dimensions. These are described in detail elsewhere (Furco 2002 & 2003). The three stages are:

- Critical mass building
- Quality building
- Sustained institutionalisation.

The five dimensions are:

- Philosophy and mission of SL
- Student support for and involvement in SL
- Staff support for and involvement in SL
- Community participation and partnerships
- Institutional support for SL.

UNP’s position on the various stages of the rubric is briefly presented below (a more detailed description can be found in Gelmon *et al* 2004).

- Philosophy and mission

Although SL is cited in the strategic initiatives document of the university, it does not appear to be “part of the primary concern of the institution” (Furco 2003:1).

It appears as though the institution is divided into two distinct groups, when attempting to identify how faculty define SL. The majority of staff fall into Stage One (Critical Mass Building) where there “is no campus-wide definition for service learning” (Furco 2003: 1). Many do not know about SL and those who practice some form of engagement use a variety of terms for this purpose. However, a small minority are in Stage Two (Quality Building), where participation in the CHESP project enabled the team to arrive at “an operationalised definition for SL on the campus” (Furco 2003: 1). If, as Furco recommends, a common definition is central to institutionalisation, UNP still has considerable ground to cover. This is compounded by the fact that in the South African context, arriving at a single term for SL-type practice, has been difficult and there is still a lack of agreement over core terms, such as “community” (Nuttall 2000).

- Student support/involvement

In this particular dimension “there is no campus-wide mechanism for informing students about SL modules, resources, and opportunities that are available to them” (Furco 2003: 3), and SL options in which service is integrated in core academic modules and are limited to only certain groups of students in the academy (such as students in certain majors, honours students, seniors, etc). Further to this, the campus has neither formal nor informal mechanisms for encouraging students to participate in SL.

With regard to student leadership, UNP remains at the Critical Mass Building stage. There are “few, if any, opportunities on campus [...] for students to take on leadership roles in advancing SL in their departments or throughout the campus” (Furco 2003: 3).

- Faculty support/involvement

Out of a total of 70 disciplines, only 16 disciplines (approximately 22%) were identified as performing some kind of off-campus engagement. However,

[...] very few members know what service learning is or understand how service learning is different from community service, internships, or other experiential learning activities (Furco 2003: 2).

UNP has suffered in its development of a SL critical mass through changes to leadership. A number of “service learning champions” have

left the institution for appointments elsewhere. Still, staff development seminars on various aspects of SL are being offered through staff development units (such as the Quality Promotion Unit and the University of Natal) as a means to build support for SL.

UNP appears to be located in the Quality Building stage where “there are only one or two influential faculty members who provide leadership to the campus’ service learning effort” (Furco 2003: 2). Although criteria apparently exist at UNP for the promotion of staff on the basis of “community service” activities, it appears as though there is no institutional record of promotion based on this criterion, similar to that noted by some authors such as Schneider (1998). Thus, UNP is situated in Stage Two — Quality Building where

[...] although faculty members are encouraged and are provided various incentives (mini-grants, sabbaticals, funds for service learning conferences, etc) to pursue service learning activities, their work in service learning is not always recognized during their review, tenure, and promotion process (Furco 2003: 2).

- Community participation

In his recent analysis of change in South Africa, Du Pre (2003: 11) noted that

[...] community participation has become part of higher education planning. Many higher education institutions have established departments to develop links with the community.

There is no centre for community partnerships at UNP. It has been debated whether such a centre should be established to maintain links with communities, or whether a decentralised model is preferable. Holland (1997: 36) notes that a central office is able to “provide leadership and assistance, and [is] seen as a powerful force necessary for a sustained or expanded effort”. However, such a centre could also be viewed as potentially inhibiting the interests of others on campus. Further, community partnerships are often built around individual relationships that academic staff invest in and thus a decentralised model would assist in sustaining these.

It would appear, that while UNP on the whole is at Stage One — Critical Mass Building, where few community agencies are partnered with the university, those disciplines that are involved in SL have well-

established and successful relationships with off-campus partners. Indeed, certain disciplines have exceptional relationships with service providers. Both parties feel the relationship is secure enough to make requests about potential projects or suggested changes to existing programmes. For example, the Keep Pietermaritzburg Clean Association and the Political Science department have a relationship which allows the lecturer to contact the association and request their participation in a SL internship. Indeed, the association is able to meet with lecturing staff and offer suggestions to improve future collaboration.

- Institutional support

As mentioned above, at UNP there is no campus-wide co-ordinating entity that is devoted to assisting in the implementation, advancement, and institutionalisation of SL and there are no academic staff whose primary responsibility it is to institutionalise SL.

