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# **'Useful, Usable and Used'**

## **Sustaining an Australian model of cross-faculty service learning by concentrating on shared value creation**

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In recent decades, partnerships between community-based organisations and universities through service-learning programs have proliferated, with service learning increasingly recognised as a 'work integrated' way of learning with enormous benefit; not only for students – producing 'work-ready' graduates with an understanding of socially responsible professional practice – but as a means of addressing complex issues, and building bridges between university, community, student and faculty expertise. It is a recognition of the shared value of learning, teaching and knowledge *in context* – that is, 'useful, usable and used'.

UTS Shopfront Community Program (Shopfront) is a dedicated unit that has operated for over 20 years at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. As the longest running cross-faculty community-engagement program (CEP) at an Australian university, today it offers the following services: brokering community-based projects and curricular internships with final-year or postgraduate students; recruiting students from any stage of their degree for skilled or unskilled volunteering activity through an extracurricular, community leadership 'award' program; brokering expert volunteering of university staff based on community need; and supporting and publishing academic research with a social purpose.

This article examines the longest running component of the services offered: community-based projects undertaken under academic supervision as part of disciplinary coursework by final-year or postgraduate students with local small to medium (SME) non-profit organisations. Although this activity has been running for 20 years – leading to the completion of more than 1000 *pro bono* community projects – the analysis will focus on evaluation data collected over 10 years, from 2006 to 2016. Before exploring in detail the processes and stages of the service-learning model, a review of the literature provides some guidance to those aspects that underpin best-practice service learning. Data analysis sheds light on the value that this program creates for community clients

and students, while also highlighting difficulties. The article concludes with some thoughts on key characteristics essential to best-practice service learning, as well as challenges and next steps.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In recent decades, partnerships between community-based organisations and universities have proliferated, with an increasing number of higher education institutions arguing that community engagement should be understood not as an add-on but a core part of higher education's mission (Holland 2006): a third pillar of equal importance to research and teaching. Certainly, recent research in the US reveals that higher education institutions have implemented a wide variety of programs for 'curricular and co-curricular student engagement' (Campus Compact 2015), as universities strive to offer their staff and students an enriched research and learning environment while fulfilling their civic obligations (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett 2000). One of the most widely implemented models is service learning, which, as its name suggests, links a service experience with a civil society organisation with specific curricular outcomes.

There is a substantial body of research demonstrating the benefits of service-learning programs to students, including: the development of critical thinking skills; improved communication skills and self-knowledge; greater civic engagement and political awareness; improved technical and analytical skills; and strengthened ability to work collaboratively (Bringle & Hatcher 2002; Buys & Bursnall 2007; Egeru 2016; Jacoby 2009; Schamber & Mahoney 2008; Steinberg, Hatcher & Bringle 2011). For universities, service-learning engagement models create advantages in the form of 'increased legitimacy' (Boyle 2007) and enhanced community relations (Eyler et al. 2001). These models can also be a response to the increasing criticism that higher education promotes learning that is disconnected from practice, which leads to the compartmentalisation of knowledge by discipline, fails to prepare students for work in highly complex environments (Dallimore & Souza 2002) and lacks connection to students' personal lives, public issues and the wider community (Dumas 2002; Godfrey, Illes & Berry 2005; Khurana 2010; Papamarcos 2005).

Less often explored, however, is the benefit to community organisations (Lester et al. 2005; Grossman 2002). In 1998, Giles and Eyler argued that understanding community impacts of service learning was one of the top 10 unanswered questions in service-learning research; more recent research would seem to suggest this remains an issue (see, for example, Blouin & Perry 2009; Eyler et al. 2001; Stoecker & Tryon 2009; Stoecker 2009). Bortolin (2011) posits this knowledge gap is due to a general privileging of the university over the community in these types of partnerships, while Stoecker and Tryon (2009, p. 3) suggest the imbalance might stem from service learning's early focus on

'illuminat[ing] college students about the real world'. They call attention to the need to 'transform service learning into a practice that serves communities', stating that the 'hallmark of an evolved view of higher learning is the willingness to look at issues from different angles with an open mind and change course where appropriate to ensure the sustainability of the practice' (Stoecker & Tryon 2009, pp. xv, 5). Others have echoed the call for active and respectful inclusion of community voices as essential for truly 'transformational learning' (Sandy & Holland 2006). Indeed, in their definition of service learning, Campus Compact squarely focuses on what they see as the 'novel and provocative' goal of service learning: '[the] development of civically minded students who possess analytical problem solving abilities and self-identify as community change agents as a direct consequence of their community-based learning experiences'.

In acknowledgement of this gap in knowledge, increasingly efforts are being made to more respectfully listen and learn from community partners. Sandy and Holland (2006, p. 31), in their research on 99 experienced community partners, began by asking, 'What do we know, versus what do we assume to know about these "other worlds" with whom we are entwined in the work of service-learning?' In their US-based research, Stoecker and Tryon (2009) found three main reasons for community participation in service learning: to serve as a centre for student learning; to develop future support for their group or their work; and to forge or strengthen relationships with universities. Students are also the greatest source of immediate and tangible benefits: student labour frees up staff time and increases organisational capacity for new projects; students' ideas and energy bring fresh perspectives; student commitment to quality outcomes can inspire staff to reflect on their own work; students can introduce (and build confidence to use) new technology. (Cronley, Madden & Davis 2015; Gazley, Littlepage & Bennett 2012; Gerstenblatt 2014).

