Factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects: A case of commerce students at Fort Hare University, South Africa

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This study investigated factors that motivate university students to participate in community engagement projects. Specifically, the study sought to identify factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects at Fort Hare University, identify perceived benefits of community engagement to students, investigate activities of students’ societies that are involved in community engagement projects at Fort Hare University and therefore establish the role of the university management in supporting students’ societies. Questionnaires were used to gather data from respondents. Convenience sampling method was used. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The results showed that students are motivated by the desire to satisfy their needs and also by goals that they want to achieve. Institutional support also plays a role in motivating students. It is recommended that institutions of higher learning should support students’ societies and encourage students to participate in community projects. Students are encouraged to participate in community engagement projects for they will also benefit.

Key words: Students, community engagement, projects, motivate, university, participate.

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement was a relatively an unknown concept to South African higher education until the late 1990s (Lazarus et al., 2008: 57). According to Lazarus et al. (2008:58) the white paper on the transformation of higher education (Department of Education, 1997) laid the foundations for making community engagement an integral part of the South African higher education. The white paper calls on higher education institutions to demonstrate social responsibility and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community engagement programmes. It states that one of the goals of higher education is to promote and develop social responsibility and awareness among students of the role of higher education, in social and economic development through community engagement programmes.

Community engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference (Ehrlich, 2000:vi). It means promoting the quality of life in a community.

According to Bender and Carvalho-Malekane (2010) “Community engagement at the University of Fort Hare refers to all negotiated and dynamic partnerships between the university and the community it serves, which is practiced through varied initiatives focused on the interface of research, teaching and learning aimed at addressing the social, cultural and economic development objectives of society”.

Community engagement activities can take the form of volunteering, community outreach, internships, cooperative education, and service learning. This study focused on community outreach projects only. Community outreach is a form of engagement which is primarily focused on benefiting the community through delivering a particular service (Bender and Carvalho-Malekane, 2010:5).

Community engagement forms part of the mission
statement of the University of Fort Hare. It is also included in the mission statement of the University’s Faculty of Management and Commerce which reads; “To provide learning, research, and community engagement opportunities that enable intellectual and personal growth and the development of a critical learning community”. This makes community engagement activities and projects by commerce students very relevant and important to all university stakeholders.

There are a number of students’ societies or organisations in which students can be members and participate in community engagement projects. The students’ societies at the University of Fort Hare can be classified as political organisations, religious organisations, academic organisations and professional business organisations. Some societies are registered with the Students Representative Council (SRC), and recognised by the General Students Council (GSC) while others are not.

**Problem statement**

Although the university of Fort Hare encourages students to participate in community engagement projects, participating in these projects has not been made compulsory. Considering the fact that students who voluntarily participate have their own work, are not paid for community engagement projects, and in some cases sacrifice their own time and resources. It is therefore important to investigate factors that motivate them to participate in these projects.

**Objective of the study**

The primary objective of this study was to identify factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects. The purpose of this study stems from the fact that university students embark on various voluntary community engagement projects sacrificing their own time and in some cases resources.

Secondary objectives of this study were to identify the perceived benefits of community engagement to students at Fort Hare University, investigate the activities of students’ societies that are involved in community engagement projects at Fort Hare University and to determine the role of university management in supporting students’ societies at Fort Hare University.

**Research questions**

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

(i) What are the perceived benefits of community engagement to students at Fort Hare University? (ii) What are the activities of students’ societies that are involved in community engagement projects at Fort Hare? (iii) What is the role of the university management in supporting students’ societies at Fort Hare University?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Motivation**

Du Toit et al. (2007) mention that performance in any organisation or society is mainly determined by the desire to do something (motivation), the capability to do (ability) and availability of resources to do the job (environment). According to Hellriegel et al. (2006), motivation can be defined as an influence that triggers, directs and/or maintains goal directed behaviour. Since the level of motivation has a direct influence on performance of an individual, it is very crucial to understand how motivation takes place. It is also important to note that motivation is not only about positive performance. Deviant behaviour like sabotage and absenteeism are also motivated behaviours (Du Toit et al., 2007:232). Du Toit et al. (2007) pointed out that motivation refers to those forces within a person that affect his or her direction, thus, a motivated individual is willing to exert a particular level of effort (intensity) for a certain amount of time (persistence) towards a particular goal (direction).

