Lessons learned from a community engagement initiative within Irish higher education

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This paper focuses on a community–university partnership built around a programme of study co-created by residents of a disadvantaged community and situated, for the most part, within that community. The aim of this paper is to share lessons learned from this community engagement initiative, as identified through a research study which ran concurrent to the programme. The study involved 41 interviews (18 individual interviews and 23 focus groups) over a two-year period with 28 participants. Participants included students, lecturers and community and university stakeholders. The finding section focuses on the characteristics of the initiative which allowed it to positively impact those involved. The data indicated that (i) the authenticity of the partnership between the community and university, (ii) the suitability of the lecturers and (iii) the ability of the lecturers and management to adapt the programme to identified needs were all key to the success of the programme. The paper concludes with a discussion, incorporating relevant literature, regarding what can be learned from this programme for those interested in enacting truly engaged practice in Irish higher education.

Keywords: community; university; partnership; engagement; disadvantage; higher education

Introduction

The role of community–university partnerships in marginalised urban areas has been explored by a number of authors with an interest in determining the potential for truly collaborative relationships that are of equal benefit to both partners. Much of this research has focused on community engagement through service learning or through community-centred research endeavours (e.g. Allahwala et al. 2013; Anyon and Fernandez 2007). The focus of the present paper is on a community–university partnership built around a programme of study co-created by residents of a disadvantaged community and situated, for the most part, within that community. The Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWell) programme is a two-year community-driven diploma programme which was developed in partnership between the community of St. Mary's parish, an underserved area of Limerick

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City and staff of the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences at the University of Limerick (UL). The programme brought together community partners, university staff and students to work collaboratively towards the overall aim of building capacity in well-being, leadership and life skills within the local community.

The aim of this paper is to share the experiences of participants during the first two-year full cycle of the CWell programme in order to record lessons learned and inform future community engagement initiatives within Irish higher education. Community engagement is becoming increasingly prevalent in the Irish higher education sector. However, this work is often fragmented and not embedded within the strategies of higher education institutes (McEwen and Mason O'Connor 2013). Rather, initiatives commonly involve discreet, short-term efforts that function alongside the core work of the university (Fitzgerald et al. 2012). In Ireland, there is a notable absence of literature on the experiences of institutional or community members of engagement which is strategically integrated through the curriculum (McKenna and Martin 2014). Without capturing such experiences, there is a risk of much knowledge being lost which could be beneficial in the planning and development of future initiatives.

While empowering pedagogies of experiential reflective teaching and learning in higher education can be advanced through community engagement, research on the extent and types of community engagement and their impacts, on both the university and the community, is needed (Mason O'Connor, Lynch, and Owen 2011). To thrive in the twenty-first century, higher education must move engagement from the margin to the mainstream of its research, teaching and community work (Fitzgerald et al. 2012).

Irish policy context

CWell comes to fruition at a propitious time. The Irish policy context as it pertains to education, health and community development has recently been set out for the coming years. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 (Higher Education Authority 2015), in line with its parent strategy, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills 2011), prioritises the expansion of participation in higher education to include those previously excluded. In particular, emphasis is placed on engaging under-represented groups such as those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers, those who are first-time mature students and those wishing to access higher education on a part-time/flexible basis.

Prioritising community engagement, the national higher education strategy stresses a need for 'inward and outward flows of knowledge, staff, students and ideas between each institution and its external community' (Department of Education and Skills 2011, 13). The Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016 (HEA 2016) also emphasises the importance of enhanced engagement with communities, and embedded knowledge exchange. Further, in June 2015, presidents from across Irish higher education committed to the ten-point 'Campus Engage Charter on Civic and Community Engagement' (see campusengage.ie). By signing up to the Charter, the presidents underscored their commitment to the civic and community engagement role and responsibilities of their institutions. The launch of the Charter built upon similar initiatives in countries including Australia, the UK and the US, which were set up to support and strengthen the civic role and responsibilities of higher education institutions.

