

University Community Engagement: Insights from Field Work Practices

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Abstract

Higher education cannot be enriched without active linkages with neighborhood. Community-university engagement is a reciprocal process which strengthens each other. Western world has accepted the said engagement as a means for aligning research with societal needs. Though, India is having a deep rooted history, legacy and various academic practices, only in the recent times University-community engagement has acquired certain significance. For the promotion of new types of teaching and research the societal engagement need to be more deepened. In continuation to the recommendation and provisions earmarked in 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17), the University Grants Commission (UGC) has also launched a new scheme to support setting up a Centre for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement (CFSRCE) in various universities. The appeal of Hon'ble President of India for setting up "Community Development Cell" in Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) and Prime Minister's idea of "Unnat Bharat Abhiyan" envisages the same thrust. Engagement with a community is a pre-requisite for Social Work Education and practice. Present paper is highlighting the community field work practice of Department of Social work, Central University of Rajasthan. The components of university community engagement are discussed in the context of social work practice.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Neighbourhood, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Social work education is a dialogical, interactive, reflective practice based learning programme wherein sizeable weightage is reserved for field work. Trainer and trainees, both are expected to work closely with various clientele groups to enhance the knowledge while integrating skills, attitudes and values. It is a natural expectation from

the University system to demonstrate their learning in nearby surroundings through its field action projects and extension activities.

Central University of Rajasthan is a newly established government university with the motto of "Higher Education for Sustainable Development". Department of Social Work has translated university's commitment through its field work interventions. As Field Work is regarded as the soul of social work profession; department has emphasized on institutionalizing various innovative field practices. Programmes like establishment of Community libraries in surrounding villages, Soak Pits Constructions for village cleanliness, establishment of youth groups, children's group, adolescent girl child development group, women self-help groups, working with schools, awareness programmes through street plays, observing various days and participation in national programmes, collaboration with civil society organizations and government institutions are the few exercises that the department has undertaken to nurture the communities around it.

Each learning opportunity is closely supervised and partnered with the faculty supervisor. Some innovations have been converted into field action projects by the respective faculty member with thrust on sustainability with local ownership. Departmental visibility, students' learning, faculties' credential and community empowerment goes hand in hand.

In the beginning of 2015, Hon'ble President of India, speaking at a function held at Panjab University said that all academic institutions should adopt villages and leverage all resources to offer solutions to their problems and develop them as model villages. (Bhatnagar, G.V. 2015, March 14) Rightly observed by the President,

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educational institutions including centers of higher education located in or around rural areas are uniquely positioned in a way which can immensely help the local communities around them for their all-round development (Rice & Walsh, 2014).

University-Community Engagement: Reciprocal Relations

The idea that the Universities can contribute to and learn from the communities around them is gaining momentum. Community engagement has emerged as a top priority among colleges and universities which can lead to collaborations of mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources for both Universities and communities (Carnegie, 2006). A difference must be made between engagement and one way service. One way service is where the universities are seen as mere service providers for the communities but engagement is a two way reciprocal relationship in which the university and community partner collaborate to address societal needs and issues (Weerts & Sandman, 2010). Frances Bowen et al (2010), defined “*Community engagement strategy is the pattern of activities implemented by firms to work collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting the social well-being of those people.*”

Community on the other hand is a set of citizens who are together by geography, interaction or identity and consist of individual citizens or group of citizens organized to represent their shared interests (Crane et al, 2004 cited in Bowen et al, 2010). Community engagement is a multi-dimensional umbrella term that describes collaboration between the University and a Community for the mutual beneficial exchange of resources and knowledge (Escrigas, C. 2015)

Hence, it follows from the above definitions that universities can play a role of catalyst in promoting rural development. More so in the Indian context, community engagement as a strategy has a huge untapped potential which should be used for development of villages and rural areas. Not only has this, collaborating with communities has the ability to empower and benefit students, practitioners, agencies and universities also (Rice & Walsh, 2014). Such reciprocal relationships can build sustainable partnerships that can positively affect all stakeholders (*ibid*). more often, it is not only the community and university that benefits but

even practitioners engaged in service learning benefits from academic challenge and stimulation and the students can practice professional skills (Templeman, 2005).

