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## The Power of Relationships: A Qualitative Study of a University-Community Partnership Model in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Meaningful university-community partnerships (UCPs) can contribute in transforming stereotypes, and promoting collaboration and social learning for students and community members. However, preparing students in higher education to engage in their civic responsibility through UCP-based pedagogy is difficult. This paper illustrates and critically analyses a UCP model practised in an informal curriculum programme at a residential college in a Southeast Asian university to promote holistic learning through community engagement. Engaging with different communities in unique ways is achieved through the UCP, partnerships that were established with institutions and organisations that work with marginalised and vulnerable groups like migrant workers, elderly, youth-at-risk, and more. Grounded in empirical evidence obtained from 31 in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions with students, and eight in-depth interviews with community partners, this paper systematically analyses the affordances of the College UCP model. Findings reveal how collaboration and reciprocity can result in positive outcomes like relationship building and lifelong learning for students in higher education.

**Keywords:** University-community partnership, higher education, community engagement, community partners, living and learning programme, qualitative research, informal curriculum, marginalisation, vulnerable communities, relationship building, collaboration and reciprocity.

## INTRODUCTION

Universities and communities across different societies have a long history of collaborative partnerships in building social capital and addressing different economic, social, and environmental issues (Laniga et al., 2011; Buys & Bursnall, 2007). These university-community partnerships (UCPs) can encompass community development projects (Robinson-Dooley et al., 2018), community-based research (Minkler et al., 2006), industry partnerships for workforce development (Samuel et al., 2018; Thatcher et al., 2016), and community engagement (Mores et al., 2019). They increase the likelihood of reaching a larger population in understanding the myriad problems faced by communities, and effectively using the services and resources available within the communities to address those issues. Meaningful and effective UCPs can produce a holistic growth of the community (Agmon et al., 2018; Dodd & Nelson, 2018; Guillen & Zeichner, 2018; Robinson-Dooley et al., 2018; Russell & Flynn, 2000) and have multiple contributions like promoting collaboration, transforming stereotypes, and providing a rich platform of social learning for students and community members (Strier, 2011). However, UCP processes are complex and come with their own set of challenges (Strier, 2014). For example, the unequal distribution of benefits produced by the partnership between the different stakeholders involved (Strier & Shechter, 2016) has been a common concern in realising the full potential of any given UCP.

UCPs continue to be a growing area of academic interest (Sasson, 2018; Strier, 2014; Buys & Bursnall, 2007), and a great deal of research has focussed on UCPs, and the positive and negative impact of the different forms of these collaborations (Watson, 2003; Kellet & Goldstein, 1999; Waddock & Walsh, 1999). However, efforts to guide practice in this area is still limited (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). While researchers generally agree that successful UCPs can have tangible benefits, like gaining new insights and achieving pedagogical enhancements (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Kellet & Goldstein, 1999), they also acknowledge that an in-depth understanding of the practice of the two-way engagement is still limited. Specifically, engagements that can co-create knowledge and co-construct products and services for the academic communities (especially students) and the community partners. Furthermore, understanding the institutional contexts that enable or disable UCPs is crucial for its smooth functioning in the learning journey, and these perspectives have not been documented adequately. Preparing students in higher education to engage in their civic responsibility of including community members in their learning journey through UCP-based pedagogy is hence difficult.

This study illustrates and critically analyses a UCP model practised within the informal curriculum of an undergraduate residential college's (referred henceforth as "the College") living-and-learning programme (LLP) that strives to promote holistic learning through community engagement (CE). The College is based in a Southeast Asian university, and therefore the study also addresses the critique that knowledge on UCPs are primarily derived from Western countries (Mtawa et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2014). There is indeed a dearth of research that look into the nature and outcomes of UCPs in specific societies or regions in Asia (Mores et al., 2019). Moreover, the few studies that do look into UCPs in an Asian context, like campus town projects in China and Korea, are often published in their native languages (Mores et al., 2019). Therefore, this study can significantly contribute in building knowledge on the contextuality of UCP models practised in non-Western societies.

CE, embedded within the informal curriculum of the College, is used to encourage students in voluntary groups to initiate and engage in unique ways of interacting, learning and critically thinking about the various forms of marginalisation of different communities. This is achieved through the UCPs built with organisations that work with marginalised and vulnerable groups like migrant workers, elderly, youth-at-risk, and more. Borrowing from the existing conceptualisations that meaningful UCPs can effectively contribute to teaching and learning (Strier, 2014; Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Kellet & Goldstein, 1999), this study describes the meaning making processes of the agents involved in the UCPs (students and partner organisations) and how they build their own understanding of the construct. These understandings can potentially contribute to the broader

knowledge building of how universities can become valuable partners in the sustainable development of UCPs to promote learning.

The research questions of the study are:

- How do students and community partners in a university-community partnership (UCP) understand and make meaning of the collaborative practices of engagement, and what are the outcomes of such collaborations?
- How does the learning environment of the academic institution contribute to these understandings?

