Exploring the Impact of Service Learning amongst Undergraduate Students in Cameroon: The Case of the CUIB Volunteer Network Program

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Abstract

Service learning is one of the most widely used approaches to university-community engagement. It is a pedagogy that integrates community service with academic study to enhance learning while strengthening local communities. While the impact of service learning has been widely researched on across various higher education contexts, the concept is relatively new to the educational system of Cameroon. The Catholic University Institute of Buea (CUIB) is one of the few higher education institutions in Cameroon to have integrated service learning within the university curriculum with its Volunteer Network Program (VNP). Using a qualitative approach, this study thereby aims to explore undergraduate students' perception on the impact of CUIB-VNP. It seeks to examine how students' experiences with the service learning program influence their skills development, personal growth, academics and sense of civic responsibility, and also identify the major challenges they face. Through data gathered from focus group discussions and online written responses, the study found that participating in CUIB-VNP has profound impact on students' personal growth, the development of soft skills and a sense of civic responsibility with limited impact on students' academics. It also identified challenges such as poor balance between academic workload and service activities, lack of program orientation, lack of reflective practice, logistics and administrative challenges. The study concludes that service learning has great potential in improving learning in higher education in Cameroon and recommends ways through which service learning programs could be improved.

Keywords: Service learning, VNP, volunteerism, Higher Education, Cameroon.

1. Introduction

Service learning, which serves both educational and social purposes of universities, has recently received a lot of attention due to the realization that it is as a valuable pedagogical approach that has great potential to enable universities to advance citizenship formation, social justice and develop mindful and caring professionals (Britt, 2012; Feyt & Mwalemba, 2021; Howe et al., 2014; Petersen & Ruksana Osman, 2013). Universities are expected to foster academic excellence, promote research, drive innovation, enhance community engagement, and ensure that graduates have the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes they need for their future careers and roles as responsible citizens. To achieve this, universities should engage with both internal and external stakeholders, and encourage collaboration with industry and the community. According to UNESCO (2010), universities must constantly renew their connections with society. Service-learning is one of the strategies that universities can adopt to enhance their connections to and engagement with the community.

The social value of service learning has been observed in different higher education contexts across the globe. In Africa, service learning emerged within the broader debate about the public mission of higher education institutions (HEIs). Specifically, service learning was deemed a mechanism through which African HEIs could become instruments of social change (Nkhoma, 2020; Petersen & Ruksana Osman, 2013; Preece, 2013). Currently, service learning continues to be linked with the overarching strategy for transformation and calls for HEIs to be more responsive to societal needs. As such, service learning in Africa continues to be seen as a means through which universities can actively foster social justice, human dignity, citizenship and develop civic-minded graduates (Petersen & Ruksana Osman, 2013; Tagoe, 2014).

In Cameroon, the term service learning is not widely used within higher education institutions. Volunteerism on the other hand is the term generally used to refer to university students providing service to their communities. Yet, whether service learning or volunteerism, either of these forms of civic engagement is scarcely found within university education in Cameroon. While higher education institutions in the country have tried to remain committed to their mission of teaching, research, and community service, these institutions have had a stronger focus on teaching and learning to a greater extent, and research and civic education to a lesser extent. The Catholic University of Buea (CUIB) is one of the few higher education institutions in Cameroon which have been at the forefront of integrating a service learning approach into their curricula. The CUIB - VNP is one of the pioneering programs in the country, aiming to instill a sense of social responsibility in students while providing them with practical skills and experience.

This study thereby aims to explore the perceived impact of CUIB's Volunteer Network Program on students. Specifically it seeks to (i) examine how participation in the program influences students' personal growth, skills set, academics, and sense of civic responsibility; (ii) identify the major issues or challenges students encounter participating in VNP activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The origins of service learning can be traced to the works of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, who have been central to providing theoretical foundations for service learning as a pedagogical strategy that enhances capacities of citizenship, civic agency and minded values among students (N. Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020). Deans, (1999) provides a useful comparison of the educational philosophy and approaches between John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Dewey's basic tenets are based on philosophical pragmatism, which calls for education and schools (universities) to help students become 'good citizens'. Individuals and schools ought to work with society and be agents of service and transformation (Deans, 1999). Freire was more focused on critical pedagogy and his educational goals were built around 'political transformation of individuals and society through literacy education, critical reflection, and collective social action'(Deans, 1999, p.19). Generally, the core concepts of both Dewey's and Freire's philosophies are embedded in experience, growth, communication, inquiry, mediation, consciousness-raising, problem posing and solving, ethical social action and transformation (Deans, 1999; Hatcher, 1997; McMillan, 2011).