From the perspective of health, the recent Healthy Ireland Framework (acknowledging that prevalence of chronic conditions and accompanying lifestyle behaviours are strongly influenced by socio-economic status, levels of education, employment and housing), calls for a reduction of health inequalities as one of its four goals. Further, through two of its six dedicated themes the Framework prioritises (i) fostering partnership between local structures working towards common health goals and (ii) empowering people to respond to challenges affecting health and well-being in their own communities (Department of Health 2013).

Civic engagement and equity of health and educational outcomes are principles echoed within the local policy context. Both the Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan (Limerick City & County Council 2013) and the UL's Strategic Plan 2015–2019 (University of Limerick 2015) focus on strengthening links between the university and local communities, improving the quality of life and well-being of regeneration communities through sustainable development, and opening access to training and education opportunities within targeted areas in order to promote greater social and economic inclusion.

Introducing CWell

The CWell programme was designed with the community, for the community and was delivered, for the most part, in the community. The two years preceding the first student intake (2012 and 2013) saw the development of a co-designed curriculum whereby community and university stakeholders came together on the CWell Curriculum Design Committee to discuss what content was best suited to the new programme. The remit of the Curriculum Design Committee was to design a curriculum which prioritised the needs identified by the local community, while simultaneously satisfying the academic requirements of the university accreditation process. Following the curriculum co-construction process, the first two-year cycle of the CWell programme took place from January 2014 to January 2016. In all, 10 students completed the two-year programme.

The CWell programme content included three pillars: (i) mental health, (ii) physical health and (iii) personal and professional development. Three cross-cutting themes were addressed within each pillar: (i) the young person, (ii) middle age and (iii) the older person. The CWell programme was spread over four semesters with two modules covered per semester. CWell students participated in lectures for three hours each Monday throughout the four semesters.

CWell modules were taught by lecturers from across the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences. Confirmation of commitment to the CWell programme was received from all six departments in the Faculty in September 2012. In addition to teaching on the CWell programme, many CWell lecturers served on the CWell Curriculum Design Committee and the subsequent CWell Steering Committee, which took over from the CWell Curriculum Design Committee when the programme was underway. CWell lecturers also acted as advisers for individual CWell students during the course of their studies. This cross-faculty facilitation of the programme was a unique opportunity which aimed for increased collaboration between staff of different departments within the Faculty. In all, one dean and 11 lecturers from the Faculty were involved in the programme. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the modules in which students participated and the departments responsible for each module.

Table 1.   CWell modules and responsible departments.

	ECTS[a]
Semester 1 – January–June 2014	
Mental Health 1: Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health Across the Lifespan	18
Department of Education and Professional Studies	
Study Skills and Personal Development	12
Department of Nursing and Midwifery	
Semester 2 – September–December 2014	
Managing Health in the Home and Community	18
Graduate Entry Medical School	
Communication and Life Skills	12
Department of Clinical Therapies	
Semester 3 – January–June 2015	
Mental Health 2: Prevention and Management	18
Department of Nursing and Midwifery	
Practicum 1	12
Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences	
Semester 4 – September–December 2015	
Leading and Sustaining Change in the Community	18
Department of Psychology	
Practicum 2	12
Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences	

[a]European credit transfer system credits.

Data collection and analysis

During the first two-year cycle of the CWell programme, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to (i) trace the development of the programme, (ii) record the experiences of students, lecturers and management, (iii) identify areas for improvement and (iv) determine how the programme might best be sustained into the future. In all, data collection involved 41 interviews (18 individual interviews and 23 focus groups) over a two-year period (January 2014–December 2015). The choice between individual interview and a focus group was dependant on the availability of participants at given times, with focus groups preferred where possible. Interview participants, totalling 28, included 11 CWell students (one of whom left the programme at an early stage to take up employment), four members of the project co-ordination group (two of whom were also interviewed separately in their capacity as lecturers), five additional lecturers, two additional steering group members and six UL practicum students whose role was to provide peer-support to the CWell students during the programme.[1] A summary of the research interviews is outlined in Table 2.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively, following a pragmatic approach (Burnard et al. 2008; Newell and Burnard 2006). In all, there were 586 pages of interview transcripts, which were transferred to a spreadsheet and broken into meaning units (Elliott and Timulak 2005), comprising a single line or a collection of related lines of data, which underwent two phases of coding. Initially, each meaning unit was assigned to one or more data categories (e.g. 'student outcomes', 'programme organisation', 'partnership'). Within each category, units were then further coded through a constant comparison of meaning units (Rubin and Rubin 1995) until all the

Table 2. Research interviews.