Content approach to motivation will be used to explain factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects. According to Du Toit et al. (2007), content approach try to determine factors that actually motivate people to perform, or the ‘what’ of motivation. Content theories to motivation focus on factors within a person that direct, energise, maintain or even stop behaviour and are also known as need theories or theories of individual differences as according to Hellriegel et al. (2006).

**Theories of motivation**

There are content and process theories of motivation. Process theories explain the actual process of motivation or the how part of it while content theories explains the what part of motivation, identifying people’s needs and the goals they want to achieve in order to satisfy such needs. Factors that motivate students can be best explained by content theories or theories of individual differences as others refer to them. Hellriegel et al. (2006) highlighted that many theories of motivation had been developed with each theory offering some insight. This therefore means that no single theory of motivation adequately addresses all aspects of motivation.

**Individual differences**

Individuals are different in terms of needs that are most
salient, the values that are most important and also the competencies that are most developed. People are just different in many aspects. Hellriegel et al. (2006) mentioned that the specific content of individual differences is what makes each person unique. They admitted that people differ from one another in many ways, they have different abilities, needs, values and personalities. Theories of individual differences consider individual differences in terms of needs as particularly important to explain what motivates people (Hellriegel et al., 2006:365).

These theories include Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Alderfer’s ERG theory and McClelland theory of learned needs. The first two theories are based on primary instinctive needs. According to McClelland’s theory, needs are learned and can be reinforced.

**Maslow’s hierarchy of needs**

According to Maslow, a need is a strong feeling of deficiency in some aspect of a person’s life that creates an uncomfortable tension. That tension becomes a motivating force, causing a person to take actions to satisfy the need (Hellriegel et al., 2006:265).

Maslow believed that people have five types of needs which he arranged in a hierarchy. He suggested that as a person satisfies each level of needs, motivation shifts to satisfying higher level needs. The types of needs as identified by Maslow include the physiological needs, security needs, affiliation needs, esteem needs and self-actualisation. According to Du Toit et al. (2007), the core of Maslow’s theory is that needs are arranged in a hierarchy where the lowest needs are physiological and the highest are self-actualisation needs.

1. Physiological needs are basic ingredients for survival and they include food, clothing and water. People try to satisfy these needs before all others. In students societies these may include venues with adequate lighting.
2. Security needs include the desire for safety and stability and the absence of pain (Hellriegel et al., 2006:265). Since safety and security needs deal with the protection from physical and emotional harm, they include structures that deal with grievances.
3. Social needs include the need for friendship, love and affection. This also includes the need to be accepted by peers.
4. Esteem needs according to Maslow, refers to the need for a positive self-image and self-respect, and the need for recognition from others. Examples of esteem needs as stated by Du Toit et al. (2007) include compliments, titles, access to information and challenging job assignments.
5. Self-actualisation refers to realising one’s potential through growth and development. They include development opportunities, challenging assignments and decision making opportunities (Du Toit et al., 2007:234).

Maslow’s theory assumes that a person endeavour to fulfil more basic needs before moving ahead to satisfying upper level needs. Another assumption is that people strive to move up the hierarchy in terms of need satisfaction and a specific need ceases to motivate once it has been satisfied.

Du Toit et al. (2007) argue that although it is a very popular and convenient theory to apply, Maslow’s theory has some shortcomings. The idea that all needs originate intrinsically is said to be questionable. Others argue that needs are learned and develop because of social influences and different life experiences. Research has shown that not all levels of needs as identified by Maslow are always present, and certain cultures may have different need categories and hierarchies (Du Toit et al., 2007:235).