If the benefits for community organisations can be real and tangible, so too can the risk (Gray et al. 2000). Difficulties can stem from students' unreliability, lack of professionalism, poor work ethic, lack of preparedness and awareness regarding the community organisation's mission and population they work with. Community organisations have also noted the disproportionate burden they bear to train and support students, draining their resources and time. Sandy and Holland (2006), among others, note the potentially serious repercussions for community organisations that can result from some of these issues, ranging from staff disruptions, harm caused to vulnerable individuals, and negative impacts on the organisation's ability to do its work (see also Blouin & Perry 2009).

The literature notes time and again that a fundamental aspect of successful service learning is the quality and nature of the relationships that underpin it. Blouin and Perry (2009) state that service learning, when done well, emphasises 'shared power

and shared control', involving '*partners* rather than subjects or recipients' (p. 131); Godfrey, Illes and Berry (2005) note the crucial importance of 'reciprocity', where community organisations work as partners with students and each party contributes knowledge and learns from each other; while Dorado and Giles (2004) highlight the importance of developing committed relationships as a means to ensure long-term viability – and many others concur (see also Bringle & Hatcher 2002; Kenworthy-U'Ren 2008; Kenworthy-U'Ren & Peterson 2005).

This article hopes to shed some light on how the above ideals of mutuality and respect can be realised by presenting in detail a service-learning program in an Australian city, developed over 20 years in one institution, involving multiple faculties and a wide range of local community organisations. It is also hoped that by describing the model, accompanied by an analysis of data from 2006 to 2016, this article will contribute to answering a persistent critique of service-learning research, which is that, even as it attempts to include community voices and perspectives, it struggles to reflect the variety of service-learning activities, disciplines involved, and the range of community partners participating (Blouin & Perry 2009, p. 123).

### **THE PROGRAM: CONCENTRATING ON SHARED-VALUE CREATION**

The service-learning activity reported hereon is a university-wide program where final-year or postgraduate students undertake *pro bono* disciplinary-based projects as part of their coursework and under academic supervision. Projects are initiated by SME local non-profit organisations in response to their own needs. The university has around 44 500 enrolments in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework and research degrees in the disciplinary fields of analytics and data science; business; communication; design, architecture and building; education, engineering; health (not including medicine); information technology; international studies; law; and science. The analysis covers the period from 2006 to 2016: Figure 1 shows a distribution of projects across the community sector by social mission, and Figure 2 shows a breakdown of project type by discipline.

From the outset and to this day, projects are undertaken in response to community need. This is an important distinction to make, as it distinguishes this service learning from professional practicums or internships. In those programs, periods of guided workplace-learning experiences with working professionals are built into degrees such as medicine and health, social work and teaching. They are typically mandatory for entire course cohorts, and external partners are likely to see 'serving as a centre for student learning' (Stoecker & Tryon 2009) as part of their ongoing mission. Instead, in this model, community groups, as the initiators of projects, are viewed by both the Shopfront and the clients themselves as partners, not 'subjects or recipients',

Figure 1: Projects by sector, 2006–2016

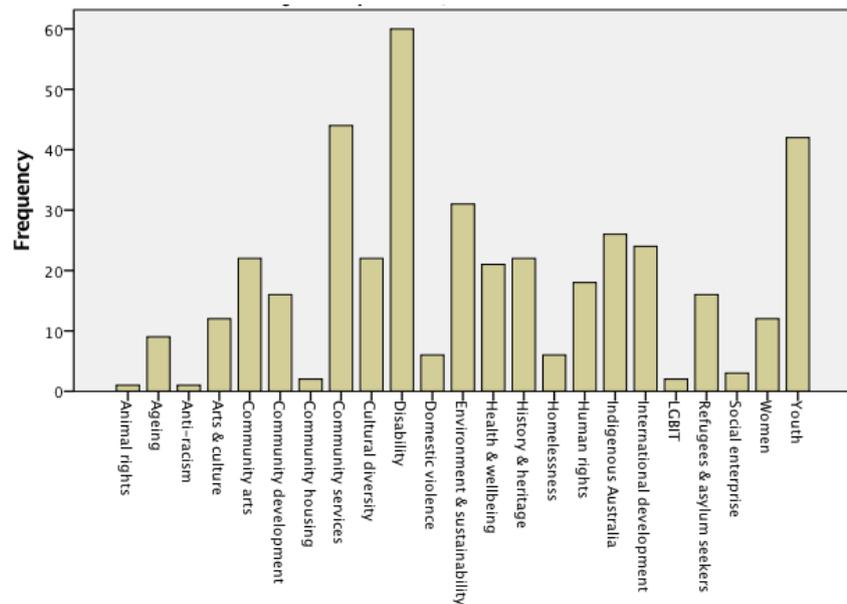
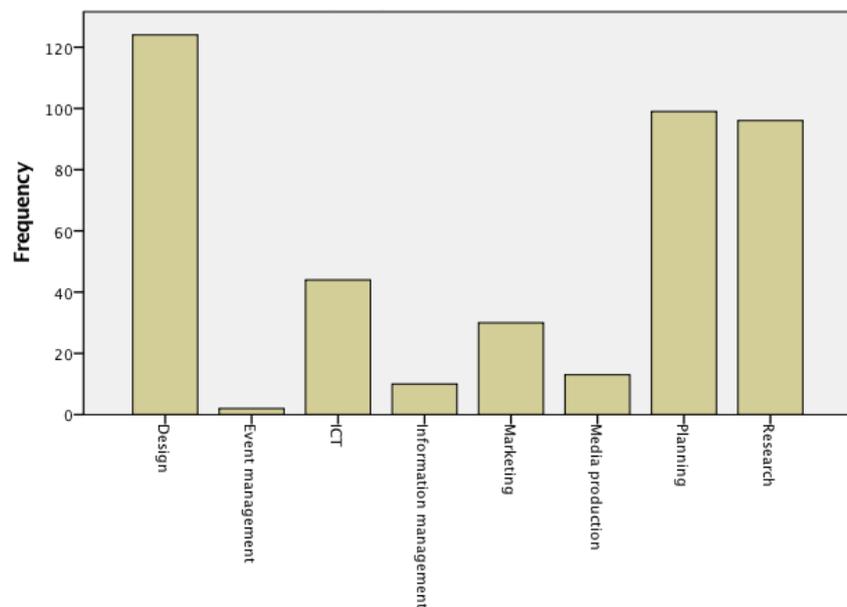


