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“Think through the consequences”: Higher Education staff reflections on student-led international university-community partnerships

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Abstract

Higher Education staff are key stakeholders in enabling student extracurricular and co-curricular international university-community partnerships. Short term international volunteering is greatly valued by higher education institutions (Killick 2011), yet they are highly problematic if there is inadequate preparation, partnerships and supports for student learning. This qualitative research, as part of an EDD thesis, is a case study of two HEI student societies with a focus on the staff mentoring roles with the aim of understanding how staff articulate their role in enabling effective university-community student projects. Semi-structured interviews with staff were analyzed utilising the thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Staff reflections include feeling under resourced, out of their depth at times, care takers and advisors supporting students to navigate practical and ethical concerns. Andreotti's (2014) global citizenship education resource provides a conceptual framework for exploring staff reflections and opportunities for opening up conversations on institutional responsibility.

Full paper

Higher Education staff are key stakeholders in enabling and recognising student extracurricular and co-curricular international

university-community partnerships. Partnership projects involve students travelling overseas with a wide range of objectives including fundraising donations, volunteer time with education and health projects, to building social enterprises. Short term international volunteering is greatly valued by higher education institutions (Killick 2011), yet they are highly problematic if there is inadequate preparation, partnerships and supports for student learning. Indeed, McGloin and Georgeou's (2016) research concludes that student volunteering during gap years or semester breaks "leaves intact colonial relations of power" (p. 415). Although literature on student international engagement focuses on student impacts, and to a lesser extent host communities, there is an opportunity for greater attention to higher education staff and their significant roles. This qualitative research, as part of an EDD thesis, is a case study of two HEI student extracurricular societies with a focus on the staff mentoring roles. The research questions are:

--How do staff articulate their role in enabling effective university-community student projects?

--What are the experiences of staff in enabling student engagement with university-community international partnerships?

Semi-structured interviews with staff were analyzed utilising thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The guiding conceptual framework is Andreotti's (2014) soft versus critical global citizenship engagement and provides a tool through which to view staff reflections on their mentoring role within student-led students with international projects. The first case is a university student society agricultural social enterprise project in Africa and the second case is a university student society fundraising and volunteering in overseas medical clinics.

As Andreotti (2014) outlines, a soft approach to the "potential benefits of global citizenship education" is an increased motivation to help versus in a critical approach the benefits are "independent/critical thinking and more informed, responsible and ethical action" (p. 48).

Staff member Marcia reflects on role of staff advisor as “sometimes the granny nearly that needs to know you cannot do this, there is no point doing this and that honest advice” adopting a seemingly critical stance. This is articulated clearly here to protect the university institution by upholding standards for student voluntary projects,

“But the ownership has to be very much based on a reality that if you don’t perform then there’s consequences and that’s where then we get quite firm that if you don’t perform there are consequences for you. But there are consequences for the university. And this becomes a very different kind of, not so much a very different but it becomes more of a different relationship in terms of accountability.” (Interview participant, Marcia)

There is a chaplaincy role for staff in student extracurricular programmes, as Marcia goes on to reflect,

“I think you know a lot of the time the students need that kind of guidance. On dealing with people and particularly students are dealing often with marginalised groups so it’s about that kind of working with them. And I think giving them the kind of, you know we’ll say physical support in being there because I think that is important, somebody to call on. But the whole sense as well of that kind of emotional and resilience support...”

However this support and guidance role is not recognised as teaching or research activity and supporting students at evening meetings, staff reflect, is beyond the workload model in existence (Warren, 2016).

Staff express frustration with their current infrastructure, “I suppose we are dealing with a small staff and so we are limited in terms of what we can do” (Interview participant, Joseph). Andreotti (2014) outlines, a soft approach to the “basic principle of change” is universalism versus a critical approach that embraces reflexivity and dialogue. Indeed staff seek reciprocal relationships,

“But it’s not just bearing gifts, we’ve also tried to establish a more academic engagement with those sites for example, giving them access to some of the resources here. So that it’s not simply our students getting access in return for material gifts and so on. So there’s an element of reciprocity and that is part of the relationship and that’s important, that’s at least one step towards it not being volun-tourism.”

Staff want deeper relationships and collaborations, and aware of the limitations to the programmes that are currently in place.

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