Dewey's philosophy, rich with the moral responsibilities of education in a democracy such was seen as a major stepping-stone of flourishing democracy in America (Benson et al., 2007). One of Dewey's critiques of education was that it had not led to a more humane and/or moral society (Dewey, 1916). Dewey envisaged education that improved society and enhanced individuals' fullest potential (Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008). Such a vision has significantly influenced the field of service learning as one of its main framing ideas. For Dewey, education's social mission was to equip students with experiences in citizenship skills and democratic habits so that they would grow up to participate in and lead the governmental, private, and volunteer organizations that make up a community. In his writings, Dewey focused on four aspects, namely: pragmatic philosophy, progressive political vision, student-centered educational theory, and ethical imperative (N. Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020). Each of these dimensions offer a particular value in relation to individual, education and society. For example, the pragmatic philosophy ties knowledge to experience; the progressive political vision connects individuals to society; student-centered educational theory combines reflection with action; and ethical domain emphasizes democracy and community (Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008).

The work of Paulo Freire has also been central to theorizing and interpreting the value of service learning. His work is underpinned by the concept of 'praxis', which connotes the concept of 'action-reflection' and a problem-posing model of education (Freire, 1970, 1973). Freire (1970, p.75) illustrates that 'Within one world we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interconnection that if one is sacrificed – even in part –, the other immediately suffers'. Dean (1999) reveals that Paulo Freire serves as a theoretical anchor for some service learning advocates. Freire imagined education as a key mechanism in fostering critical and active citizenry. This is enshrined in his notion of critical consciousness, which is constituted in the dialectic of men and women's objectification of and action upon the world in the individual's grasp of his or her relation to society (Deans, 1999). Freire views this as the duality of consciousness of being in and of the world (Deeley, 2015). Further, Deeley (2015) indicates that consciousness involves change in ways of thinking or ways of knowing, awakening, an increased awareness, cognition and liberation. Many articulate consciousness as the agency of the oppressed or marginalized to become conscious in line with Freire's concept of conscientization,

which is associated with the idea of 'praxis' – emphasizing action and reflection upon the world in order to change it (Cipolle, 2010). For Cipolle (2010) critical consciousness consists of four elements, namely developing a deeper awareness of self, developing a deeper awareness of broader perspective of others, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of social issues, and seeing one's potential to make change.

2.2 The Concept of Service Learning

Service-learning is defined as a method of teaching that enhances learning by involving learners in important services to their institutions and contemporary society. It is a pedagogical approach that integrates meaningful community engagement with instruction to enrich the learners' experience with more emphasis placed on reciprocal learning and reflection. In addition, Osman & Castle, (2006) define service-learning as a method of experiential learning where learners receive credit academically for addressing the community and human needs. As an educational philosophy, approach, and pedagogy, SL provides students with experiential learning opportunities in community settings and outside of classrooms (Bringle et al., 2009). In recent decades educators have made significant efforts to raise awareness of the importance of SL and to increase its level of implementation in college campuses. Through community engagement and services, educators aim to help students develop not only their academic skills but also their personal values, sense of civic responsibility and a broader appreciation of the discipline (Mitchell & Banik, 2019).