**Alderfer’s ERG theory**

Alderfer’s theory represents a refinement of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. According to Alderfer, there are three core needs, namely existence, relatedness and growth. Existence needs relate to a person’s basic material need. They are the same with Maslow’s physiological and safety needs. Relatedness needs relate to a person’s desire for interpersonal relationships and interaction. According to Hellriegel et al. (2006) relatedness needs are similar to Maslow’s social or affiliation needs and the external aspect of Maslow’s esteem needs. Growth needs relate to the desire of an individual to make creative or productive contribution. They are similar to Maslow’s esteem and self-actualisation needs. The theory does not subscribe to a rigid hierarchy of needs. According to this theory, two or even all three categories can influence behaviour simultaneously.

**McClelland’s theory of learned needs**

According to McClelland’s theory needs are learned and reinforced. This theory focuses on three needs that explain motivation. The needs include the need for achievement, power and affiliation. The need for achievement is the need to excel, to be successful or to exceed a set standard. The need to be influential, to control others, or to make others behave in a certain way explains the need for power. The need for affiliation refers to the need for warm and close interpersonal relationships, and to be liked and accepted by others. Du Toit et al. (2007) are of the opinion that since needs can be learned, according to this theory people can also be trained to increase their achievement motivation.
Empirical review

The relevance of community engagement is discussed by Boruff-Jones (2006) who points out that community engagement is accepted as an important part of higher education for both staff and students. Activities that may be identified as community engagement for students include experiential learning, community based research projects, service learning, internships, or community service projects (D’Apolito, 2011:5). This study however only focused on community service projects by students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Triangulation, a research design that combines quantitative and qualitative research methods (Cooper and Schindler, 2006:719) was used in this study. According to Cooper and Schindler (2006:219), qualitative studies may be combined with quantitative ones to increase the perceived quality of the research.

Both primary data and secondary data were used. A questionnaire was used to collect data from students in the faculty of Management and Commerce at the University of Fort Hare. The researcher used convenience sampling.

Babbie and Monton (2002) point out that reliability is concerned with consistency of measures. Validity refers to whether an instrument actually measures what it is supposed to measure given the context in which it is applied. Babbie and Monton (2002) identify four major types of validity which are face validity, criterion related validity, content validity and construct validity. The researcher used the following steps to ensure the validity and the reliability of the study as pointed out by Cooper and Schindler (2003): using a statistician and a panel of experts to evaluate the research instrument for conceptual clarity, pre-testing the research instrument in a pilot study, using self-administered questionnaires which generally have a high response rate and comprehensively reviewing the literature for theoretical constructs and empirical conclusions. The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

STUDENTS SOCIETIES AND ORGANISATIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE

Students in free enterprise (SIFE)

SIFE is an international and professional students’ organization with a mission of “bringing together the top leaders of today and tomorrow to create a better, more sustainable world through the positive power of business” (SIFE, 2011). SIFE as an organization represents a business and higher education network in thirty nine countries. In South Africa alone, at least twenty six universities participate in SIFE activities.

According to SIFE (2011), by contributing their talents to projects that improve the lives of people, SIFE students are demonstrating that individuals with knowledge and passion for business can be a powerful force for change.

SIFE is a non-profit organization that works with leaders in business and higher education to mobilise university students to make a difference in their communities while developing the skills to become socially responsible business leaders. Participating students form teams based on their university campuses to apply business concepts and develop community engagement projects that will improve the quality of life and standard of living for people who are in need. SIFE teams present the results of their projects at national competitions where they are evaluated by business leaders. National champion team advance to the prestigious SIFE World Cup.

SIFE also have leadership and career initiatives which create opportunities for learning and exchange among the participants as well as the placement of students and alumni with companies in search of emerging talent.