Figure 2: Community project by discipline, 2006–2106



or mentors or ‘co-teachers’ required to provide professional disciplinary guidance. As one community partner commented, ‘Primarily we were relying on the advanced skills of the students and their teacher to bring it all together.’ This orientation has an impact on the aims of the service learning, too, in that a key objective of the program is to support sustainability in community partners through delivering discrete projects based on their own self-identified need and internal lack of skills and resources to otherwise undertake the project. Students are not directly engaged learning ‘at the counter’ of professional service delivery, but instead create value by applying ‘faculty expertise’ (Calleson, Jordan & Seifer, 2005, p. 318). That is, students are akin to external ‘consultants’ working in response to a specific project brief, providing coverage across organisational capability gaps. As shown in Figure 2, above, the common organisational skills/capability gaps in the local SME non-profit sector where they seek support through student coursework projects include

design, research, communications, business planning, financial management, governance and in the development of new technological infrastructure.

Following is a detailed breakdown of the process and key elements of the service-learning program as it is now, after 20 years' practice, reflection and adjustment. Each year, insights and lessons learned are used to develop further improvements to Shopfront, which are subsequently piloted and embedded in the process.

**Table 1: Description of coursework community projects process and elements**

<b>Stage 1: Pre-semester project initiation</b>	
<b>Call for project applications</b>	Via the UTS Shopfront website, our networks, social-media channels etc., we call for applications from local not-for-profits to submit projects based on their need for upcoming semester coursework.
<b>Project scoping</b>	Shopfront assists client organisations to focus the project and clarify goals. It also provides continuity with communities, allowing larger, multi-disciplinary projects to be defined, planned, broken down and completed across disciplines and over time.
<b>Project breakdown</b>	This facilitation ensures that projects are student-ready and manageable, usually within a 12-week semester timeline, and that students, academic supervisors and community organisations clearly understand the schedule, roles and responsibilities.
<b>Brief development</b>	The Shopfront project coordinator helps clients fill in a project brief to assist them with developing the aims of the project, clarifying their needs, target audiences, and resources available for the project (for example, time commitment, personnel/ expertise to assist the students).
<b>Selection of projects based on specific criteria</b>	The Shopfront project coordinator and the academic supervisor of each course review relevant project applications and select projects based on the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the ability of the client to work with and support the students at that time</li> <li>b the significance of the project to the client organisation</li> <li>c the nature of the client organisation (with priority given to issues of social justice and access)</li> <li>d the degree of interest the project has for students.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2: Project process, tools and support</b>	
<b>Development of project management timeline</b>	Students are expected to manage their project effectively, to develop clear individual roles and responsibilities if they are working in a team, keep minutes of client meetings, and use online systems for communication and document development. Community clients are asked to commit to the students' coursework assessment timeline and make available (a minimum of) two hours per week to support the students' work.
<b>Initial client-student meeting</b>	The Shopfront project coordinator attends the first meeting between the student(s) and community client to ensure that the final project scoped meets the client's needs, fits the student skill sets and is manageable within the semester timeframe.
<b>Project scoping</b>	The project 'scope' or 'plan' document is prepared by all students/student teams as the agreed plan for actions and deliverables and is signed-off both by the academic supervisor and community client.

<b>Project monitoring</b>	The Shopfront project coordinator monitors progress and relationships during the semester. The student team is asked to update the client, academic and the project coordinator regularly about the progress of their work.
<b>Formal assessment</b>	Formal assessment is spread over the semester, and includes the establishment by students of their goals and objectives for their project; these become benchmarks for the final assessment.
<b>Feedback</b>	Frequent feedback (both formal and informal) is provided by the academic supervisor, the Shopfront project coordinator and the client. Such extensive feedback maintains student motivation and responsiveness while enabling students' autonomy.

