Glasgow Caledonian University

Social science student community engagement

Introduction

This case is about developing an engaged curriculum within social sciences, which are not generally associated with business engagement and perhaps even less so in the context of teaching. This case story reports on the impact of an innovative teaching approach: an accredited module at Glasgow Caledonian University – Community Links - that supports social science students in applying their knowledge and skills acquired in the academy through engagement with community, voluntary, and statutory organisations.

Challenges

The value of social sciences in the context of business is often overlooked. Furthermore, social science students often struggle to make the links between the learning in the academy and its application in the wider social and work context.

The Community Links module was developed using staff research and consultancy networks to identify a number of community, voluntary and statutory organisations who had small projects that they were keen to have undertaken but lacked the funds, the time, or the knowledge to do so. This provided a unique opportunity for students to be involved in projects that would be mutually beneficial to the university, the student, and the host organisation.

Actions taken

The module provides a supportive and structured approach for students to apply their academic knowledge and learn how to plan and carry out research activities, understand the relevance of specific social issues within their host organisation, demonstrate and apply their knowledge and understanding to that specified social issue, reflect on their experience of working within an outside agency, and draw conclusions about the role of, and the process of undertaking, research. Assessment includes a short account of the agency’s work, a research plan, the research output, their research diary, and an assessment from the host organisation.

Good partnerships have been established with a number of organisations such as Strathclyde Police\(^1\), Greater Glasgow and Clyde National Health Board, SACRO,\(^2\) Poverty Alliance, Rape Crisis, and Glasgow Women’s Library for example. Annually they identify a piece of research they would like done within the broad field of social and criminal justice issues, or social history.

The key to the success of this module is two-fold: the research is of value to the organisation, and the interests of the students can be matched with the requirements of the organisation’s proposals.

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\(^1\) Since the 1\(^{st}\) of April, 2013, the eight Scottish police forces combined to become one national force to be known as Police Scotland.

\(^2\) SACRO: Safeguarding Communities – Reducing Offending. SACRO aims to promote community safety across Scotland through providing high quality services to reduce conflict and offending.
Brief synopses of two projects are offered here with comments from the supporting organisations and the student researchers, which exemplify how this module meets the needs of all parties and is in line with the Principles of PRME.

**Project 1**

**Organisation** – Unite the Union

**The project** – Project undertaken in Trimester 2, 2012 – To conduct research with young people to enhance Unite the Union’s knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by young people entering the job market for the first time or seeking employment and how the union could support them in making that transition.

**Output** - A written report and a video

**The student’s view** – “Community Links has given me an insight into the role of a researcher and confidence in my abilities to conduct research by enabling me to apply my knowledge gained in the academy to real life circumstances. It has also enhanced my knowledge of the Trade Union movement and of young people’s experiences of unemployment and the issues they face. The module provides opportunities unavailable otherwise, equipped me with practical research experience, enhanced computer skills, and references for my CV.”

**The organisation’s view** – “The research outputs have provided a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues faced by young people. The documentary and podcast are on the website and the written report will also be posted online.”

This student also attended Unite the Union’s annual Conference in London to present the findings from her research to a wider audience.

**Project 2**

**Organisation** - Strathclyde Police

**The Project** – Project undertaken in Trimester 2, 2011 – To undertake qualitative research into the issues of Reporting Domestic Abuse in Adolescents' Relationships.

**Output** - An interesting and thought-provoking report.

**The student’s view** – “Community Links has developed my transferrable skills, particularly oral and written communication, referencing and research skills including research design and impartiality. One of the main benefits of Community Links is working with an organisation external to the university where expectations were found to be higher. It also encourages independent learning in a supportive environment and encourages you to take responsibility for completing the project within the set timescales.”

**The organisation’s view** – “The report is useful to us as it provides an insight into our understanding (or lack thereof) of Domestic Abuse and potential barriers to reporting identified by young people. It will be used to inform targeting of resources in respect of media campaigns to (hopefully) positively impact on the number of domestic abuse reports received from young people.”

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3 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8ysqfy9l5U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8ysqfy9l5U)
Results

The research reports/outputs compiled by the students have been used in a number of submissions to the Scottish Government and Funding Councils in support of bids by statutory, community, and voluntary organisations to apply for funding for various reasons.

Furthermore, students report that it greatly enhances their organisational skills, particularly for entering the workplace, as it is, they say, an excellent module to have on their CV – employers are impressed by the students’ achievements. Some students have been offered employment with the agencies for which they carried out the research and it has forged stronger links and closer partnership working between some community groups and the academy for research, networking, and information exchange, and involvement in learning and teaching.

The role of PRME/sustainability principles

This module fits with a number of the PRME principles, particularly those that have an aim to facilitate and support student community engagement and student capabilities. For example, in:

- incorporating into our academic activities and curricula the values of global social responsibility
- creating educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enable effective learning experiences
- engaging in conceptual and empirical research that advances our understanding about the role, dynamics, and impact of corporations in the creation of sustainable social, environmental and economic value
- educating students, business, government, consumers, media, civil society organisations and other interested groups and stakeholders on critical issues related to global social responsibility and sustainability
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