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# Unintended outcomes? Building organisational capacity with PACE International partners

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# Unintended outcomes? Building organisational capacity with PACE International partners

## **Abstract**

PACE International is a component of Professional and Community Engagement (PACE), a Macquarie University-wide initiative that provides opportunities for students and staff to contribute to more just, inclusive and sustainable societies by engaging in activities with partner organisations in Australia and internationally. Underpinning PACE is a commitment to mutually beneficial learning and engagement. To align with this commitment, PACE-related research engages partner perspectives and those of students and academics. The dearth of scholarly research on partner perspectives of community engagement (Bingle, Clayton & Price, 2009) underscores this imperative. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with community partner representatives from Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, India, and Peru, this paper examines some of the apparently unexpected benefits of engagement with PACE that community partners report have contributed to their improved organisational capacity. We conclude by speculating that what can be perceived by universities as unexpected and unplanned by-products of student engagement, may actually be intended and strategically planned outcomes of community partners. The paper highlights the need for universities to develop a deeper understanding of the organisational objectives of community partners and their broader motivations for developing institutional relationships in order to ensure the nurturing and facilitation of such highly-valued outcomes through student engagement programs.

## **Keywords**

outcomes?, unintended, building, organisational, partners, capacity, pace, international

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# Unintended outcomes? Building organisational capacity with PACE

## International partners

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PACE International is a component of Professional and Community Engagement (PACE), a Macquarie University-wide initiative that provides opportunities for students and staff to contribute to more just, inclusive and sustainable societies by engaging in activities with partner organisations in Australia and internationally. Underpinning PACE is a commitment to mutually beneficial learning and engagement. To align with this commitment, PACE-related research engages partner perspectives and those of students and academics. The dearth of scholarly research on partner perspectives of community engagement (Bringle, Clayton & Price, 2009) underscores this imperative. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with community partner representatives from Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, India, and Peru, this paper examines some of the apparently unexpected benefits of engagement with PACE that community partners report have contributed to their improved organisational capacity. We conclude by speculating that what can be perceived by universities as unexpected and unplanned by-products of student engagement, may actually be intended and strategically planned outcomes of community partners. The paper highlights the need for universities to develop a deeper understanding of the organisational objectives of community partners and their broader motivations for developing institutional relationships in order to ensure the nurturing and facilitation of such highly-valued outcomes through student engagement programs.

Keywords: Capacity building, community partners, mutually beneficial learning, international service-learning

### INTRODUCTION

There is little empirical research examining the objectives, motivations, and impacts of service-learning on community partners (Baker-Boosamra et al, 2006; Birdshall, 2005; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Bringle, Clayton and Price, 2009; Kiely & Hartman, 2011; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tonkin, 2011) or the “after-lives” of tangible products produced through such engagements (Oldfield, 2008). In response to this gap, this paper presents empirical data about international community partner perspectives of campus-community partnerships, focusing on partner motivations and outcomes at a level beyond project outputs and direct student engagement.

In the literature on service-learning, including international service-learning (ISL), there is in general an assumption of mutual benefit and ethical engagement. Oldfield (2008, p.270) states that much “[community-based] research proceeds with the assumption that projects can be mutually beneficial, but without an empirical or conceptual analysis of how this mutuality is constituted” (See also Butin, 2003; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Similarly, Dostilio et al (2012, p.17-18) call for a “deliberate examination” of the meanings behind the concept of reciprocity, arguing that “unexamined or unintentionally differing conceptualisations of reciprocity can lead to confusion in practice and can hinder research”. Their conceptual review offers three orientations to reciprocity that assists scholars and practitioners to clearly identify, organise, and articulate various forms of reciprocity within their own research and practice.

Furthermore, Hammersely (2013, p.177) argues, there is “a lack of research to support claims that programs result in mutually beneficial learning and engagement” and that this “can be attributed to the under-representation of community partner perspectives within academic research”. Similarly, Baker (2012) demonstrates that while the literature on partnerships acknowledges the need for ethical engagement with community partners, it does so by “focusing on ethical interactions between institutions and their partner organizations” from the institutions’ perspectives, rather than directly examining partners’ perspectives (see also Weston *et al.*, 2009; Flicker *et al.*, 2007), and does so largely in a theoretical or anecdotal way. Even less attention, however, has been given to international community partner perspectives (notable exceptions being Baker-Boosamra, Guevara & Balfour, 2006; Camacho,

2004; Crabtree, 2013; Porter & Monard, 2001). This underrepresentation has been variously attributed to a lack of clarity around the definition of “community” (Sandy & Holland, 2006); issues of methodology (Cruz & Giles, 2000); lack of institutional and financial support; and practical and logistical constraints that may prevent academics from being able to engage community partners in prolonged collaborative research, especially in international contexts (Crabtree, 2013; d’Arlach, Sánchez & Feuer, 2009).