From the various definitions, service learning can be interpreted based on three key components of community involvement, link to the curriculum and reflection (see Figure 1 below).
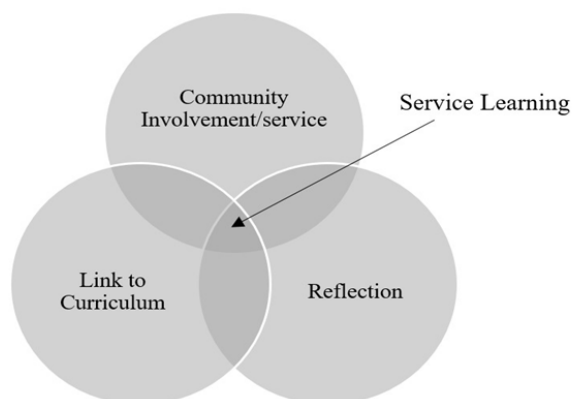

Figure 1. Basic Components of Service Learning (Kendall, 1990)

Community involvement is essential to any service-learning program in the sense that learners address real community needs through collaborative partnership between the university/college and the community. Service learning entails a balanced emphasis on both learners' learning and addressing real needs in the community (Lebovits & Bharath, 2019). This is important because education should also provide the learner with opportunities to develop and practice shared responsibility and accountability through community service learning (Lebovits & Bharath, 2019).

Moreover, for a service learning program to be relevant, it should have a ***link to curriculum***. Mogford and Lyons (2019) argue that service-learning is not simply the addition of a community service assignment to a course; rather it challenges the educator, learner, and community partners to connect course materials explicitly to service in community, thereby making communal and reciprocal theoretical and pedagogical approaches a necessity. In a service learning endeavor, there must be a deliberate effort to incorporate the service experience into the content of a course (Mogford & Lyons, 2019). Apart from the primary objectives of a course, educators can explore ways in which community service can be included in course content so as to teach some of the fundamental competencies and concepts of the curriculum. Competencies related to service-learning can include features of citizenship, leadership, entrepreneurship, life skills, research skills, and communication skills. Lastly, there must be an element of ***reflection*** in any service learning program which provides a link between the service and the learning. It deliberately engages the learner in incorporating creative and critical thinking so as to understand and evaluate what they did, what they learned, how it affected them personally, and how their services affected society on a broader scale (Baetz et al., 2012). It is also crucial for enriching the quality of service as it offers the learners with an opportunity to evaluate what they do and how they do it so that they can

identify areas which need improvement.

2.3 The Impact of Service Learning on Students

Different studies have demonstrated the impacts of service-learning is multifarious because its impact cuts across every phase and stages of all participants especially the students (Olagoke-oladokun et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Personal Growth and Development

In previous studies, one of the most frequently reported outcomes of service-learning was increased self-efficacy among students (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Mtawa, 2017). In fact, Giles and Eyler (1994) noted that not only was increased self-efficacy a benefit of service-learning, it was also a predictor of whether individuals would become involved. Furthermore, the students reported a belief that they could make a difference in the communities they served. This is a significant finding in that a resistant attitude toward service-learning may prevent students from gaining the maximum benefit from the experience. Service-learning also fosters students' personal development by putting them in situations they have not been exposed to previously. As a result, students discovered personal strengths they were unaware of prior to this experience (Mason & Dunens, 2019). In addition, Mitchell et al. (2015) found that service-learning helped students evaluate their own values and beliefs. Mungo (2017) also found that students' personal values were questioned during their service-learning experiences, which enhanced self- awareness and clarified personal values and beliefs (Lee et al., 2018; Mason & Dunens, 2019; Mungo, 2017).

2.3.2 Skills Development

A key aspect of students' skills development is the "self- knowledge" that allows them to make career decisions aligned with their interests, skills, values, and motivations (Daugherty, 2015). Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2000) concur suggesting that, opportunities for skill development as a career- relevant learning experience may provide a "direct influence" on career choice (p. 38). The better students recognize their values, interests, and skills, the better poised they are to make career decisions that match those traits. Studies report increased leadership skills (Daugherty, 2015; Manning-Ouellette et al., 2018), enhanced communication skills, professional growth (Mason & Dunens, 2019), and increased confidence to proceed with their chosen careers (Manning-Ouellette et al., 2018). Studying STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) career choice, Collins et al. (2019) found that offering college students the opportunity to experience science- based research through a summer internship developed skills that enhanced their feelings of competency and rein- forced students' career choices in science- based fields.