Participant group	Number of interviews	Timing of interviews
CWell students	11 focus groups 15 individual interviews	Semesters 1–4
CWell project co-ordination group	Five focus groups	Semesters 1–4
CWell steering group	Three focus groups One individual interview	Semesters 1 and 2
CWell lecturers	Two focus groups Two individual interviews	Semester 4
UL practicum students	Two focus groups	Semester 4

data were sorted into higher-order codes. For example, within the 'partnership' codes included 'authentic partnership', 'shared benefits' and 'challenges'. A comparison within these categories and codes, as well as between these coded units and the original transcripts, resulted in the identification of overall trends and patterns, the most salient of which have been represented in the findings section.

A number of steps recommended by Creswell (1998) were taken to increase the trustworthiness of findings. During the data collection stage, participants were given the opportunity to verify information shared during ongoing or previous interviews by such questions as 'Did I understand you correctly when you said … ?' or 'Am I correct in thinking that … ?' During the data analysis phase, any data which contradicted emerging trends were given careful consideration in the context of the given interview and the entire data corpus. The trustworthiness of the data was further increased by the opportunity the research design afforded to triangulate data from different sources with respect to similar phenomena. For example, it was possible to view the data pertaining to various elements of programme organisation from the perspective of students, lecturers and programme management.

Findings

The findings have been arranged under four headings. The first, 'shared benefits for CWell stakeholders' illustrates the ways in which the CWell programme positively impacted those involved. The following three headings represent lessons learned regarding what influenced the success of the programme in achieving such shared benefits: 'Authentic Partnership', 'Appropriately Experienced Lecturing Staff' and 'Adaptable Structures and Content'. Pseudonyms are used in the presentation of findings. The term 'CWell Management' is used as a blanket term to categorise participants other than those interviewed in their capacity as students or lecturers, for example, university and community members of the steering group or project co-ordination group. This step was taken to protect the anonymity of those who may otherwise be easily identified by their specific role(s) in the programme.

Shared benefits for CWell stakeholders

It was evident that everyone involved in the CWell programme found the experience transformative. The CWell students benefited in terms of enhanced skills, knowledge and understandings:

Before I would have never [noticed] a lot of what I have in my community, yes it does benefit mental, physical wellbeing, health, but I would have never looked at it that way. Whereas now after doing this I can see now the benefits of them. (Michelle, CWell Student)

I could wallpaper the house above with all the different courses I've done. I never got a thing out of them. But this, if you never got a job out of this, between your confidence and everything else, we really have grown, we've grown into adults, d'you know that. (Louise, CWell Student)

It's actually beginning to open up doors for them, you know what I mean, in terms of their own personal development, they are beginning to talk about the future, their grandkids future, the people around them. It's all those little things that have changed for the students and I suppose for the community. (Niall, CWell Management)

The lecturers described the ways in which the programme reaffirmed their educational beliefs and gave them new perspectives on education:

I think certainly as a teaching experience it was absolutely fabulous. And like [other interview participant] says, you certainly would have that feeling of this is absolutely what it's all about. (Marie, CWell Lecturer)

It really prompted me in preparing as a teacher educator, kids have to teach the student, they can't teach the content. They have to get to know their students and try to meet their student's needs, where their student is. I think it's just, working with these folks just confirmed that for me so much. (Emily, CWell Lecturer)

You had to think on your feet and adapt and all of that makes you better academically, even going back into the unreal world of academia. (Niamh, CWell Management)

Those UL practicum students who took part in service learning in support of the CWell students also found the experience educational:

In my mind I really defined disadvantaged communities as their problems and not really as anything more than that. I really thought it was an all-consuming experience … Then actually taking part in CWell made me realise that they are people too and they have families and they have a lot of pride and they are capable, just in a different way. They did all this stuff without ever knowing about Foucault. (Susan, UL Practicum Student)