Regarding policy development, the

[...] institution's official and influential policy-making board(s)/ committee(s) recognise service learning as an essential educational goal for the campus, but no formal policies have been developed (Furco 2003: 5).

While a policy document was drafted as part of the CHESP process, the process of ratification was never completed due to the fact that further information was required regarding the implications of implementing the policy, such as the costs to the institution, and whether SL should be centralised or decentralised. Further policy development has become problematic with the current institutional merger process.

With regards to funding, SL activities have been supported by both “soft” money (short-term grants) from sources outside the institution as well as “hard” money from the institution. It seems self-evident that institutional support will be stronger when there is a commitment of “hard” resources in terms of financing, staff positions, central academic resources to support module and partnership development, and related resources.

### 1.3.2 Strengths

The process of institutionalisation of SL is context-specific as this UNP narrative illustrates, yet the rubric can offer a useful common assess-

ment tool regardless of the part of the world where it is used. It reminds institutions to evaluate and measure their progress in areas that are important in the success of SL programmes and their institutionalisation.

### 1.3.3 Limitations

The Rubric assists in providing a point-in-time “snapshot” rather than a “motion picture” perspective. Over time one would hope and expect to see movement across the dimensions.

The Rubric fails to address the issue of competing institutional or programmatic priorities when applying the category of “philosophy and mission”. An institution such as UNP may espouse community responsiveness in its mission statement, but other aspects of the mission may in fact result in competing priorities, such that at any one time an institution may be placing more or less emphasis on an element of the mission statement. This is difficult to operationalise, but has a profound impact on the support for institutionalisation of SL.

The Rubric further fails to emphasise the role of resources and their importance in institutionalising SL. Resource availability may be inferred in some of the dimensions, but in an era of budget constraints it may be more helpful to be able to address resource issues explicitly as part of the self-assessment process.

The “stages” provided by the Rubric may not be sufficient for capturing an institution’s progress or lack thereof. For example: a Stage zero (preceding Critical Mass Building), would accommodate those institutions that are still conceptualising the idea of SL before they have even begun to build critical mass. One might also consider adding a Stage Four, which would be the stage in which SL is assumed to be part of the institution’s daily teaching and learning practice, but still allow room for further growth, development and improvement.

### 1.3.4 Utility at UNP

Evaluating institutionalisation of SL at UNP through the Rubric reveals the following picture: Over the last year, critical mass building at UNP has definitely slowed, and in some places has retreated instead of advanced. There are fewer faculty involved at a co-ordinating level than a year ago, in large part due to the end of the CHESP grant. While a backward movement is evident, UNP’s status one year ago may have

been a false reading of the state of SL because it was driven by external forces (a grant and reporting responsibilities) rather than by an institutional commitment beyond the grant. If the institution did not own the process then the question of sustainability arises: would the gains made in institutionalising SL during the CHESP process have been sustained in the longer term if leadership support or funding had continued? The UNP experience offers a practical reality for any institution currently dependent on soft funding for sustaining its SL initiatives.

While external direction and interference can complicate such institutionalisation processes, many of them are unavoidable. This is particularly evident in the South African context where quality assurance is a prime example of an externally mandated process. However, this is a national process driven by the South African Department of Education — not an international funder. The relevance of this point is that funders often have agendas beyond simply “institutionalising service learning”. Thus, one could argue that it is not the external influence that is the “problem”, but rather the challenging issue of attaching funding to this influence. Compliance with funders’ requirements is sometimes contrary to the developmental processes taking place within the institution and in fact one could argue that this may seem to be the foundation of barriers to progress. For example, the collaborative ethos that was fostered on the UNP campus was sometimes undermined by the considerable number of compulsory meetings convened to meet the demands of CHESP and MERP for compliance with the funding. This sometimes led academics to feel that participating in a SL network was more of a burden than a benefit.

The diversity of approaches to SL that different disciplines offer make the completion of the Rubric difficult. Ultimately the question is where the campus is in terms of institutionalisation. Across most of the dimensions, UNP is still in capacity building (Stage One). However, mechanisms have been put in place in order to advance beyond this stage (for example, the placement of SL in the strategic initiatives document). There is a need for considerably more support from the institution itself to make substantial progress in institutionalisation.

Unfortunately, as of mid-2004, university priorities are focused on the recent merger, and further developments in SL have been placed on hold until after the initial effects of the merger are complete. At that

point, in order for SL to become institutionalised, a central office headed by an academic may be of key importance in order to support, facilitate and advocate for SL at the new university. It will also be important to gain support from the new academic/administrative leadership. Throughout this time period, however, those already providing leadership for SL will continue to provide support and information to colleagues, and to further raise awareness through presentations and publications.