At the University of Fort Hare SIFE was started in year 2007 and have been participating at national competitions since then. Their projects address the needs of the community. Through their projects they seek to improve the level of entrepreneurship and financial literacy. They also teach on how markets operate and sustainable ways of running projects. They always emphasise the importance of business ethics to their audience.

New economic horizons (NEH)

New Economic Horizons (NEH) was formed in 2007 by students registered in the Faculty of Management and Commerce at the University of Fort Hare. The members of the society were concerned about the existence of economic problems in the real world; and thereby pledged their time, effort, dedication and abilities to make the world a more habitable planet by endeavouring to find possible problem solving economic solutions. According to NEH constitution (2007) the society does not claim to be an economic messiah but promises to harmoniously work with various stakeholders who are committed to see the economy achieving a state of equilibrium.

The NEH Mission Statement reveals that the society is focused on conducting a profound, comprehensive and inquisitive analysis of various economic problems in the search for sustainable solutions and simultaneously providing an engagement platform that enable personal growth of members, and the advancement of critical learning community.

The NEH has run various projects including the Basic Financial and Economic Empowerment Programme (BEFEP) which was targeting farm workers.

World Students Community for Sustainable Development (WSC-SD)

The World Student Community for Sustainable Development is a multi-disciplinary network of motivated students with the ability to think and act both locally and globally, and who share the vision to make a difference. The fundamental purpose of the World Student Community for Sustainable Development is to give motivated students, who are passionate about sustainability, opportunities to learn from each other and to collaborate (WSC-SD, 2011).

This society is both multi-disciplinary and international and they believe that they can make a difference through understanding each other and then by working together. The WSC-SD offers students opportunities to get involved and to take action.

At the University of Fort Hare, it is the WSC-SD that is leading when it comes to campaigning and teaching the community about climate change and the need for a green economy.

Business Management Post Graduate Students Association (BMPGSA)

This is a students’ society for post graduate students in the Business Management Department. Registering as a post graduate student in this department will guarantee membership. It will also come with obligations to participate in some form of community engagement.

The computer literacy project targeting secondary school
students in Fort Beaufort at the Kat River Citrus Coop is one of their flagship projects. This project was carried in partnership with the Waitrose Foundation in Fort Beaufort. The BMPGSA also run financial literacy projects targeting Small Business owners and managers in Alice town. They also provide career guidance to high school students in schools around the main campus of Fort Hare (UFH-Business Management Postgraduate Students Association, 2010).

**Political students’ organisations**

There are various students’ political parties in which students in the Faculty of Management and commerce are affiliated to. These political students’ societies sometimes come up with initiatives to empower or at least help the community. The popular political organisations at the University of Fort Hare are African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), South African Students Congress (SASCO), Pan African Students Movement of Azania (PASMA), Congress of the People Students Movement (COPEsm).

**Religious organisations**

Commerce students are also associated with, and participate in religious students’ organisations. These also come up with initiatives to help the general students’ community and the communities around Fort Hare University. Religious students’ societies, through their community engagement projects assist people in hospitals, primary schools and so on. The religious students’ societies, which are mainly Christian societies include the Twelve Apostles Students Association (TASA), Students Christian Organisation (SCO), Forward in Faith (FIF), Seventh Day Adventist Students Movement (SDASM) and Methodist students (METHOSOC).

**Other societies**

Other students’ societies in which commerce students participate in include the newly formed Students Economic Review Assembly (SERA), Political Students Association (POSA) and other departmental students’ societies.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Population characteristics**

One hundred questionnaires were distributed and 61 questionnaires were completed and returned. This gave a response rate of more than 60% which is relatively higher.

Table 1 shows the composition of respondents. It is important to note that the total numbers of students who are in more than one society are either members of SIFE or NEH and they are not included in the total of these societies.

Close to 40% of the respondents joined students’ societies to participate in community engagement projects in their first year of study at the University of Fort Hare. Thirty-nine percent joined in their second year of study and the remainder (21%) in their third and forth years of study at the university.