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### **Stage 3: Project delivery and finalisation**

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<b>Professional presentations on-campus</b>	Students usually present their project to their community client, the academic supervisor and Shopfront project coordinator during a final presentation session. Students are usually assessed on the professionalism of this presentation, which should include an explanation of the process, presentation of the final outcomes, handover of knowledge, and any implementation plan. Clients are invited to the university for this presentation. As many see universities as 'closed' institutions, this invitation can bridge many cultural and social barriers.
<b>Final assessment and review</b>	Project reports/designs/digital production/plans represent the major coursework assessment. They are evaluated by the faculty (not Shopfront) based on their practical value, evidence of original thinking, and design and delivery. This includes an assessment on whether the recommendations are a sound and innovative response to the issue, the quality of method, and the usability of the outcomes.
<b>Community ownership of outcomes</b>	The university classifies the student projects as commissioned research and the results and intellectual property (IP) are transferred to the community partner. In some cases, shared IP is negotiated and structured – most often around academic publication of results.
<b>Communication of value created for the university</b>	Information on the completed projects is communicated by Shopfront for inclusion in the university's quality reporting, such as annual report, social justice report and disciplinary-based reports, for example the report to the United Nations on the implementation of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). Information about specific projects is shared with university communication offices and is regularly featured in internal and external media.
<b>Generative community-university partnerships</b>	Final projects very often recommend and/or handover the basis of follow-on projects in a different disciplinary area (for example, a research report becomes the basis of a law-reform campaign; a strategic plan leads to branding design; a community consultation leads to a funded research project). Shopfront maintains the relationship management with the community partner and stewardship through the university and to broader external expertise and input.

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### **Pre-semester Project Initiation**

In the first stage, the focus is on ensuring there is a real need and real commitment from the community client to the students' work and the project timeline. Only those projects which 'would not otherwise go ahead' due to internal resource gaps are undertaken. This ensures *pro bono* student projects are not replacing paid work (and, potentially, employment for university graduates). Currently around 75 per cent of projects submitted go ahead within a year

of submission, across a range of organisations. The diversity of the client base adds interest for the students, as they see their peers working on other projects, and demands versatility across the student cohort in their approach to planning for different clients and target audiences. Also in the project initiation stage, Shopfront can work with individual course coordinators on tailored designs that may include course requirements for: group work or individual student projects; intensive block teaching, weekly classroom sessions or blended learning modes; and single-semester or year-long courses. In addition, when working with courses to build in service learning, SCP has learned to require that the service-learning project component has a minimum weighting of 60 per cent (but preferably closer to 100 per cent) of the course mark to ensure adequate focus on the specific project brief and greater depth of student engagement, necessary for delivering value to the community client.

### **Project Process, Tools and Support**

In stage two, the focus shifts somewhat from the client to the student: a key part of this stage is to ensure optimal student learning and delivery of good-quality outcomes. In undertaking these projects, 'students apply previously learned topics to an unstructured problem [and] ... seek out and learn methodological techniques on an as-needed basis' (Gorman, 2010, p. 565). Particularly in the early weeks, assessment and discussion occurs between students, the academic supervisor and the Shopfront project coordinator to identify if any additional expert or professional practice input and/or skills development sessions (such as cultural awareness training or presentation skills workshops) is needed. This closes any knowledge and skill gaps and supports good performance. With some courses, volunteer industry coaches are also recruited (usually as part of corporate social responsibility programs) to provide guidance on professional practice for students. Interaction between the client and students can occur through site visits, university-based meetings, Skype, email and telephone. These interactions create opportunities for the students to share what they have learned in their degree and demonstrate they can apply their knowledge and skills appropriately when interacting with external parties. This also sees knowledge and skills transferred to the community client; in return, community clients transfer their professional knowledge of the non-profit sector and their social mission. For the majority of students, this is their first engagement with the non-profit sector and these specific social issues. As professional practice, students usually sign confidentiality agreements allowing client organisations to seek support for the most relevant issues, including issues that are sensitive or confidential.

### **Project Delivery and Finalisation**

In this stage, students present the final outcome (research report, design, plan, digital production, etc.) to the client, the faculty,

the Shopfront project coordinator and, where confidentiality arrangement allow, their peers. This represents the major coursework assessment. Students are also often assessed on their presentation skills as part of final presentations to community clients. Students are often enthused to support their community clients in an implementation phase outside their coursework, and many students have gone on to become volunteers or board members within their client organisation.

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE SUCCESS OF A SHARED-VALUE FOCUS**

Qualitative researchers argue that study of a single case can not only provide insight into practice but can also, where it offers unusual access to a specific area of interest, have exemplary value (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2014; Thomas 2011). Shopfront represents such a case of ‘unusual access’ because the author has worked on its development and delivery for many years and used this participant observation alongside extensive survey data and course materials and documents collected over an extended period of time to analyse and reflect on the elements of the program that facilitate its delivery of value to community organisations and students/faculties. For the purposes of this article, quantitative data was gathered from student and community-client evaluations of 458 projects completed between first semester 2006 to the end of second semester 2016. At the end of every semester, customised online surveys are sent to students and community organisations in order to evaluate their experience. The surveys sit alongside other evaluation processes including project tracking and troubleshooting during the semester, and telephone or face-to-face community-client feedback at the conclusion of every project. In each of the surveys (for students and community clients), a five-point Likert-type scale was used, whereby (1) indicates ‘strongly disagree’ and (5) indicates ‘strongly agree’ (see also Snell et al. 2014).