2.3.3 Academic Development

Numerous studies found that students enrolled in service-learning courses displayed a significant improvement in academic performance, overall grade point average, and attendance (Pelco et al., 2014; Song et al., 2017). In addition, it may aid in more specific skills, such as presentation self-efficacy, writing skills, problem solving, critical thinking, understanding of theoretical course concepts, and novel and real-world application of course concepts (Lee et al., 2018). Furthermore, some research has found that participating in service learning does improve students' course marks (Brail, 2016; Mungo, 2017).

2.3.4 Sense of Civic Responsibility

With respect to civic development, previous research concluded that participation in service-learning projects significantly increased sense of civic or social responsibility (Dutu & Sicari, 2016; Hok-ka et al., 2016; Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020). Civic responsibility generally refers to reducing stereotypes, developing empathetic understanding, and gaining a stronger sense of opportunity and achievement (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Not only did service learning experiences enable students to become directly involved in community service, it often continued in the form of volunteer work the following semester (Collins et al., 2019; Giles & Eyler, 1994). Additionally, most students who participated in service-learning felt more connected to their communities (D'Agostino, 2010).

3 Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine how undergraduate students' participation in the CUIB-VNP influences their personal growth, career preparedness, academics, and sense of civic responsibility. The study also sought to identify the challenges and concerns students faced throughout their participation in VNP activities. The study investigates the following research questions:

1. How does the VNP influence students' personal growth, skills set, academics, and sense of civic responsibility?

2. What are the major issues or challenges students encounter participating in VNP activities?

3.1 The Service Learning Context – The Volunteer Network Program (NVP)

Service Learning at CUIB is part of the university's Volunteer Network Program. The purpose of the program is to encourage students' community engagement and service. It is grounded in the university's mission to "prepare professional servant leaders with moral and spiritual values to contribute to the sustainable development of their communities". The VNP is a pre-requisite for graduation and students are expected to complete at least 100hrs of volunteer and/or service work.

Volunteer services can be grouped into three categories namely; community service (church service), on-campus animation and office work. Students are allowed to choose the kind of services they wish to engage in depending of their interests and also the time period as long as they are able to complete the required minimum number of volunteer hours (100hours) upon completion of their study. They can work as an individual or in a group depending on the service/activity. These include singing in the choir, being part of the dance club, cleaning, office duties, student association activities, cooking, church service protocol, and reading at the chapel, mass serving, and school event organization. Even though students are free to choose places of service from a list of available opportunities provided by the program coordinator, they are also encouraged to be creative and to discover new opportunities to be included in the program. Therefore, the program encourages students' to be more creative and develop their freedom with responsibility. This is an important aspect for their personal development, which has impact on their future career and responsibilities.

The service activities are often carried out during students' free time. There are no specific days within the week to engage in a service. Service time/period depends on individual students' free time and also the date and time of an event or activity. Service-hours per student per week is flexible and not limited. As mentioned earlier, the VNP activities are mostly campus or church related activities. Students are however encouraged to volunteer outside school, i.e. within the local community. The university however does not provide guidance or placements for students in groups or institutions in the community.

3.2 Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative approach and a case study research design. A case study research design enables the researcher to focus on a single or a few selected cases thereby allowing an in-depth analysis (Bryman, 2008). A total of twenty-four undergraduate students participated in the study. Their majors included Accounting, Human Resource Management, Logistics and Transport Management, Management, Medical Laboratory Science and Software Engineering. Participants were selected purposively based on their active participation in or their experience with the Volunteer Network Program.

Data was collected using focus group discussion, online written responses (online survey) and document analysis. One focus group discussion of five students was used. This was complemented by nineteen online written responses in the form of an online survey. The online survey included both open-ended and closed ended questions. The open ended questions asked about the kind of volunteer activities students were engaged in, their overall volunteer experience, how their experiences have impacted them personally, professionally, academically and socially, and what challenges they encountered and how they addressed them. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidentiality was guaranteed. Finally, an analysis of documents about Service-Learning at the Catholic University Institute was conducted to provide supplementary data for the study.

Data analysis was based on thematic analysis while guided by the literature. The thematic analysis involved transcription of the qualitative data and coding them into categories and major themes through a process of open coding.

4. Findings

4.1 Research question 1: How does the VNP influence students' personal growth, skills set, academics, and sense of civic responsibility?