## **UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS (UCPs) AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (CE)**

UCPs are a process where different agents from the university and community, with diverse interests, come together to achieve a common objective through dialogue, interaction, and collaborative engagements (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). CE in the context of higher education, is an intended orientation towards “strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world” (Watson, 2003, p. 25). Thus, the concept of UCPs is embedded in the broader notion of CE. In recent times, CE through UCPs has been touted as a difference-maker to concerns of “socially detached and...irrelevant” academic institutions to social problems (Strier, 2011, p. 82). Furthermore, it has been gradually adopted as a form of two-way knowledge exchange by various institutes of higher learning across the world as a solution to the criticism of academia’s traditional model of one-way knowledge transfers (Mtawa et al., 2016). However, simply conceptualising the relationship between UCPs and CE, without proper practice models, is not enough in realising the benefits derived from these collaborations. Further, lack of a proper understanding of these collaborative relationships can lead to the perpetuation of fragmented links between higher education and communities. For instance, Boyer (1996) criticised institutes of higher learning for becoming, over time, more divorced from what he called the “scholarship of engagement”, and less involved in problems faced by the communities in which they are situated (p. 7).

Inculcation of civic responsibilities among students through formal and informal curricula involving meaningful engagement with outside communities are examples of universities’ efforts in accomplishing their educational functions (Alter, 2005). Studies have indicated that UCPs are strong forms of educational functions, and can provide positive pedagogical outcomes like enhanced quality of teaching, relevance of curriculum, student access to applied learning, and more (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). However, UCPs are not simple linear collaborative engagements with communities. According to Strier (2011), UCPs are fields of paradox. Through this paradoxical lens, collaborations are seen to be entangled with conflicts. For example, the “*top down* institutional presence versus *bottom up* grassroots orientation” (p. 158) paradox explains the need for a more egalitarian structure in UCPs. Meeting both needs is necessary for the success of a UCP but can simultaneously be a source of conflict too. Thus, both conflict and collaboration are seen as integral components of successful UCPs, instead of conflict being seen as counter to collaboration. Other significant paradoxes posited by Strier (2011), like “exposing unequal power relations versus strengthening trust” (p.159), and “transformational goals versus tangible achievements” (p.160) point towards the need for all parties in UCPs to learn to navigate the paradoxical demands for the long-term success of their UCPs.

Given these complexities and the importance of UCPs in promoting learning in higher education, this study attempts to understand the impact of community partnerships on university teaching and learning by systematically analysing the UCP model practised in the College under study.

## SETTING AND THE PEDAGOGICAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The College is one of seven residential colleges (RCs) within the university which were developed over a decade ago to provide diverse learning platforms for undergraduate students primarily in their formative first and second years of study. Through structured formal and informal interdisciplinary curricula, the RCs, guided by their respective ethos, focusses on student engagement and innovative pedagogy in order to achieve the following LLP outcomes: *develop* Critical Thinking; *cultivate* the Appreciation of Complexity; *hone* Effective Communication; and *demonstrate* Personal and Social Responsibility. These intended outcomes collectively support the university's [vision](#) of being “...a leading global university shaping the future” and its mission “...to educate, inspire, and transform”.

The College's ethos of active citizenship and CE is grounded in the belief that CE, with an emphasis on critical analysis, collaborative engagement, and social action, is a more powerful way than the service-learning model to achieve the LLP learning outcomes and prepare students for active citizenship. Service-learning has been widely promoted as a strategy to help higher education to prepare students in addressing widespread social problems and meet the needs of a rapidly changing social, economic and political societies (Boyer, 1990). However, though service-learning can enhance students' compassion and social consciousness (Eyler & Giles, 1999), it does not prepare them adequately for active citizenship (Colby & Ehrlich, 2000). Active citizenship requires the ability to reflect critically about social policies and conditions in addition to the moral commitments such as empathy, altruism, and concern for the common good (Boyte & Kari, 2000). It needs students to have the capacity to harness the knowledge and skills necessary to take thoughtful and concerted action to envision social change. Academic institutions enabling direct engagement with the community with a critical lens enables the development of active citizenship behaviour.

The College thus adopts the educational philosophy of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy affirms that education must be liberatory and transformative, rather than oppressive and oriented toward unquestioned maintenance of existing systems (Darder et al., 2003). It challenges existing social relations and structures of privilege (Noddings, 2009) by empowering students with the knowledge and skills to broaden their intellectual horizons, develop critical and creative thinking skills, and promote spoken and written articulacy. CE serves as a powerful form of critical pedagogy in the College as it helps students develop the capacity to think critically and analytically about existing structures of oppression and injustice by directly engaging with the different marginalised communities, and preparing them to be active agents of social change in their current and future lives.

## METHODS

A wider study, using a constructivist philosophical paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), was conducted to understand the meaning of CE as a pedagogical tool built in the College's informal curriculum. This study was adopted from that larger qualitative study and aimed to uncover how knowledge was constructed, not just accumulated, in understanding the College UCP model. By privileging the voices and experiences of the students and community partners, the study also sought to know how those understandings authentically came about and their implications for student learning.