It is with no doubt that students in the Faculty of Management and Commerce participate in community engagement projects voluntarily. Ninety percent of the respondents indicated that they joined students’ societies voluntarily and were participating in projects voluntarily. The remaining 10% that did not join voluntarily raised the point that they were required by their department (mostly Business Management) to participate in students societies and membership to their students’ society was compulsory.

Fifty-five percent of the respondents were male and 45 were female. More than 60% of the respondents were still in their undergraduate studies.

**Students’ roles in students’ societies that were involved in community engagement projects**

Students who were involved in community engagement had specific roles in their societies or organisations. Some were founder members, while some were leaders, active members, members or just participants.

**Founder members**

These are the students who will have come up with the idea of forming the students’ society. Most students’ societies are formed after students realise that there is a need to fulfil or simply because they see an opportunity.

**Leaders**

Most students’ societies at the University of Fort Hare elect students leaders who would be responsible for strategic decision making. In some cases, leaders were just appointed by staff members. The leaders are students who plan activities of the society, coordinate other students to achieve results, direct other students, supervise other students and also evaluate performance in societies.

**Active members/members**

These are members who visibly participate in students’ society’s activities. They are responsible for the activities and work in society’s projects. They are rarely known by the university management but they do most of the work. It is members who elect leaders, and also contribute ideas that would be developed into successful projects that will empower the community.

**Participants**

There are other students who just participate in
community engagement projects although they are not members of any students’ society. These are usually called by leaders or members in students’ societies to assist when there is need.

Factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects

Various factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects were raised by students. These factors were either their own goals or needs that they needed to satisfy. The factors include:

(i) To make a positive impact in the society; More than 80% of students indicated that they participate in community engagement projects so as to make a positive contribution in the community. These students want to be part of change and are proud of their efforts in improving the lives of many people.

(ii) To create a name on the university through empowering others; about 20% of the respondents wanted to create a name in the university. For them, it is only through community engagement that they could be known.

(iii) To give back to the society; giving back to the society is an objective that had been set by almost all students who contribute their time, effort and resources to community engagement projects. These students believed that they could change the world even by their very small acts of kindness.

(iv) To gain more skills and knowledge through practical work; through application of concepts learnt in class into the real world, students could gain some skills through community engagement. The gained skills were in the areas of communication, time management, negotiation and presentation. Students also had an opportunity to develop the ability to work in teams.

In students’ societies, students had the opportunity to not only learn from their lecturers but also from each other or from community members that they interacted with. This factor was raised by more than 50% of the respondents.

(v) To network; Networking is very important for students. Through this, they develop beneficial long term relationships with various people. This also allows for the sharing of ideas. Sixty percent (60%) of the respondents valued networking and they felt it was through community engagement that they could connect to relevant people in the world.

(vi) To refresh from studies; students need time to meet friends and discuss non-academic issues. In students’ societies, students can meet and discuss real life issues.

What demotivate students from participating fully in community engagement projects?

Students’ politics and lack of information sharing, insufficient resources in students’ societies, time constraints, lack of commitment from other staff members and inadequate institutional support are some of the factors that were identified as limiting students from participating in community engagement projects.

Benefits of participating in community engagement projects students

Students who participate in community engagement projects mentioned experience, opportunity to learn thereby gaining more knowledge and skills, cultural awareness and networking opportunities as the advantages of dedicating time, effort and other resources to benefit their communities.
Challenges faced by students participating in community engagement projects

There are various challenges that are faced by students that participate in community engagement projects. The following challenges were common in all the students’ societies that participated in this research.

(i) Inadequate support from academic staff: Not all staff members really commit their time to assist students in their societies. Students work with very few staff members who voluntarily give their time. Staff members are expected to guide and advise students.

(ii) Politics among students within societies: This affects access to information and other resources among students. Students’ politics also affects the way students will relate in the long term.