Table 1. Summary of impact on student's skill set, personal growth, academics and sense of civic responsibility

Impact (Total number of students = 24)		Comment
Skill set (n=20)	Communication, public speaking, adaptability and flexibility, social/interpersonal skills, leadership skills and teamwork.	Approximately 83% of students mentioned some form of skill set impacted by their service learning experience
Personal growth (n=19)	Self-confidence, self-control, self-knowledge, self-worth, sense of achievement, patience and empathy.	Approximately 79% of students mentioned some personal qualities impacted by their service learning experience
Academics (n=5)	- Ability to apply theory to practice - Gained insights about research project/topic	Approximately 20% of students felt their service learning experience impacted their academics.
Sense of Civic Responsibility (n=12)	Awareness about environmental and societal issues.	50% of students felt they had a better sense of civic responsibility due to their service learning experience.

Table 1 provides a summary of how service learning impacts students' skillset, personal growth, academics and sense of civic responsibility.

4.1.1 Impact on Skill Set

Results obtained showed that students gained several skills from their participation in service learning activities. One major skill mentioned by majority of the students is communication. One student said "Engaging not only in choir but with other diverse groups made me develop communication skills. I belief I am a better communicator now than I was before participating in the SL activity". Another student mentioned "…being a protocol at school/church events requires you to be able to communicate with the audience or visitors coming. Working as a protocol enabled me to be courageous and confident when talking with people I do not know either in the form answering questions about the event or simply giving directions in a polite and respectable manner".

Some students mentioned that they developed public speaking skills. Students who demonstrated such skills where mostly involved in leadership positions. One student said "…I never knew I was a fluent public speaker. As the president the choir and vice president the student government association, I always find myself in situation where I have to make presentations or address large group of people in some way or form. I can say I have become a confident public speaker due to the exposure". Another student talked about fear of public speaking that they were able to overcome through their SL experience.

Students also gained adaptation and flexibility skills due to their participation in the program. A student said "Working with people with different personalities and points of view enabled them to be flexible in their ways of thinking and also adapt to changing situations".

Students were also able to improve on their interpersonal skills. Interpersonal or social skills play a crucial role in personal, academic, and professional contexts as they are the key to building meaningful relationships, fostering effective communication, and navigating complex social dynamics. One student said "I generally don't like working in groups so I expected a bad experience but at the end of the day, I did not only make new friends but worked with people who shared the same ideas with me." Several students mentioned a boost in their self-confidence. "…it made me feel confident in my abilities to not only engage in activities other than academics but also contribute to the betterment of the community". Five students talked about learning how to write reports and proposals through SL experiences.

Students also talked about gaining leadership skills as a result of their SL experience. One student said "The greatest skill I've learned is leadership… holding a leadership position makes you learn to be bold and how to manage people. It also boosts your networking skills". Some students mentioned improved decision making skills. "I have learned to think on my feet, make quality decisions and to be accountable".

4.1.2 Impact on Personal Qualities of Students

Results show several qualities students gained or strengthened as a result of the Volunteer Network Program. Students mentioned self-confidence, one student said "…you gain this confidence through working with the community because you feel like you are actually doing something that matters." Another student said that she needed to be confident in order to showcase their activity/performance to the public. "Being part of the dance club has taught me to be free to express myself, not caring about what other people may think".

In addition, students gained the ability to understand themselves and other people better. One student said "…it made me understand myself. For example knowing my strengths and weaknesses, my values and passions". Another student said "I never knew I was a fluent public speaker and I understood that people will not always think like me. I might be seeing a grey cloud while another person sees the cloud as blue". Students also mentioned an increased self-worth. One student mentioned that the positive feedback she got from assisting her peers and people from the community increased her sense of self-worth.

Students mentioned the sense of achievement due to the services they provided and the positive feedback they got from their peers, teachers and community members. They also learned patience, humility and empathy.

 "I used to be impatient but I have learned during my time as a volunteer to be patient and communicate any worry I have. Dialogue is always the best and I learnt that being polite and dialogue helps solve a lot of issues". Another student said

"…working in team to help others in school made me understand that humility pays and it's beneficial for my growth". One student said

"Volunteerism experience has made me see things differently. Helping people for free lessens their burden. If we all got to help each other whenever we could, people would be calmer and nicer".