I just think it was so important, because it would be so easy not to care. You could translate that to any part of life. 'Oh, it doesn't really affect me, so I don't care.' But it will affect you as much as you want it to … It meant so much to them that we actually cared about it, their project. You can take that lesson in every outlet of your life. Just being present and caring is everything. (Heidi, UL Practicum Student)

CWell students also described the benefits they saw for the community as a whole:

Now with the allotments going in, the outdoor physical activity area and the girls' parent and toddler group, I mean, that's a small step but it's going to have a massive impact … I can absolutely see the benefits it's going to have for this community. (Michelle, CWell Student)

[CWell] has given me a diploma that I would never have had. Long term, it has made me a more confident person and I think by being more confident, I can help my community better and it has given me the ammunition to help my community better. (Joe, CWell Student)

In many ways, it was the evident successes of the programme that allowed the partnership to continue and enthusiasm to grow. As one community member of CWell management explained:

> I think there's a lot of people in shock in the community that's there's ten people in the community that have actually achieved a diploma out of [it] … They've become role models within their community, that it's spreading out hugely. And you don't see that and it's not something you can measure, but it is there. (Ellen, CWell Management)

Before moving on to discuss lessons learned from the CWell programme, it should be emphasised that the fact that the programme's success was shared between all of those involved was seen as crucial to the programme's success. Being reciprocal and mutually beneficial was identified by Bringle and Hatcher (2011, cited in Fitzgerald et al. 2012) as a foundational characteristic of engagement. As a partnership programme, it was important that the outcomes of CWell could be felt both within the university and within the community. The authenticity of this partnership will now be discussed as one of the main elements affecting the programme's ability to achieve such shared successes.

Authentic partnership

Authentic partnership was found to be core to the ability of the CWell programme to foster trust among participants and ensure they were willing to engage with the programme and invest their time and effort. A key to the authenticity of the partnership was the fact that the CWell programme was designed with rather than for the community. Community stakeholders worked with university stakeholders to ensure the programme was rooted in needs identified by the community and built on existing community resources.

> You know, for a long time people have been coming into this parish and telling the people what they want. I think that CWell is asking them what they want and they're listening. (Joe, CWell Student)

> Having community participants sitting at the table as [the programme was being designed] meant that we didn't sort of lose the run of ourselves in terms of getting so focused on the programme, and content, and regulations, that we lost sight of the needs of the community as articulated by the community representatives. So I think it could have easily ended up being a bit tokenistic, people sitting there and not really participating, but I think genuinely it was a very shared experience. There was genuine discussion. There was real negotiation. (Marie, CWell Lecturer)

The data demonstrated that this sense of partnership grew over time as various members of the curriculum development committee and subsequent steering committee found that they shared common goals and aspirations for the community and for the CWell students, resulting in a shared sense of identity.

> I don't know that the people around the table are saying 'I'm here from the community', 'I'm here from the university'. I think now it's almost a sit around the table and people speak about the students and the programme with the interest of the students and the programme, not whether they're from the community or the university. So I suppose there has been a shift in thinking. (Niamh, CWell Management)

A sense of mutual respect between partners was also evident:

> It was respecting each other for the kind of skills we had. I think we were respected for the skills of actually developing a programme, and putting it through the [Academic Programme Review Committee]. Whereas, actually, it was incredible the skills that some of the people from the community had in relation to managing the people in the community at the various meetings and things like that. Engaging them, getting their interest in the actual programme, and also their funding skills. (Jane, CWell Lecturer)

This authentic partnership echoes the recommendation by Fitzgerald et al. that all partners become both 'learners and teachers in shared efforts to seek solution-focused outcomes' (2012, 234). The partnership approach was not without its challenges, however, and the authenticity of the partnership ebbed and flowed through the two-year cycle. While the quotes above illustrate the overall positive sense of partnership and mutual respect, at times holding that partnership together fell to a few core university and community members. As one such university member stated: 'I feel we are teetering on a very tight rope and I can't drop' (Niamh, CWell Management). So, while the partnership was very important to the success of the programme, it was sometimes fragile and required considerable work on the part of core CWell management to be sustained.