## 2. Reflections from outside South Africa

These three efforts to study institutionalisation at UNP can be further examined through the lens of activities outside of South Africa. One would hope that concerted efforts to develop SL and related programmes would demonstrate how institutions would advance with respect to institutionalisation. Anecdotal reports at conferences, postings on websites and journal articles tell stories of individual accomplishments. Yet, even structured and systematic efforts have not produced the kind of changes that might be anticipated, such as the lack of “significant advancement in the institutionalisation of service learning on the forty-three campuses” reported by Furco (2002: 61). As demonstrated by the UNP case, institutionalisation is a function of multiple variables — both internal and external — and may not proceed smoothly or systematically, despite good intentions and careful scheduling and planning.

### 2.1 Participating in multi-site collaborations

One of the key lessons identified by the UNP research is that an individual institution may be compromised in its ability to make progress at its own pace because of guidelines and constraints imposed by a large-scale funding project. Thus, while UNP drew benefit from CHESP/MERP in many ways, the institution’s own areas of concern sometimes needed to be compromised in order to adhere to the schedule of project-defined activities. Several national or regional demonstration projects related to SL and community-based education in the USA have not specifically studied institutionalisation, yet similar challenges of synchronising local and national goals and needs have been identified. For example, a multi-year project involving ten USA universities studying

community-based health professions education found that participation in a national project increased the local visibility and validity of the work (Gelmon & Barnett 1999). Such a benefit could be cited by UNP, as the CHESP participation gave the institution and its representatives visibility and opportunities that might otherwise not have been as readily available. Yet the same USA project identified barriers across the participating sites such as differences in disciplinary or institutional approaches; conflicts in scheduling; challenges involving common instrumentation; and limited resources. Each of these barriers is relevant to the UNP experience, and potentially compromised its individual progress with respect to institutionalising certain key elements of SL.

Similar findings were observed in a USA-based national study of the integration of SL at 20 institutions, in this case involving a variety of health professions disciplines (Gelmon & Holland 1998). The Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) sought to study the development and institutionalisation of SL in medical, nursing, dental, pharmacy and other health professions education programmes. Benefits identified during the HPSISN evaluation included opportunities for collaboration, facilitation of networking, rapid access to information, enhanced opportunities for dissemination of findings, and accelerated learning through collective experiences (Gelmon & Holland 1998). These were most powerful in the early stages of the project when sites were beginning their exploration of SL, with external funding and national recognition providing a “jump-start” to accelerate campus activities. By the latter stages of the three-year project, issues of sustainability became prominent and were largely dependent on individual institutional commitment to the SL programme. As institutions progressed at different rates, participants found common evaluation and research methods to be of less value, seeking instead to focus on their own individual needs, accomplishments, and challenges.

Again this mirrors the experience of the CHESP participants, where, through the CHESP project, opportunities to network and participate in joint problem-solving resulted in “accelerated learning”. While pioneers at UNP gained in their understanding of SL as a teaching and learning pedagogy, this did not mean that the institution was ready, or indeed capacitated, to implement, or monitor practices similar to

other South African institutions, or in the manner proposed by the national project leaders and evaluators. The central issue appears to be a “goodness of fit” dilemma, where, as is described above, unique and complex contextual factors and processes seldom create barriers for the institution to fit comfortably within a particular imposed frame or model.

## 2.2 Linkage of self-assessment to strategic planning

The use of self-assessments such as an institutional audit echoes some of the experiences seen in the USA, in particular with respect to the self-assessment process undertaken in preparation for institutional accreditation (a process which some in South Africa have been examining as efforts to develop an improved system of quality assurance are underway). Self-assessment is intended to promote reflection and improvement, yet the process is sometimes constrained by the accreditation guidelines and there is disconnectness between responding to criteria and creatively identifying areas for planning and action. Institutions that have made a major commitment to SL and civic engagement may find that the guidelines for self-assessment (whether an audit list or a set of accreditation criteria) do not speak specifically to identifying those opportunities or linkages that may be most evident in the array of SL activities. Separate strategic planning and visioning exercises may identify these linkages, but such forward looking activities generally move beyond the minimum threshold response found in accreditation criteria.