4.1.3 Impact on Students' Academics

Results indicated that a minority of students appreciated the usefulness and relevance of service learning at CUIB to their academics. One student talked about the role of their major in their desire to take part in volunteering activities. Two students said being in a hospitality major, they think there is need for them to have exposure to real life experiences that way they can put what they have learned in the classroom in practice. One student said "Working as protocol enabled me to see first-hand what it means to serve people and I was able to put in practice what I learned in the classroom which made the experience more satisfying". Another student talked about her academic interest in the topic of leadership, therefore she needed to be part of activities that require people management and teamwork so as to get better insights about her research topic. Two students said their SL experience gave them insight into future academic plans, one said that through their SL experience volunteering as head of a school project, they was were to decide what their Masters topic will be. One student in accounting major mentioned that he gained the knowledge of computerized accounting as one of his duties as a volunteer is to prepare vouchers.

4.1.4 Impact on Sense of Civic Responsibility

Results showed that students developed a greater sense of civic responsibility due to their participation in service learning activities at CUIB. One student described being a change agent, and gaining the skills and tools to help develop the community, in addition to actually working with the community to better their lives, as a rewarding experience. Another student talked about the SL experience encouraging her to give back and make a difference in the community.

In addition, students mentioned the impact of the SL experience on their understanding and analysis of social issues surrounding their community and the country at large. One student mentioned the lack of volunteerism spirit among the local people. "…because most communities do not value volunteerism hence we can't have clean environments etc. For example if everyone would pick a piece of paper seen on the road and throw it into a nearby trash bin or not even throw a piece of paper by the road in the first place, which I consider as volunteerism, I think the world will be a better place". Another student believed that working to keep their school campus clean made him understand the importance of taking care of our environment.

4.2 Research question 2: What are the major issues or challenges students encounter participating in VNP activities?

Despite the benefits and positive learning experiences of the program, students also faced numerous challenges. Some students had difficulties in balancing their academic responsibilities with their service commitments. They reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the program, particularly during periods of heavy academic

workload. Additionally, students engaged in group work or holding leadership positions felt frustrated with group activities due to the lack of commitment of other group members. One student said "Honestly it's not an easy task because as the Student Government Association (STUGA) Vice President (VP), you try your best to make students live their best university life but most downgrade the efforts or basically don't care. You organize activities but they don't show up. You put in your all to call in guest speakers for their benefit but they still neglect it…. I felt exploited to say the least and frustration comes in at some point and you want to give up." Logistical challenges such as transportation to service sites and lack of resources were also mentioned as barriers to effective participation in the program. The University does not fund the expenses students incur participating in SL activities as such they turn to use their personal funds. One student said "Volunteering is costly for students especially when they have to move from one place to another. They turn to spend a lot on transportation without any reimbursement".

Moreover, some students felt that the essence of the program that students are more concerned with completing the 100hours of volunteerism than the actual meaning and usefulness of their service commitment. They felt that the VNP being a graduation requirement puts a lot of pressure on students especially when they are approaching graduation and are yet to complete the 100hrs. A student mentioned that some students do not know the aim behind the VNP, there is no orientation given to students as to why they need to volunteer and how it could be beneficial to them and the community they serve. Reason why they only see it as a graduation requirement and will engage in any kind of service without reflecting on its meaning or value, as long as they are able to complete the required volunteer hours. As such terming the program volunteerism and at the same time making it a graduation requirement defeats the whole purpose of volunteerism.

Another challenge mentioned by students is tedious processing and validation of volunteer hours. After completing a volunteer activity, students are required to fill the volunteerism form and then obtain the signatures of the supervisor of that activity and the President of STUGA to confirm its validity. Some students found it difficult to obtain these signatures given that some supervisors choose to do so at their own time and discretion. One student said "At the end of my volunteer work my supervisor was supposed to sign my form which he didn't and each time meet with him asking for his signature he says he is busy."