Appropriately experienced lecturing staff

CWell was embedded in a situated learning philosophy. This required that the student be placed at the centre of the learning process and that learning be rooted in activity, context and culture (Lave and Wenger 1991). Many of the lecturers who had expressed an interest in facilitating CWell modules had strong connections to the local community and were motivated by a sense of social justice and the value they placed on learning and equity of educational opportunities. Their deep experience in the field of education and community development was key to their ability to motivate and engage CWell students and respond to their individual needs.

The importance of having appropriately experienced lecturers with values which aligned with CWell was highlighted repeatedly. As one management member pointed out: 'It's not just about somebody to deliver the content. The somebody is as important as the content, particularly for this group of students' (Niamh, CWell Management). Others concurred:

> These are mature adult learners that are going to be pushing you and challenge you, bringing in their own lives and putting them on the table saying, 'listen, that's great but this is what's going on in my life'. As a teacher you have to be able to respond and interact and bring in what they are saying to you. (Niall, CWell Management)

> I think the fact that I've worked with people, it's not that you would have had to work with people from St. Mary's Park, but I think it's important that a lecturer would have experience of working with non-traditional students, or Access students, if they're going to [work in CWell]. (Marie, CWell Lecturer)

There was a consensus that such teaching required a particular type of teacher and that not everybody was suitable for this type of collaborative, shared learning. It

was important that CWell lecturers were comfortable to let go of the power over teaching and blur the boundaries between teacher and learner (Mason O'Connor, Lynch, and Owen 2011). As one lecturer explained: 'You would need to cherry-pick the individuals to do the session because I know if it was down to traditionalist lecturers it would be a complete disaster' (Jane, CWell Lecturer). Although a more in-depth description of what was meant by 'traditionalist lecturer' was not presented, there was an inference that the traditionalist approach was somewhat didactic and its presence was not necessarily related to the amount of teaching experience a lecturer had:

> You can just imagine if you sort of dumped a junior lecturer in there, or somebody who had very little experience or something. But it's not even just a junior lecturer, because we have some senior lecturers who are very traditionalist in their approach. Who are happy to sit up with 40 or 50 slides and talk to a group. (Marie, CWell Lecturer)

The participating lecturers expressed a view that a key mediator of success was that the focus of teaching was on the development and support of the student as a person and that the focus on content followed from that.

> I think maybe it's a kind of a necessary aspect that you come with that mindset and you come with that ability to reach out and say, 'hold on, come with me, I'm not telling lies here, you will get through this and it will open a door for you and it's something that we'll do together'. (Nora, CWell Lecturer)

> It is about people and once you took care of them and had their trust, whatever you asked of them and whatever you gave them to do, you know, the readings, you'd explain to them and it's like anything, 'we've chosen this reading because last week you said this and we're going to go here in two weeks' time, this is why'. There was that element of trust in that we weren't just filling time. It was about them, they were central to the whole piece. (Laura, CWELL Lecturer)

One challenge with regard to some lecturing staff was the fact that CWell was not considered part of their assigned workload. This lack of official recognition made their contribution to the programme reliant on their goodwill. This echoes the experiences of other community-engaged Irish HEI staff, who have lamented lack of time or institutional recognition as barriers to engaged practice (McKenna and Martin 2014). While relying on the goodwill of lecturers is not an issue in itself, it does present a barrier with regard to the sustainability of such contributions.

> It's sort of a tricky one in terms of commitment and work load. The meetings all happened outside of nine to five … I think if you didn't sort of have that commitment and motivation, if it wasn't motivated by a sense of civic engagement, or a desire to make a contribution to a community, I don't know what other reasons that somebody would. Because I suppose it's not required of any us. (Marie, CWell Lecturer)

There is a sense in the data presented in this section that CWell lecturers, in addition to having a deep sense of commitment and a wealth of experience, were very student-centred. One characteristic of taking a student-centred approach to learning is the need to adapt content and structures in response to student needs. It is this final mediator of success that we will discuss next.