In the customised student survey, students are asked to indicate their level of agreement with 10 statements about the quality and significance of their learning experiences, as well as respond to open-ended questions asking them to provide additional reflections on their experiences, including what elements of the community project they found most or least helpful. From 2006 to the end of 2016, 594 custom surveys have been completed by students – a response rate of 35.5 per cent of the total student population (1671).

The community-client survey asks the client representative to indicate their agreement or disagreement with seven statements related to their experience with the student coursework project, the quality of the students’ work, the opportunity for knowledge exchange with the university, the usefulness of the project for their organisation, and whether they would work with SCP again, and includes additional open-ended questions to reflect on the worst and best parts of the experience and suggest ways to improve

the engagement. From 2006 to the end of 2016, 275 community-client surveys have been completed, 65.7 per cent of the 418 community clients who have participated in coursework projects. This evaluation sits alongside the community program's client management and troubleshooting process during the project, so the program team is kept aware of all clients' experiences throughout the semester. (Note: the number of projects completed during those 10 years (458) is greater than the number of clients (418) as, with 12 projects, clients worked with four or five different student teams over the semester, each co-contributing their specific project work to a larger project outcome; in these cases, the clients completed only one evaluation.)

### Value for Students

Evaluation evidence shows that the students' service-learning experiences contributed to their professional and personal development: 89 per cent of the total cohort agreed or strongly agreed that the work was relevant to their professional development; and 87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the work was relevant to their personal development. Further, 90 per cent of students would recommend the experience of doing a community coursework project to other students. Table 2, below, provides a summary of student evaluations.

**Table 2: Summary of student evaluation responses, 2006–2016**

	Work was relevant to professional development	Work was relevant to personal development	I would recommend CEP projects to other students
Response	%	%	%
Str.agree	49.7	41.6	51.7
Agree	39.7	45.7	37.9
<b>Cum.%</b>	<b>89.4</b>	<b>87.3</b>	<b>89.6</b>
Undecided	7.7	9.6	8.7
Disagree	2.6	2.2	1.4
Str.disagree	0.3	0.9	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean	4.36	4.25	4.39
Std. deviation	.761	.785	.732

Asked why they would recommend the experience, students focused on the value of applying learned skills in a 'real' setting coupled with the value of doing something useful, as summarised by the following two comments from students:

*It gives the student actual work experience and a great feeling of accomplishment, that their work is actually going to be used. The project was great overall, teaching me so many things, and the fact my work was appreciated for such a great cause made it all the more worthwhile.*

*I would recommend all students to do a community project before entering the workforce because valuable lessons are learnt in regards to skills, dealing with a crisis and learning how to ask questions to*

*get correct information from the community group. It also taught me how to become independent and apply what I have learnt over the years to this project.*

Table 3, below, summarises the value the students' perceived they had gained from their experience. The primary value was attributed to the 'real world' application of disciplinary knowledge with an external client while working towards an outcome that was genuinely needed and would be used. As one student reflected about her team's work:

*It was about helping not-for-profit organisations to be able to provide better services to people who are in need of their support. The fulfilment of seeing them satisfied with the recommendations that we have provided was worth all the challenges we have experienced in this project.*

It is clear that the students' experience acts as a gateway to professional practice – marking a change in the service-learning participant's self-view from 'student' to 'independent professional'. As one student commented, 'The best thing was the autonomy and empowerment provided that enabled me to complete the work as a trusted professional.' New skills and knowledge learned and the experience of collaborating as a member of a team (if relevant) were also valued. In addition, given the context of 'service', the students valued the social good of their skills contribution and their enhanced understanding of the mission behind the organisation, alongside gaining an understanding of non-profit organisations in general. For one student:

*[the experience] was a personal growth of understanding [of] how I can contribute to society. Furthermore I saw a development in my interpersonal skills as I dealt with numerous people whom I otherwise would never have met.*

Graduates reported that they were able to use their project experience in job interviews to both demonstrate professional practice and serve as evidence of their social responsibility (an attribute increasingly sought by local employers).