A current example of this is found in work underway at Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon. This is an institution that has been recognised by many as a leader in institutionalising SL through redesign of the general education component of the undergraduate major to require community-based SL experiences as a graduation requirement; through innovative criteria for academic staff review and promotion that give value to the scholarship of engagement; and through reconceptualisation of the institution’s role as a key player in the Portland metropolitan region as both a local resource and as a key player in community development and urban planning. The institution recently completed a two-year, internal strategic planning exercise that resulted in a clear statement of vision, values, and institutional priorities that form

the core of the strategic plan (Portland State University 2002). The institution is now engaged in a detailed self-assessment in preparation for its next review for institutional accreditation in 2005, and this process is heavily directed by the regional criteria for accreditation. The team leading the self-study is attempting, wherever possible, to create linkages between the current self-assessment and the strategic plan, yet in many cases there are not clear linkages. Further efforts to provide connections to internal self-assessments of civic engagement capacity, programmatic assessment, or departmental reviews muddy the waters even further, as each self-assessment tool has its own area of emphasis, and few if any appear to offer opportunities for linkage among these various examinations. Initiatives to integrate an understanding of institutionalisation of SL fall far behind when standardised audits and templates direct the self-assessment.

The challenge for higher education institutions is, therefore, to find ways to meaningfully engage with national processes in a manner which is useful to the individual university as well as the national accrediting body. For UNP, this is the quality assurance initiative of the Higher Education Quality Council of the Department of Education. Can South African universities steer the quality assurance process to develop criteria that are broad enough to fit multiple contexts, and still provide information that is useful for local action?

Two key questions for further research and relevant to this discussion have been raised by Holland (2002). These are: What is the linkage of SL planning and development with respect to overall campus strategic planning? In what ways does institutional commitment to SL promote implementation of other types of engagement activities? In the case of UNP, it is clear that the institutional audit for SL could have been a valuable learning tool. The disconnectness between this activity and other institutional planning, however, begs the question of how the purposes of the audit might have been better attained if there had been more explicit linkage to other institutional self-assessment processes. It is important to stress that simply because learning has been achieved, this does not mean an institution is capacitated to act on this new knowledge. The Furco Rubric is recognised as an extremely useful learning tool that was used to extract information from a complicated process. However this information was not translated into action.

This is not a reflection on the utility of the Rubric but rather on the contextual difficulties facing UNP at the time. As with any strategic planning activity, there is a desire to integrate the various levels of the organisation and achieve integration across all sub-units. Self-assessment and related action planning need to be contextualised among units and to the institutional purpose as a whole. As Wergin & Swingen (2000) have described, the work of the institution frames the choices for departmental or programmatic work, which in turn frame the work of individual academic staff members. Thus, in the case of UNP, the role of the institutional audit for SL might have been better framed as an opportunity both for bottom-up information (informing the university executive) and for top-down strategy development (informing individual departments, modules, and faculty/staff).

### 2.3 Use of standardised service learning assessment frameworks

As institutions integrate SL into their activities and become interested in tracking their long-term progress, as well as the building of institutional capacity, methods such as the Furco Rubric, previously described, or the framework presented by Holland (1997) are being eagerly embraced. These approaches both provide templates for self-assessment that specifically address issues related to SL, yet may be better suited to the beginner institution than to those where institutionalisation is more advanced. Neither framework incorporates sophisticated rating scales nor specifies the nature of evidence that leads to the conclusions about institutionalisation. Such detail may not be appropriate for the institution that is an “early adopter” of SL, and thus these frameworks may be most appropriately used in these early-stage situations.

Institutions that are more advanced may need more detailed frameworks. For example, in informal attempts to complete the Furco Rubric at Portland State University, it was observed that there are places where the self-assessment results indicate sustained institutionalisation, such as student support/involvement, faculty support/involvement, or community participation (Gelmon *et al* 2004). An institution beginning its SL investment would be delighted to achieve this institutionalisation, yet an institution such as Portland State can still identify opportunities for further improvement and therefore may not be content to

have achieved the basic elements of this level of institutionalisation. While there may be institutional policies and practices in place, variations in “roll-out” of activity exist across departments and programmes, and continued effort is needed to engage those areas where effort is not fully institutionalised, as well as in those areas that can continue to learn from their experiences and further enhance their roles in SL.

Perhaps what is needed is an advanced self-assessment tool, and this could be a focus for further research. This would only be used where institutions clearly have developed the basic infrastructure for SL (using the Furco, Holland or some other template) and now seek to explore where there are gaps and where there are opportunities for further enhancement and integration. This sort of advanced tool might also address the points raised previously about the disconnection between SL and other strategic planning, and offer a systematic method for overall organisational assessment and linkages to both internal planning and external reviews for accreditation or other means of quality assurance. While some might argue that a two-tiered system of self-assessment with respect to SL institutionalisation is discriminatory, institutions that have already experienced the developmental phases would be able to argue that a more advanced process would better meet their needs and enable them to continue to advance and contribute to overall knowledge of institutionalisation, thus ultimately benefiting the less advanced institutions as well as themselves.