Adaptable structures and content

Related to the situated learning approach taken by staff, an important strength of the programme was its flexibility with regard to content and structure. Among the CWell students were early school leavers as well as those who had not engaged with formal education in a long time. This had two effects. First, some skills that students entering a university diploma programme directly from school might ordinarily be expected to possess were absent or underdeveloped. But, perhaps, more importantly, this created an initial fear from some students of being perceived as deficient when judged against existing university standards, such that their engagement with the content was inhibited and lecturers felt a need to adjust the pace and structure of modules accordingly.

> So what surprised me [at the start] was not the academic ability, was their personhood, the process of re-entering as a student that brought with it a culture of being down trodden, of their fear and of them taking it so seriously … This group didn't want to hand up everything, they actually … it was their fear of seeking help, their fear of revealing what they did or didn't know, their fear of engaging with people from outside of the community. It was everything else other than their academic ability that we hadn't maybe thought about how we needed to manage that. All the discussions here before were about bridging modules and supports but it was about … what else should come into the supports and how we should make that process that pulls people in and that dissipates those fears and anxieties. (Niamh, CWell Management)

> One of the things that happened in that first year is that they had consecutive lectures on a Monday night … and very early on they were overwhelmed so we did split the night and we did alternative nights. And that did work much better. (Julie, CWell Lecturer)

> We decided we would review at the start of the week with the students so that we would determine whether we actually were getting it right and whether we were approaching the right level or not, while still making sure that we tried to achieve the outcomes. (Jane, CWell Lecturer)

Of course, lecturers would not have been in a position to be flexible and responsive in their delivery of content if they did not feel that they had the support of programme and university structures to do so, as one lecturer explained:

> I suppose they weren't at the level I expected, so that was a challenge for me to actually change the teaching and also to be okay with that … I suppose a willingness on behalf of the design team to acknowledge that, for you as a lecturer, that it wasn't possible to teach at that level … So I suppose once you understood that there was flexibility within the course, it kind of gave you the opportunity to go and redesign your teaching. (Nora, CWell Lecturer)

While, overall, allowing flexibility and responsiveness in order to empower students within the programme was clearly a positive characteristic of the CWell programme, it was not without its challenges. Students themselves challenged the lecturers, as one lecturer explained: 'You're leaving yourself open to ten people suggesting ten totally different things. That was challenging.' (Mark, CWell Lecturer)

Another challenge related to adjusting content and structure to suit the student cohort was the concern some lecturers felt regarding how adaptations might affect the ability of the programme and its outcomes to be measured within the confines of existing university structures:

> Even that first semester, I would have said to [the course director] towards the end, 'look, the external examiner is coming and I'm not sure what kind of expectations they have but we have tried to support the students where they are at, which doesn't necessarily mean that it might be at the level that you might expect but they are on a trajectory, so we have to come in really strongly and support them and not set the bar too high in the initial semester before they have enough chance to find their feet', and I think everybody was really happy about that. (Nora, CWell lecturer)

Crucial to the flexibility of the programme and ensuring it fit within university structures was ongoing monitoring. In addition to the regular steering group meetings, a number of members of the steering group formed the CWell Project Co-ordination Group, which met each semester to reflect on the practical workings of the programme and determine where structures, content or support needed to be adjusted.

> Having a group that actually do reflect on the way things are going as opposed to initiating a programme and then coming together at the end … that's one thing that I think is essential. (Laura, CWell Lecturer)

> Maybe what helped us not compromise [the programme] is having the concurrent research being undertaken that constantly reminded us, it almost allowed us an opportunity to reflect. So while we were delivering the programme, I think we might have lost our footing had we just gone on and delivered and not come to meet … it worked well to keep us reflective and grounded and be true to the programme. (Niamh, CWell Management)

As the quote above suggests, while these monitoring meetings formed part of the ongoing process evaluation of the programme, for which the data reported in this paper were collected, the meetings took on a function of their own in allowing the project co-ordination group the space to reflect upon and discuss how best to strike the delicate balances necessary for programme success, such as those between leadership and partnership and between programme flexibility and accreditation structures.