(iii) Benefits are not evenly distributed: In some cases, those in leadership positions tend to benefit at the expense of general but active members. It was noted that elected leaders who communicate with the management and external stakeholders do not always pass all important information (especially on opportunities) to other members. This challenge was mainly raised by students who indicated that important information (like bursaries, internship or job opportunities) is sent to them through their students’ society leaders and advisors, and it is up to the leaders to share that information with other members.

(v) Lack of financial and institutional support: Community engagement projects by students are not formally funded by the University. Students are sometimes forced to contribute finances, or use their own money to execute community engagement projects. The way students’ societies are funded is not really favourable to those that participate in community engagement projects. From the responses given, it seems other societies access funds easily as compared to others.

(vi) Language barriers: According to International Education Association of South Africa (2008), about 10% of students at the University of Fort Hare are from other countries. They are referred to as international students. Although English is used as the language of instruction at the university, not all residents of communities around the university can speak or communicate using this language. International students who participate in community engagement projects often face the challenge of language. They depend on local students who will have to translate.

The findings of this study are in line with what was reported by Du Toit et al. (2007). They are also supported by the theories of Maslow who identified different types and stages of needs. The research did not however try to rank the needs in order as was done by Maslow. It was found that students participate in these projects to satisfy social, esteem and self actualisation needs. No student really showed that he/she was expecting to satisfy very basic needs. Security needs are very crucial and these can demotivate students if they are not guaranteed. Students want to make friends, to network, to grow, to gain experience and some felt they just have to give back to the society. The results can also be supported by Alderfer’s theory in the sense that students participate in community engagement projects so that they will be known and that others will feel that they exist. Alderfer also indicated that relationships are valued by people and students are no exception. The desire to satisfy growth needs also drive students as confirmed by Alderfer in his theory. McClelland’s theory also support the findings of this study. He observed that people are motivated by the desire to satisfy different needs and the need included the need for achievement, power and also affiliation.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key findings of this research include that students are generally motivated by the goals that they set for themselves and also by the desire to satisfy their needs. Students have different goals and needs. It was also shown that although there are many students’ societies at the University of Fort Hare, Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), New Economic Horizons (NEH) and Business Management Post Graduate Students Association (BMPGSA) are well known for community engagement by commerce students.

Fort Hare students voluntarily participate in community engagement projects. Although there are many challenges faced by participating students, lack of financial support was identified as the greatest challenge.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

University management

Community engagement is not a foreign term at the university of Fort Hare. Students’ initiatives need to be supported by the management. Students’ societies should be included in the university budget. Including students’ societies in the university budget will at least guarantee them the required resources. There is also lack of publicity on the activities of students. The community engagement office should improve on making the efforts of students known to the public. Awards for students who commit their time and resources to such projects can also help to motivate students and to prove that the university supports them. Support by university staff is crucial for it will help establish networks with different stakeholders.

Students

Students are encouraged to participate in community
engagement projects. This is mainly because they also benefit through contributing their time and effort to develop communities. It is recommended that students seek the attention of the university management and communicate the results of their projects. It is also recommended that students share information with others. This will help increase the number of students who participate in community engagement projects hence, the results or impact of those projects.

Companies and other organisations

Companies can market themselves through supporting students’ societies that genuinely work with the communities. Students’ societies are one such group. This will also help companies give back to the community for their own corporate social responsibility.

Community leaders and members

Community leaders and members are urged to work together with students that volunteer to assist and empower them. They should however seek more sustainable ways of doing projects so that they will be able to continue even in the absence of the students.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there are different factors that motivate students to participate in community engagement projects. These factors vary from one individual to the other and it is important for those responsible for managing these initiatives to identify these factors. Although there are challenges that are faced by students participating in these projects, benefits of participating are perceived to be of value by students. There is also need for the university management to support students' societies.

Although there are different forms of engagement, this study only focused on community outreach, or community engagement projects. Because of the limitation pointed out, care should be exercised in the interpretation and application of the results of this study and the generalisation of the findings.

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