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University, community and corporate partnership: A case study of service-learning projects in the University of Colombo

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Service-learning provides an opportunity for a learning by experience to university undergraduates through “scholarship of engagement” in selected communities. This allows students to interact with the outside world in solving a problem, while gaining academic credits. This practice was non-existent in the university curricula in Sri Lanka previously and was introduced by the Career Guidance Unit, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo in 2012. This process, developed as a design-based research is described elsewhere. We report insights from the design process, implementation and results of three pilot service learning projects. Participants included 22 eligible undergraduates selected on predesigned criteria inclusive of three project leaders, mentored by faculty project coaches and supported by corporate project partners.

Project I was on improving drinking water quality in Nelumwewa, Puttalam. Following a questionnaire survey and laboratory tests on water quality it was concluded that hardness made water in the area unconsumable. The team developed a low cost domestic water filter using indigenous materials – powdered Moringa seeds and charcoal, as a solution. Project II involved increasing awareness on malnutrition among school children. Software to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI) of school children was developed using data collected from four schools in Ratmalana. Programmes were conducted on healthy lifestyles and nutrition. Health clubs were formed to sustain the programme. Project III focused on investigation of drinking water issues in households of 450 employees of a corporate partner. This team travelled to many districts of the island to investigate the quality of water, accessibility related issues and challenges, and arrived at suggestions to improve individual situations.

Service-learning improved students' academic outcomes, critical thinking and cognitive development. The corporate sector gained additional human resources. Communities met real needs and priorities. However, since much of the learning takes place outside the university, the assessment of students' work should be carefully planned.