A report published by Global University Network for innovations (GUNi) titled “Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change”, has emphasized on deepening societal engagement of universities in order to promote new domains in teaching and research (Hall, B. & Tandon, R. 2014). This report, explains the concept of community engagement and more importantly, recommends how higher educational institutions can play an active role leading to desired social change.

Role of Higher Education in Community Engagement

Higher educational institutions today are expected to play a greater role in addressing local and global issues and generate transformative knowledge for social change. Higher education should create a knowledge society where the knowledge could be applied for sustainable and inclusive development (Escrigas, C. 2015). Higher education must go beyond educating professionals to educating citizens with ethical awareness and civic commitment (*ibid.*)

Prof. B.L. Mungekar, former Member, Planning Commission of India while speaking about importance of research at a seminar on Higher Education in India, remarked that there could be no research without the community because all research is from society (Event Report, 2015). Therefore, all the disciplines should make connections with real world and real time issues (Escrigas, C. 2015)

Even the 12th Five Year Plan of India, recommends community engagement and ushering in a sense of social responsibility amongst the institutes of higher learning. Furthermore the UGC too has launched a scheme in order to set up a Centre for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement in Universities (Event Report, 2015).

It is evident and now accepted by the economists that with increasingly seamless globalization, communities the world over, especially communities in underdeveloped and developing communities, are at a loss in terms of losing their culture and rights (Stiglitz, J, 2002). In the

era of market economy, the role of higher educational institutions should be of engaged learning, engaged service and engaged research (Event Report, 2015). In the same context, it is important that the students learn to engage with critical issues concerning the society, cope with diversity, understand inter cultural practices (*ibid.*).

Department of Social Work's Community Engagement

The Department of Social Work at the Central University of Rajasthan, located in a rural set up between the cities of Ajmer and Jaipur, has made substantial efforts at building community engagement leading to community development. It strives to work towards inclusive and sustainable development and believes in promoting maximum human potentials, skill development, equal opportunity, justice, respect for diversity and anti-discriminatory environment within the society.

Initiatives like establishing community libraries, formation of youth groups, children's group and adolescent girl group were taken by the Department in collaboration with the villagers. Initiatives which are strongly grounded in community partnerships make the students' learning very purposeful (Wells, 2006). At the same time, the classroom teaching also becomes much more purposeful as it is substantiated by field demonstrations. It not only provides experience to the students but also help them acquire a whole range of other important skills (Rice and Walsh, 2014).

Importance of Community Based Learning:

The Community- University partnership provided a community based learning experience to the post graduate students enrolled in the MSW course. Social Work practice deems community based learning curriculum as necessary for effective social work training. Essentially, it is because of this reason that social work education gives great importance to field work, which is considered as the soul of social work profession. A combination of knowledge, skills, values and attitude, Social Work education is also an active mix of classroom teaching and field work assignments.

In case of the Department of Social Work at the Central University of Rajasthan, the first year MSW students were placed in groups of three-four at different village

communities around the University. Throughout the two semesters, the students were continuously evaluated and guided by a faculty supervisor specifically allotted to them. In addition, continuous field assignments were also given to the students.

The following section would give the specific assignments handled by the students in their process of community engagement with the communities around the University.

Construction of Soak Pits:

Sanitation is one of the major issues in rural areas. Open drains often becoming the breeding ground for the mosquitoes, flies and other insects and which in turn exposes the population to a range of waterborne and airborne diseases. Apart from this, streets with dirty water flowing over it were a common feature in the villages the students were working with. This was not only a sanitation issue but also lead to dispute between the villagers.

To intervene in this problem, the students, in consultation with their supervisor, approached the villagers and got to know what they thought about the issue of poor sanitation. Even the villagers recognized that it was an issue and they were ready to work upon it together. Even the youngsters of the villages got together with the students. In one of the village, the elderlies already knew an indigenous technique of controlling the water that flows out of washrooms and the cattle farms which is mainly responsible for flowing on the road since there are hardly any drains in the village. In this technique called soak pit, a pit of 6' X 6' is constructed just near the water outlet so that the water can directly go in the ground instead of flowing openly on the roads. After the construction of more than 60 soak pits, the roads which were hitherto full of mud, looked much cleaner and navigable than before.