Discussion

In discussing the findings of this study, we focus on the characteristics of CWell which allowed it to positively impact those involved and what can be learned from this for those interested in enacting truly engaged practice in Irish higher education. The findings indicate that (i) the authenticity of the partnership between the community and university, (ii) the suitability of the lecturers to the programme and (iii) the ability of the lecturers and management to adapt the programme to identified needs were all key to the success of the programme.

The importance of authentic partnership has been highlighted elsewhere. Allahwala et al. (2013) present five examples of successful partnership projects between universities and marginalised communities, all of which demonstrate the positive effects of initiatives rooted in communities, drawing on existing knowledge and resources and respecting the knowledge and skills on both sides of the partnership. These characteristics were also evident in CWell. However, it was equally clear that at times, sustaining such an authentic partnership relied upon the efforts of a few key university and community actors. It has been pointed out that the challenge of balancing partnership and leadership in university–community partnerships can often be offset by the regular reinforcement of group goals (Amey and Brown 2005). Butcher, Bezzina, and

Moran (2011) distinguish transformational partnerships from transactional partnerships, with the former being characterised by genuine engagement underpinned by mutual goals and shared benefits. The fact that both university and community partners experienced benefits while striving for common aspirations was, arguably, what allowed the CWell partnership to grow and evolve through its first cycle.

Lecturers and management alluded to the importance of those lecturers who engaged in the programme being 'suitable', with more 'traditionalist' lecturers considered unlikely to fall into such a category. University staff often rely on established traditions of curriculum design. There is a risk, however, that this can result in a dependency on such traditions and a diminished capacity to take risks or leave the comfort of familiar concepts and practices (Heard 2014). CWell saw experienced lecturers across a range of subject areas confront new learning situations which afforded them the opportunity to explore how their content and teaching strategies could be adapted and enhanced for the given situation. According to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017), all adults want to make sense of their world, to find meaning, and to be effective in what they value, this is what fuels their motivation to learn. Brady, Cardale, and Neidy further argue that the success of lifelong learning communities has been hinged on face-to-face engagement and the development of social relationships through learning (2013). It is important for people to identify their own problems, become critically aware of their political, socio-economic and cultural situations, and ultimately try to transform the reality collectively. In this sense, 'learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991, 31). Accordingly, the approach taken in CWell resulted in new learning experiences for the participating lecturers and a more student-centred programme of study. The findings suggest that much may be gained from an appreciation for how high-quality practices can be adapted in ways that take student needs into account. Such adaptability requires both institutional support for curricular flexibility and professional development for lecturers focused on enhancing teaching and learning skills which facilitate such adaptability. Participating in a programme such as CWell has a lot to offer any institution interested in promoting truly engaged practice. It was, perhaps, not the past practices of lecturers which determined their likelihood to optimise their involvement in CWell. Rather, it was their ability to adapt their practices and to recognise and prioritise the need for such adaptation.

Relatedly, it is crucial that engaged practice be prioritised at the institutional level, both in strategic documents and in the consequent allocation of resources (Demb and Wade 2012). The allocation of a university's resources is a reflection of its embodied values such that an absence of formal recognition of the contribution of lecturers to a community–university partnership initiative risks belying such an institution's stated aim of championing civic engagement.

Ongoing monitoring and reflection was probably the most important underlying structure of CWell. Drawing on an examination of 13 conference presentations of successful university-community partnerships, Mai, Kramer, and Luebbert (2005) contend that some of the most valuable learning in a university–community partnership can occur as a result of partnership reflections which question the core purpose, and nature of success, of a programme. The regular meetings held between CWell management members, including both community representatives and programme lecturers, were the mechanism through which the workings of the partnership, the suitability of teaching and learning strategies and the need to respond to evolving student

needs could be discussed and appropriate decisions made. Indeed, as Mai, Kramer, and Luebbert (2005) suggest, it is through reflecting together that partners may gain empathy for different positions so that they can identify common objectives and work together towards their attainment.

Note

1. The CWell programme was supported each semester by 6–8 university students who undertook a service learning module as part of their course. As part of this module, students provided crucial support to the CWell students through such activities as homework workshops, tutorials on academic writing and assistance with presentations, etc.

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