Where there is a focus on partnerships, as in Jacoby and associates (2003) it is either largely theoretical, examining the principles of effective collaboration, or descriptive or anecdotal, focusing on program design and logistics (for example, Jones, 2003). The emerging empirical research primarily examines the impacts of ISL programs from either a faculty or student perspective (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones, 2011; Crabtree, 2013). An exception is Leiderman *et al.* (2003) who aim to “bring community perspectives into clearer focus” via empirical research on the “perspectives, experiences and voices of experienced community partners” (p.2). However, their research does not examine the international context. This paper responds to these gaps by presenting evidence of community partner benefits reported by international partners of Macquarie University’s Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program.

## CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

PACE is a University-wide initiative designed to provide undergraduate students with a distinctive educational experience involving community-based experiential learning opportunities with a range of local, regional and international partners. Through PACE, students work on jointly conceived projects that both meet the partner’s organisational goals and enable students to develop key graduate capabilities and learn through the process of engagement. The broader goal of PACE is to contribute to positive social change locally, regionally and internationally (see Macquarie University, 2008; Macquarie University, 2012). PACE International, an integral part of the PACE Initiative, is jointly managed by Macquarie University and Australian Volunteers International (AVI). PACE International in-country projects are currently operational with community-based partners in Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, India and Peru. On-campus projects connecting students remotely with partners in Lebanon, India and the Philippines have also been conducted. Over 400 students have participated in the PACE International program to date.

A central strategic aim of PACE is to develop ‘a continuously improving [program] that is reflective and converts lessons learnt into practice’ (PACE Strategic Plan 2009-2012). This involves a commitment to research and evaluation informed by ‘knowledge-flow theory’ (Weerts and Sandmann, 2008, p.77). This theory posits a paradigm of two-way knowledge exchange where learning occurs within the context in which knowledge is applied and is embedded in a group of learners (the community and the university), who are equal participants in the process. The PACE model of ‘interactive engagement’ (Roper and Hirth, 2005, p.3) is underpinned by a commitment to ‘mutually beneficial learning and engagement’ (Macquarie University, 2013). Clearly, to be true to this commitment, PACE-related research and evaluation must by definition engage partner perspectives as well as those of students and university staff. The dearth of scholarly research on partner perspectives of community engagement discussed above strengthens this imperative.

## METHODS

To gather partner perspectives on PACE International, the research team, members of which have been involved in the design and ongoing development of the PACE program, conducted interviews and focus groups with nine international partners. These took place at a workshop in Bangkok in April 2013 and during partner visits to the university campus during 2013 and 2014. Data in the focus groups was collected using participatory methods and focused on the extent to which the PACE International program was currently meeting partner needs and how it could be improved to better assist partners to achieve their community-based and organisational objectives. The guiding principles informing this research are molded methodologically around an ethics of reciprocity and the project has Macquarie University Ethics committee approval. Qualitative data analysis was undertaken using NVIVO 10 which assisted in the identification and analysis of key themes as discussed below.

## BENEFITS TO PARTNERS

Text boxes 1 and 2 in Figure 1 summarise the benefits of engagement that flow to partners as reported by PACE International community-based partners. These benefits are categorised as either 'expected' or 'unexpected', as viewed from the research team's perspective. Expected benefits are defined as those that were intentional outcomes of PACE program design and either previously reported in the literature and/or by Australian partners of the program. Reported benefits that did not satisfy both these conditions are categorised in Text box 2 as 'unexpected'.

Text box 1: Expected Benefits	Text box 2: Unexpected Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quality outputs of the student projects</li><li>• Partner needs foregrounded in project design</li><li>• Well supported and prepared participants enable them to make contribution more quickly</li><li>• Building relationships</li><li>• Cultural exchange</li><li>• Establishing social networks and having fun together (e.g. playing sports, street theatre, dancing and sharing meals)</li><li>• Knowledge exchange</li><li>• Personal development</li><li>• Building institutional relationships</li><li>• Motivational boost</li><li>• Peer to peer exchange between students and partner's youthful workforce and their clients</li><li>• Students skills, knowledge and attributes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improved organizational management systems*</li><li>• Predictable revenue stream *</li><li>• Predictable timing, numbers and quality of participants enables longer term planning*</li><li>• Building confidence of community and staff in interacting with foreigners *</li><li>• Network of advocates/international awareness raising*</li><li>• Validation of community, organizational and local knowledge *</li><li>• Positive outcomes for students</li><li>• International students bring intercultural competence</li></ul>

FIGURE 1. Summary of partner benefits

\* These unexpected partner benefits are discussed below.