**Table 3: Summary of what students liked most about their project, 2006–2016**

<b>Response</b>	<b>%</b>
Application of disciplinary knowledge/skills in real world setting	14.6
Doing something important that will be used	14.4
Engagement with a real client/workplace	14.2
Teamwork and collaboration	11.4
Learning new skills/knowledge	7.1
The social value of my work	6.7
Working as a professional for the first time	6.1
The challenges of working outside my comfort zone	4.5
Pride in the quality of the outcome produced	3.0
Learning about other cultures/ diverse people	2.8
Supportive client/workplace	2.8
Learning about non-profit organisations	2.6

Learning about social issues	2.4
Being held accountable to produce outcomes	1.6
Being part of my client's community values and service	1.4
New networks	1.2
Being creative	1.0
Project management processes	1.0
Seeing my ideas realised	.8
Problem solving	.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Value for Community Partners

Ninety-seven per cent of community clients agreed or strongly agreed that the project was of value to their organisation, 98 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the experience to other organisations, and 99 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they would work with Shopfront and the university again. When asked why they would recommend working with Shopfront, comments included:

*I found the process a little more focused and productive than other student placements I have had, in part because it was a very specialist field of expertise in which I have very little experience. So for me [what] was really valuable was to develop new aspects of the work we do here through a different lens.*

*This is a quality program bringing academic and industry rigour as well as the students' experience, skills and expertise to bear on real-life issues for organisations that could not otherwise afford this level of assistance.*

In terms of the role Shopfront plays in supporting the initiation of projects and ongoing project management, 93 per cent of community clients agreed or strongly agreed that the project coordinator assisted in defining the project and scope. One client commented, 'The process forced [our organisation] to present a very focused research brief. This really helped us to prioritise our needs.' Ninety-seven per cent agreed or strongly agreed they had adequate avenues for contact throughout the project, with one client commenting on the importance of Shopfront's role in being 'proactive in moving the project forward and ensuring all parties are "in sync"', in order to ensure a quality outcome. Table 4, below, provides a summary of community-client responses.

In a 2015 study on motivations for community partners to engage in service learning, Cronley, Madden and Davis found that the desire for increased organisational capacity emerged as one of the strongest motivators for participating in service-learning partnerships. Table 5 provides insight into what community organisations most specifically valued about student coursework projects.

For one third of community organisations, the primary value was in the delivery of an outcome that could be used. This

‘useful, usable and used’ value is also reflected in the next top-four responses, where application of the outcomes provided a new strategic direction (18 per cent), improved service delivery (15 per cent), enhanced the organisation’s profile (6 per cent) or enhanced the organisation’s professional reputation (6 per cent). A sub-group of project types submitted to Shopfront relate to organisations seeking to examine the feasibility of a new direction or social enterprise activity, or develop prototypes for new services or infrastructure – now usually around digital platforms. The value in this subset of projects is reflected in the evaluations, where 5 per cent of organisations appreciated the opportunity to prototype new services, products or infrastructure, and assess and determine their feasibility pre-investment. For one client the value came through:

*Fresh thinking. Critical evaluation. An external view of the organisation. A logical, well-presented report. As requested, the students also completed a ‘plain English’ version of the presentation for our members (not university educated). A well-thought-out actionable report that will make a difference to our organisation.*

**Table 4: Summary of community evaluations of service learning projects, 2006–2016**

	The project will be of value to our organisation	The student(s) were professional in their approach	There were adequate avenues for contact with CEP staff	CEP was of assistance in defining the project	The project provided an opportunity for skills/knowledge exchange	I would recommend doing a project to other community organisations	I would work with the CEP again
<b>Response</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Strongly Agree	72.0	63.6	67.2	60.4	47.4	86.3	84.4
Agree	25.5	31.6	30.2	32.6	40.4	11.8	14.4
Cumulative %	97.5	95.2	97.4	93.0	87.8	98.1	98.8
Undecided/neutral	1.8	2.9	2.2	6.3	11.5	1.8	0.7
Disagree	0.7	1.1	.4	0.7	0.7	0.0	0.0
Strongly Disagree	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>4.69</b>	<b>4.56</b>	<b>4.64</b>	<b>4.53</b>	<b>4.34</b>	<b>4.85</b>	<b>4.83</b>
<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>.545</b>	<b>.679</b>	<b>.546</b>	<b>.649</b>	<b>.708</b>	<b>.410</b>	<b>.451</b>

**Table 5: Summary of the value community organisations received from student coursework projects, 2006–2016**

<b>Response</b>	<b>%</b>
Usable outcome	33.2
Provided a new strategic direction	17.9
Improved service delivery	15.2
Enhanced our professional reputation	6.0
Raised our profile	6.0
Prototyped/tested concept	4.9
Saved money	3.3
Enhanced sustainability	3.3
Rigor and quality of research	2.7
Provision of objective advice	2.2

Developed skills/knowledge	2.2
Lead to public policy change	1.6
Contributed to community development	1.1
Valued the whole process	.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: an additional 2.2 per cent of organisations said they did not use the project outcomes.