A useful model for this sort of two-pronged approach to self-assessment can be found in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), which is an alternative approach to institutional accreditation for those institutions in the United States that are members of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (AQIP 2004). In its long-standing research into institutions that have demonstrated high performance in review for institutional accreditation, AQIP has identified a set of common values that permeate institutions that have achieved a systematic approach to continuous improvement in institutional quality. These values include focus, collaboration, involvement, agility, leadership, foresight, learning, information, people, and integrity (AQIP 2004). This set of values might be applied and tested in high performing institutions committed to SL, and a more advanced template designed to facilitate self-assessment and gain further insights into the process

of institutionalisation. Clearly, this would be a long-term strategic direction for the HEQC, once the basic approach for institutional review and accreditation is in place.

In summary, different tools may be appropriate for different institutions at different developmental stages. The institutional audit is a useful tool for gaining a broader picture of the state of SL already in place at an institution. It assists in identifying potential champions or pioneers, who are then significant in driving the institutionalisation process. The audit also identifies strong community partnerships and linkages where potential “fledgling” SL modules may be fostered. It further identifies areas of inactivity and gaps in the institution, where promotion of SL needs to be focused.

The more detailed Monitoring and Evaluation Process (MERP) where standard tools and instruments are completed by a variety of disciplines and their partners provides the finer detail on the “broad strokes” picture created by the audit. This is useful for assisting SL practitioners to be more reflective and rigorous about the nature of their modules and the application of SL pedagogy within their disciplines. If used appropriately, the kind of information gained through this process could be useful for lobbying and advocacy. The caution, gained from the UNP experience, is that this process should be developed and owned by the SL practitioners and not seen as imposed by external parties, with little relation to the actual understanding of the forms of knowledge they subscribe to or the mental models they use.

The Furco Rubric provides a dimension that is not revealed by the other two processes. This is useful as a reflective exercise in guiding where future effort needs to be expended. The assessment process can stimulate conversation about issues of definition, areas for development and the vital role of leadership in the process of institutionalising SL. The caution here is that this information may not be transformed into action unless there is a commitment from the leadership of the university to SL as a core function. If this is not the case, one wonders whether this focus on community is more about positive publicity and the appearance of social responsibility, than actual action.

### 3. Implications

Although all the tools used at UNP have yielded potentially useful data and information for action, this is where the process ends. The MERP process provided information for a national research project — this was not translated into action plans for institutionalisation at the University of Natal. Likewise the institutional audit revealed a number of community-based activities and some actionable suggestions for institutionalisation. This was not taken any further. Lastly, the most recent assessment using the Furco Rubric has highlighted a backward shift in institutionalisation due to a lack of the mechanisms necessary to maintain ongoing impetus. However, there is no apparent audience for this information within this institution. One of the major issues with institutional assessment, therefore, is that it is conducted with an audience and purpose in mind.

An assessment of institutionalisation for the sake of assessment is a limited exercise. An assessment of institutionalisation for the purpose of driving future policy and practice and highlighting areas for development is more meaningful. The information yielded by the assessment remains mere information if it falls on deaf ears. Although the three assessment procedures described above were approved by university leadership, there were no direct requests for the processes or their results. The institutional audit assisted in bringing champions together. The MERP process informed a national research project, but module co-ordinators were left waiting for input on their modules and how to improve their pedagogy. In the main the outcomes were useful for outside parties.

It seems, therefore, that any institutional assessment process needs to be conducted with the purpose foregrounded, otherwise the results of such an assessment disappear into a meaningless vacuum. To prevent this, leadership and funding are vital. Leadership is key to translating assessment results into efforts towards institutionalisation. As mentioned above, UNP has suffered in its development of a SL critical mass through changes in leadership. Additional changes to leadership, which may be precipitated by the recent merger of UNP into the new University of KwaZulu-Natal, cast uncertainty on the priorities of the new leadership. This is of concern as Schneider (1998: 2) notes: "Support from high levels of the administration and guidance by the president

are key components for service learning ...” In addition to leadership, the requisite resources need to be available to translate assessment results into action.

Apart from lobbying the top of the institution, it is also important to keep practitioners involved and motivated. Schneider (1998: 2) writes about the importance of “Johnny Appleseeds’ who started, nurtured, and guided their programs”. Stanton *et al* (2000) make a strong case for the strength of a bottom-up approach to networking driven by practitioners, some of which has been lost as SL has become institutionalised in the USA. This is a warning as to the dangers of allowing institutional and national policy processes to overshadow and bureaucratise the development of practitioner-driven SL networks.

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