The benefits of this technique are twofold, firstly, it stops water from flowing on the roads and hence reducing exposure public health threats, secondly, the water that goes to the ground also raises the ground water table in that particular area. This also leads to recharging of the wells and traditional *baoris* (step well). This has special implications for a semi-arid state like Rajasthan where water scarcity is common.

Hence the construction of soak pits has been an example of community engagement using indigenous and local knowledge and resources.

Establishment of Youth Groups:

Youth are the major resource for any society whose potential must be tapped. Youth can prove as an important stakeholder in the area of community engagement. Appreciating the linkages between youth and village development, the Department's students made efforts to engage and organize the village youth into youth groups. After developing the initial rapport with them, the students told the youth about the benefits of forming groups. They also told them about the Nehru Yuva Kendra which is instrumental in promoting youth groups across the country. After having preliminary meetings, the students assisted the group in developing an agenda for itself. A few components of the agenda were developing and making a playground where the youth can play and work on their fitness, establish community libraries where they can update themselves and prepare for competitive exams and higher studies.

The students facilitated the entire process with the village youth actively participating in the process. The youth identifies that the ground of the village school was an ideal place where they could play. However, because of long time of not having used, it was full of weeds and even needed leveling. So the youth themselves cleared the weeds and leveled the field. They also installed the playing net and poles to play handball and basketball. They got it from the school authorities. Having done it, it was a huge sense of achievement for the youth and they were ready to channelize their energies in the other fields.

The youth also held regular weekly group meetings where they discussed and worked on agenda. The students facilitated the process by helping them identify issues and strategies to tackle them.

Establishing Community Libraries

After having organized and engaged the youth into productive activities, the students used the youth group's potential to establish a community library in the villages. Libraries can prove to be great centers of learning and for the rural areas; it can open up a whole new world of learning. Mobilizing the energies of the youth group, the students identified an appropriate location where they could open the library. They even involved the village Sarpanch and pooled in a few of his funds for purchasing books for the library. Fund raising was done through

private donations. Students, together with the members of the youth group prepared the venue and purchased the books too. They even got an Employment News Subscription for themselves so that they could keep themselves updated about employment opportunities. Further, they prepared a catalogued all the books and also prepared a register with duties allotted to different members. They decided the timings for the library and took turns for its management.

This entire exercise lead to a very positive impetus on the young minds where they could believe that they could take on challenges and successfully meet it. This made them see themselves in a positive light. Same was true was of the University students who went there for their field work. Their work was not only recognized but was also appreciated. On the other hand, the members of the youth group looked up to them for guidance, giving them role of a mentor which led to the students' capacity building as well.

Adolescent Girls Group

Teenage girls in rural areas are often more vulnerable than their urban counterparts. Due to lack of knowledge of guidance, onset of puberty could be a horrifying experience for the girls. It is often coupled with the girls dropping out of school, many times, owing to no or poor toilet facilities in the school or because of the custom of child marriage which is still prevalent in some parts.

The students at the Department of Social Work, in the course of their field work, realized the gravity of this issue and in consultation with their supervisor, decided intervene in the situation. The female students build rapport with these adolescent girls and started taking group sessions with them on different issues including body image, meaning of menstruation, reproductive health, etc. all these exercises not only comfortable with changes in their body but also made them more confident. When the government officials visited the village and a function was organized to welcome them, these same girls welcomed them by singing welcome sings. Apart from the girls' group also actively participated in street plays and skits. Performing successfully in street play, in front of the entire village, gave them confidence and they actively started to look for solution to their common problems. Some of them had even started preparing to take admission in the University.

Girls, who were reluctant to speak till now, were not only speaking but were now active stakeholders in the village's development, whose voices were hard to be ignored.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

Benefits of moving away from the traditional classroom teaching to community engagement in rural areas are immense, as the case of the Department of Social Work at the Central University of Rajasthan has shown. Benefits can be reaped for the social work practitioners, students and the community itself (Hyde & Meyer, 2004). Moreover, the students get the opportunity to apply and strengthen what they learn in the classroom. Also, upon the completion of field work, they are also evaluated by multiple stakeholders. They get feedback from their faculty supervisor, external examiner who evaluates them in viva voce examination, peers and community members. Such feedback from multiple sources can give students great insights about their strengths and even areas of improvement (Balciuniene & Mazeikiene, 2008 cited in Rice & Walsh, 2014).