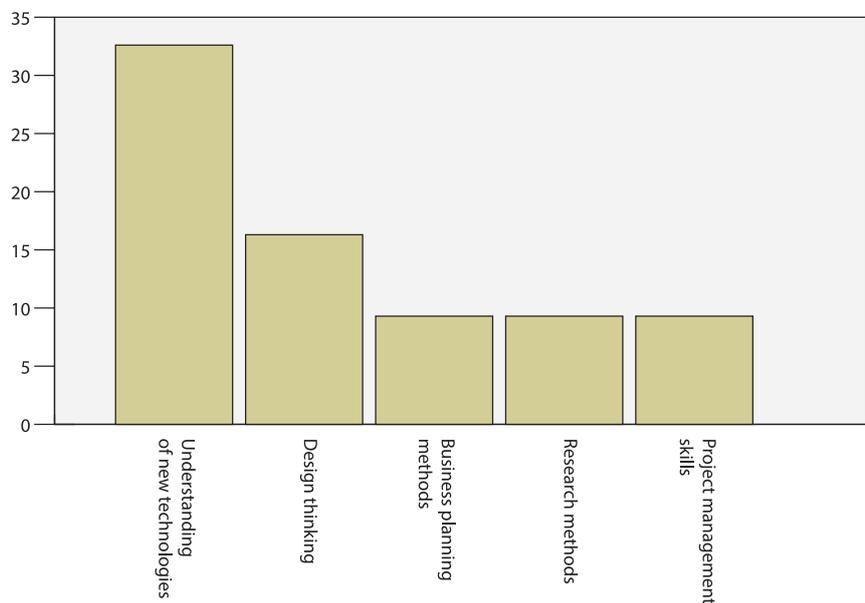
## DISCUSSION

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from both students and community clients demonstrates the real potential that best-practice service-learning programs can offer. Based on hands-on experience, as well as reflection and analysis of the data, the author argues that this distinct model of curricular service learning is a generative and sustainable program because its starting point is the vital need for specific contextual knowledge of community groups' motivations and requirements. Such an attitude helps to ensure that Shopfront is community-facing. Deliberately built into the program at various points are opportunities to learn; 'What do we know, versus what do we assume to know about these "other worlds"?' (Sandy & Holland 2006). Student-learning opportunities are then built around this key primary understanding. Furthermore, the facilitated nature of the program ensures that communication channels, processes and evaluation are appropriate, detailed and responsive. While others have suggested communication is a four-way cycle (see Cronley, Madden & Davis 2015), in this model, communication is considered and varied depending on the stage of the process. Twenty years' 'deep' experience delivering shared value – within the constraint of rigid semester timelines – has identified key principles and touchpoints to ensure successful outcomes that include: a project coordinator as the relationship manager, who is present at the first student–community client meeting to manage the project's scope; students' developing a project plan/scope of agreed deliverables and a timeline; students attending on-site meetings at the client organisation to engage first hand with client issues; ongoing communications between the students, client, academic supervisor and project coordinator; a scheduled mid-point in-class project-troubleshooting session; delivery of draft outcomes for client review prior to final presentations; and opportunities to rehearse student teamwork presentations.

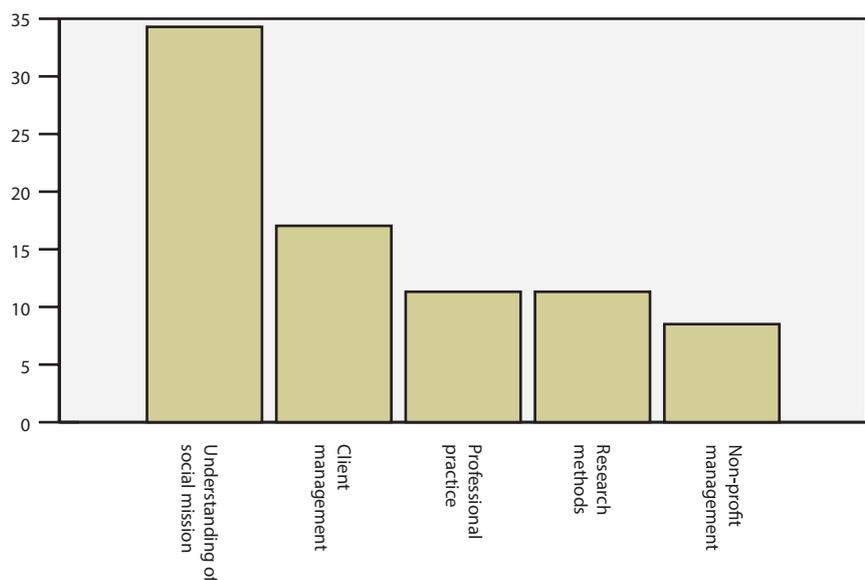
From both personal observation and feedback, it is clear to the author that community clients are very aware of the two-way knowledge exchange taking place. Data shows that 89 per cent of community clients agreed that the projects provided the opportunity for skills and knowledge transfer to both their own organisation and to the students (see Table 4). Reflecting that the nature of this service-learning model is *not* one where community partners have the capacity to act as mentors/co-teachers in students' disciplinary fields, community clients saw their main

contribution to student knowledge was in building students' understanding of the specific social mission of the organisation (and this is reflected in student evaluations) and the broader non-profit sector, alongside enhancing professional practice, client management and research skills. The key knowledge transfer to community partners – as reflected in the literature – was a greater understanding of new technologies. What is new from this analysis is the finding of a transferred value that enhances organisational capacity to use new design thinking, business planning and research methods. It is clear that the 'expert, external consultant' nature of these projects – with students often applying new theoretical knowledge from outside the client's own disciplinary background – is itself a driver of organisational development. (See Figures 3 and 4 for a summary of the top-five skills exchanged, as perceived by community clients.)