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the perceived impact of service learning amongst university students in Cameroon using the CUIB-VNP as case study. The study found that students, through their service learning experiences, were able to gain skills and qualities they otherwise would not have obtained in the classroom. The CUIB - VNP has proven to be an effective program in enhancing students' academic learning, personal growth, and professional preparedness. My findings indicate that engaging in service-learning activities provide the opportunity for participants to relate and interact with others. One of the skills students mentioned to have had the greatest impact is social or interpersonal skills. This conforms with the findings in previous literature, where many authors reported that service-learning contributes to students' personal and interpersonal development (Baetz et al., 2012; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Lee et al., 2018; Olagoke-oladokun et al., 2020; Toews & Cerny, 2013). Participating in service learning activities also enabled student to improve on their communications skills. Having strong communication skills aids in all aspects of life – from professional life to personal life and everything that falls in between. Good communication skills are essential to allow others and yourself to understand information more accurately and quickly (Pacho, 2017). Service activities influence participants in terms of providing real life experience, interaction and bonding with their peers and with those they work with. Consequently, participants acquire important competencies of networking, leadership, teamwork, decision making, adaptation and flexibility which are crucial for a successful transition into the workplace and the society as a whole.

The findings of this study also show significant impact on students' personal growth and development. Students reported to have gained self-confidence, sense of achievement, patience, humility, empathy, increased self-worth and the ability to understand themselves and other people better. Service-learning has been proven to have the potential to transform higher education and society through the development of soft skills. Soft skills are the foundation for effective communication, collaboration, and adaptability in an ever-changing professional landscape. Additionally, service learning activities enabled some students to have hands-on experience practicing what they learned in the classroom while incorporating their observations and experiences into their academic studies. However, other students felt that their service learning experience had no effect whatsoever on their academics. This is mainly because the activities they were involved in had no relation to their major, one student

said "My volunteer experience had no impact on me academic wise because I am majoring in Graphic design while my volunteer work mostly involved assisting in the organization of school events." Through the VNP, students have developed a sense of value for volunteerism. Some students demonstrated the intention to volunteer in the future.

Despite the positive learning experiences of the VNP, students however faced several difficulties both at personal levels and at the level of administration. The administrative challenges identified suggest that there is room for improvement in the design and implementation of the program.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Service-learning has proven to be a beneficial form of pedagogy widely adopted by institutions of learning around the globe. The results of this study indicates that service learning has great potential in improving traditional methods of learning as it enables students to have real word experiences. This form of learning is crucial for a country like Cameroon where education is mostly theory focused with little or no connection to local contexts. Students learn better with practical and real-world tasks that build on what they know. Service-learning enriches students' learning experiences while adding value to higher education's mission of teaching, research, and service to the community. In addition, service learning fosters a sense of civic responsibility and citizenship which is essential for university students in Cameroon as it helps cultivate awareness of societal issues. Service learning programs directed towards serving local communities enables students to take an active role in addressing social and community challenges thereby developing future leaders who are committed to the betterment of their communities.

The Catholic University Institute of Buea's Volunteer Network Program can thereby act as a guideline for the implementation of service learning programs at other institutions of higher education in Cameroon. For better and effective service learning programs, this study recommends universities to:

- Fully integrate service learning into the university curriculum, with clear connections made between service activities and academic content. The idea of connection between experience and knowledge development is central to service-learning and implies that learning should not be compartmentalized. This would ensure that students can see the relevance of their service work to their academic studies, thereby enhancing their learning experience.

- Ensure the effectiveness of the program by designing mechanisms that encourage reflection either in the form of guided reports or group discussions. According to Toole & Toole (1995), no activity is more central to understanding and implementing service learning programs than reflection as it enables students to organize and construct their own understanding of their experiences.

- Provide proper orientation to students about the aims of the program and its value to students' personal development and their future careers.

- Provide enhanced support to ensure balance between academic workload and service commitments.

- Emphasize on interactions between the university and the local community or community partners by forming mutually beneficial collaborations and integrating service-learning into the universities mission statements and strategic plans.

- Continuously evaluate their service learning programs to identify areas for improvement. This could involve regular feedback from students, faculty, and community partners, as well as ongoing assessment of the impact of the program on students and the community.

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