Furthermore, all these exercises not just prepare them as professional social workers and but also make them competent in the job sector and their likelihood of getting a job increases. Getting a job right after the completion of course also enhances their confidence in self.

Writing about the code of ethics of National Association of Social Workers (NASW), it says that evaluation of one's practice and ensuring efficacy of the programs and services has great ethical importance as it improves service delivery, empowers the client and promotes better functioning of the social systems. Hence community engagement can be seen as a tool to improve and enhance the knowledge, skills, values and attitude of the student.

Apart from the benefits that accrue to the academia (universities and other institutions of higher education), there are great benefits for the rural communities as well. In the Indian context, it is often observed that universities acts as ivory towers, are located between the people, yet are miles away from their own aspirations. If one takes the specific example of the Central University of Rajasthan, one finds that the University is located between two villages of Mundoti and Banadarsindri. Now the question arises is that what does the existence of University means

for the villagers? Can they aspire that their kids will grow up and join the University? Are there local villagers who have got jobs of any kind at the University? Will the existence of the University improve their lives in any way? If answers to these questions are in negative then probably one may conclude that the University, in spite of being located in the villages, is actually far away from their lives.

Fortunately, the Department of Social Work has been able to be close to people's real lives. Because of its community engagement, the communities have a fair amount of belief that the University also exists for them. The villages also have a greater social resources and greater confidence to come together and handle their own affairs. Existence of various social platforms (SHGs, Youth Groups etc.) is seen as the beginning of new change in the village. The approach of the Department has always believed in building the capacity of the communities rather than imposing any University agenda for its success. It has taken the communities into confidence and let them take up their own issues and provide local solution. The Department has also focused on indigenous solutions for many problems especially hygiene and sanitation by constructing Soak Pits through local technology.

Implications for Higher Education in India

UNESCO recently organized the second conference on higher education titled, 'Mainstreaming University-Community Partnerships', held in Delhi, gave a call for mainstreaming indigenous knowledge and promoting higher educational institutions' social responsibility (UNESCO, 2015). Further, the Global University Network for innovations (GUNi) brought out a report titled "Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change" which has emphasized on deepening societal engagement to promote new innovations in teaching and research (Hall & Tandon, 2014 cited in UNESCO, 2015).

Noted academician Krishna Kumar has remarked that there exists a huge chasm between the institutions of higher learning and the society (Kumar, K. 2012). The author has also remarked that education in colleges works more like secondary schools where the emphasis is more on teaching than anything else which too is mostly, mechanical. Higher education is hardly seen as an intellectual resource (*ibid.*). Also, the research that

goes on in many of the higher educational institutions is seen more as completion of an academic requirement than to solve the questions of the social and natural world surrounding the universities. Hence, research should be seen as inquiry to solve problems of the society which is nothing but community engagement. As it has been noted already, it is the need of the hour. The apex body regulating higher education in India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has already taken some steps in this direction.

UGC has come up with a proposal where it has decided to introduce at the University level for the promotion of arts, culture, and community outreach programmes in form of community engagement (Dhar, A. 2013). This was essentially done because it was felt that the higher education was in a disconnected with the society. The title of this scheme read like this,

“National initiative to foster social responsibility including creation of an alliance for community engagement and national initiative on sport and wellness.”

Another scheme by UGC under the 12th Plan guidelines proposes establishment of a Center for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement in Universities (CFSRCE). The main aims of this scheme include promotion of university-community partnerships to improve the lives of people and their living conditions. Further, it aims to build an alliance with the community based organizations for promoting engagement. It also promotes integration of service, service learning and experiential learning into co-curricular programmes with the neighborhood networks of other educational institutions (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

From the above description, it is evident that university-community engagement as a mean allow students to instrument their learning while demonstrating their commitment to social development. It had also added the value of increased civic responsibilities and public contributions. Student's engagement with community also returned them good insights for quality learning and research. The quality and relevance of teaching-learning process enriched teacher as well. Once such engagement embedded within all teaching, learning

and research functions, it has potential to strengthen all stakeholders. Therefore, community engagement as an important strategy can be viewed and practice to generate and mobilize knowledge between institutions and communities related real problems, leading to mutual benefits for both. It is important to create bridges which can connect the two rather than anything that separates them.

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