**Figure 3: Top five responses on knowledge/skills transferred to community clients from students (%)**



**Figure 4: Top five responses on knowledge/skills transferred to students by community clients (%)**



However, of course, this program has not always run as it should, or achieved the results hoped for. As part of the post-project evaluation, community clients were asked what they liked least about their projects; Table 7 summarises the top 13 responses.

Table 7: Top 13 responses to what the community client liked least about their project, 2006 to 2016

Response	%
Nothing I did not like	44.5
Longer project time needed	9.6
Project communications	7.7
Client's own time constraints	7.2
Ongoing support needed post-project	3.8
Availability and scheduling issues	2.9
Confusion during the project scoping phase	2.4
Student(s) lacked depth of understanding	2.4
Student(s) lack of commitment	2.4
Lack of clarity on timelines and requirements	1.9
Wanted more face to face meetings with students	1.9
Poor quality outcome	1.9
Tensions within client's organisation	1.9

While the overall quality of the experience working with Shopfront is reflected by the fact that 44.5 per cent of respondents said there was 'nothing' they did not like, issues raised include community partners wanting projects to run over a longer time period than the semester schedule allows, or wanting more support to be provided post-project for implementation. As one client commented, 'The short timeframe was difficult when doing something which requires a lot of consultation with our team.' While, for another, the 'short deadlines towards the end meant quick decisions [had] to be made – rather than slower, more considered decisions'. Project-management issues included (in order of prominence): poor communications during the project; conflicts around scheduling and personnel availability; confusion during the initial project-scoping phase; and a lack of clarity around timelines and requirements. One client commented, 'At some stages the project felt a little rushed and client communications were not as comprehensive as they could have been (in an ideal world).' While for another client, 'The timing was not ideal ... It was important to hit the ground running to fit into the university timetable.' Clients' own time constraints to contribute to the project were also a concern. For one client, 'The pressure of supervising three students and my other work commitments made this project extremely difficult – I was so time-poor and felt that I let the students down.' In terms of outcomes, the students' lack of depth in their understanding of the problem could lead to naive or shallow solutions to the client's problem, and their lack of commitment also led to poorer quality outcomes. Shopfront responses to these issues include:

- Ensuring substantial weighting of the course mark and time allocated during semester for the project so students have time and motivation to immerse themselves in the project to safeguard against 'off the shelf' or naive outcomes;
- Managing client expectations, tracking and communicating project-failure rates, and ensuring all projects continue to be delivered *pro bono*;

- With some subjects, where the student cohort may have a lesser capacity to produce successful outcomes, working with a one-to-many/client–student team engagement scenario;
- Failure procedures that usually activate mid-project to ensure that community partners have the choice to not continue committing resources to a project unlikely to produce an outcome of value for them.

Other, more structural and institutional challenges faced by the program over the past two decades have included: maintaining and resourcing this commitment to community engagement against a backdrop of changes in senior management and strategic planning; scoping ‘student-ready’ briefs with community partners that fit inflexible semester timelines; managing risk, commitment and workload; designing and refining coursework structures to deliver shared value; and achieving the ‘Holy Grail’ of transdisciplinarity – working across entrenched disciplinary/faculty silos to deliver community projects requiring inputs from multiple disciplines – currently done by scoping projects into ‘phases’ over time and across disciplinary fields with students and staff involved in ‘passing the baton’.

One recent challenge that has emerged for Shopfront is that other nearby universities are realising the value of service-learning offerings as an important component for delivering ‘work-integrated, employment-ready graduates’ and resourcing new programs accordingly. In the future, a more crowded marketplace for community clients may impact on Shopfront, while providing greater opportunities for community organisations to ‘pick and choose’ and create value to their communities through engagement with multiple, local community-engaged programs.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

From many years of delivering the shared value of ‘useful, usable and used’ projects, the author offers the following seven components that underpin the success and sustainability of the Shopfront model of coursework service learning:

- Projects are initiated by SME not-for-profit organisations based on community needs and their own skills gaps, but rely on their capacity to commit to a curriculum timeline;
- Utilises a cross-university community-engagement program with ethics and risk-management structures in place (including failure procedures) for stability of relationship management through the university;
- A project coordinator is assigned to individual projects and specific courses to facilitate relationship and project management, from project scoping to finalisation;
- Engages with final-year and postgraduate students with developed disciplinary skills;
- University courses offering service learning are structured, timed and weighted to ensure adequate depth of student immersion and commitment;

- Disciplinary guidance is provided by suitable academic supervisors and (where necessary) through sourcing and connecting other faculty or external experts into specific projects or even courses;
- Community ownership of outcomes or structures are in place for sharing of IP.

Recent program expansion at UTS Shopfront saw the introduction of a co-curricular student volunteering program, UTS SOUL Award, in 2014. Alongside non-skilled and short-term volunteering activity in the community sector, SOUL has enabled voluntary disciplinary internships to take place out of semester – with timelines more suited to the schedules of community need – and it has made the forming of transdisciplinary student volunteer teams to address community need easier; however, it lacks the framework of regular, academic supervision and the motivator of a ‘mark’ at the end for students. With this, and new initiatives at the university around formalised academic volunteering and a university-wide Social Justice Framework, UTS Shopfront Community Program will continue to concentrate deeply on creating shared value with the community sector.

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