The following section will explore unexpected partner benefits highlighted in Text box 1 under three themes. These were identified for more detailed discussion because most partners noted the importance of these benefits to their organisation.

### *Theme 1: Improved organisational management systems*

'Organisational management systems' are the policies and procedures associated with financial, risk and volunteer management introduced or enhanced at the partner organisation as a direct result of engaging with the PACE International program. Each of these elements is encountered by partner organisations at a project level, but their impact extends well beyond that of individual projects. For example, one partner reported that the experience gained by working with PACE:

... flows through too, so a lot of the systems and things that we've put in place to manage this program [PACE] now flow out across the other volunteers that we work with. It improves the way we manage them and the risks that we're able to mitigate as a result.

Another partner specifically requested a briefing about the volunteer recruitment cycle used by Macquarie University and AVI to recruit students to the PACE International program so as to make use of the principles and procedures involved to recruit staff and other volunteers to the organisation.

### *Theme 2: Predictability of revenue stream and participant quality enabling long-term planning*

Another set of benefits identified by partners of the PACE International program relates to the stability, predictability and assurance of quality that the long-term nature of the partnership provides them. There are a number of dimensions to this, particularly the value partners place on having a reliable supply of quality volunteers, as the following quote attests:

... we do get a lot of applications [from] people that want to come and volunteer with us but they're *ad hoc* - some are good, some are bad. It's difficult to manage .... The benefit of [the PACE International] program is that we get [a] reliable, predictable, stream of volunteers that are screened and processed for us ... It's much easier to incorporate that into our organisational planning and to make it translate into real benefits.

A related benefit mentioned by many partners was the certainty provided by the predictable revenue stream that the PACE International program provides. These human and financial dimensions of program predictability enabled partners to plan for the longer term, giving them the capability and confidence to make commitments, rather than just promises, to the communities in which they worked.

### *Theme 3: Organisational recognition and advocacy*

The final set of benefits relate to the increased reputation of partners (both at home and abroad), and a greater sense of organisational confidence in communicating their objectives and achievements to diverse audiences. Greater international exposure of partners, for example, occurs as a growing network of student advocates return home, share their experiences with family and friends through social and conventional media networks. As one partner noted, "it's the positive PR that comes from it. They spread it, they talk about it, and that really helps us." Another attested:

... there are more people now who are aware of what's happening with children in the Philippines, and that gives us more ... influence or more possibility to react when something really bad happens.

Increased international exposure can also increase the organisation's potential influence in-country. For example, partnering with an international university has enhanced the organisational credibility of some PACE partners with their local and national governments:

It sometimes goes a long way in the Philippines, particularly when you work with government organisations and [you] say this is [a] partnership with Macquarie University, and all of a sudden you get taken a bit more notice of.

In addition to greater external recognition, an Indigenous rights-based organisation expressed the benefits of student engagement as increasing the self-confidence of its staff to communicate organisational initiatives to the communities in which they work, to government, international institutions, and non-government organisations locally and internationally:

... they [staff] mention that they are not afraid of interacting with people...it's a big asset because if you want to negotiate, if you want to say something, present an idea to any[body], for instance if you are fighting for your land rights...you need to have that confidence.

Engaging with "outsiders" in particular was perceived by partners as enhancing lobbying efforts and raising the profile of their cause.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined some of the apparently unexpected benefits of student engagement that international community partners report. These fall under three themes: 1) improved organisational management systems; 2) predictability of revenue stream and participant quality enabling long-term planning; and 3) organisational recognition and advocacy. While the research team has defined these benefits as 'unexpected', it may be that this nomenclature is more reflective of the definitional frame of reference of Western academics, than it is of international partners. What is perceived by universities as unexpected and unplanned by-products of student engagement may

actually be intended and strategically-planned outcomes for community partners. Anecdotal evidence from ongoing dialogue with PACE partners and preliminary research data collected around partner motivations for engagement suggests that this is the case. Further investigation is required, however, as it could be that partners' actual experience of the program is driving their *post hoc* attribution of motivations for engaging with it. Irrespective of this, the proposition points to the need for ongoing dialogue with community partners as their motivations for involvement may shift over time, for example in response to evolving organisational objectives. The research team is also aware that the finding reported here are context dependent and may not be generalisable to all international community partners, nor their participation in all forms of student engagement, at all times. This further highlights the importance of obtaining partner perspectives on desired (and actual) outcomes in the initial design and ongoing review and development of ISL programs. We thus argue that universities need to develop a deeper understanding of the organisational objectives of community partners and their broader motivations for developing institutional relationships in order to ensure the nurturing and facilitation of such highly-valued outcomes.

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