### *The University-Community partnership model of the College*

The College, within its informal curriculum, guides and supports student-initiated-and-driven efforts to build relationships and work in partnership with community-based organisations to conduct various engagement programmes. The College intends for students to achieve the following learning outcomes: build awareness

about different marginalised communities; develop empathy; reach a deeper understanding of the strengths and challenges of communities; and acquire skills (like leadership, communication and team building).

The College students form groups based on their interests and passion for either a cause or a community, and they are given the autonomy to work with community partners [henceforth referred to as “Partner(s)”] based on varying levels of their commitment. For instance, groups of 10-20 students can engage in ad-hoc CE events, or more sustained modes of engagement through weekly sessions throughout an academic semester with an identified Partner. The College acts as the bridge that links the Partners with students. The student groups then liaise directly with the Partners and collaborate with them to create events/programmes. Further, the students, both males and females, being in an RC, belong to a variety of academic disciplines and different years of study. Thus, when they design, plan and implement the various engagement programmes with different communities, they incorporate their collective knowledge and experiences into the content and structure of these programmes.

Every CE activity in the College adheres to the following protocol as closely as possible:

- **Initiation and clarification.** Students first choose a community they are interested in and identify the form of marginalisation that community faces. Next, the College links them to a relevant Partner and they begin by constructing the description, objectives and target outcomes of a programme, in collaboration with the Partner. This is an iterative process because they need several modes of communication (e.g. visits, e-mail exchanges and discussions with the Partner) to design the best possible programme which could be an event or a series of events involving participation and engagement from both parties.
- **Implementation.** Executing the actual engagement according to the mutually agreed final plan of activities. Prior to the event, sometimes, there is also a pre-briefing for participants by the committee/programme leaders about the communities and the different forms of marginalisation associated.
- **Post-implementation.** They go through a de-brief session post-programme to discuss, share and document the advantages and disadvantages of the engagement, recording in detail the achievement and learning points, including challenges faced.

Throughout this process, the College students are mentored by the College Fellows (faculty members) and other staff (e.g. finance personnel for budgeting). This overall process, in its entirety, constitute the UCP model practiced in the College.

### ***Participants and procedures***

Data for this study is based on 31 individual in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions (FGDs) with the College students (see Appendices [A](#) and [B](#) for the sample interview and focus group questions respectively), and eight in-depth interviews with the Partners (see [Appendix C](#) for sample interview questions). Student participants were selected based on a stratified random sampling to ensure a correct representation of the gender, years of study and different academic disciplines of the College’s student population. A total of 28 male and 35 female students, aged 18 to 25 years participated in the study. Majority of these participants were in their first or second years of study, and primarily from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science, providing a fair representation of STEM vs non-STEM students.

Data collected from the students represented their CE experiences within the informal curriculum for their entire length of stay in the College. The interview and FGD questions were intended to better understand their perceptions of how CE should be operationalised, and whether this was effectively captured in the College UCP. For instance, responses to questions like “What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of these

community engagement activities/events? What aspects do you think went well and or need improvement?” helped the team gain a better understanding of the extent of students' involvement and commitment to the CE programmes and what it meant to them. It also highlighted how the College's learning environment could be better adjusted to capture the full capacity of the UCP through improvements in various aspects like student-partner relationships, communication with the Partners, and more.

The eight Partners who agreed to participate in the study were all mid-to-long-term-partners of the College. They are locally-based organisations and institutions that work with different communities addressing the form of marginalisation associated with that community (see Table 1). Interview questions like, “What would you say your most important take away from these participations and involvements in these activities/events of the College?” were intended to capture their perceptions of the outcomes of CE programmes that involved their collaboration and helped the team gain a better understanding of the factors that contributed to the success of the College UCP.

Table 1

*Study participants: Community partners*

<b><i>Community Partners (CP)</i></b>	<b><i>Communities served and area of work</i></b>
Partner 1	Specialised school that provides customised and practice-oriented curriculum to train students to enter vocational schools. College students work on leadership and mentor-mentee events.
Partner 2	Specialised school that integrates academic and vocational learning in its curriculum. College students work on leadership and mentor-mentee events.
Partner 3	Non-profit organisation which develops programmes for incarcerated individuals, their families, victims and the community to rehabilitate and restore. College students engage with children and parents of ex-offenders.
Partner 4	Drop-in centre for elderly living in subsidised housing. College students engage with elderly.
Partner 5	A non-profit organisation which renders subsidised healthcare to migrant workers. They also provide social assistance and counseling for injured migrants workers. College students engage with injured migrant workers.
Partner 6	A community club which provides municipal assistance and facilities to the residents. College students engage with elderly here.
Partner 7	An animal-assisted intervention centre that develops life skills in youth, people with special needs, families, and elderly with dementia. College students engage with the different communities here.
Partner 8	A company through their corporate social responsibility efforts works with communities in different countries in transforming discarded bars of hotel soap into brand new soaps for underprivileged children and families living in slum areas. College students engage alongside with the company.

A grounded theory coding method was used to develop the codebook (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1984), which helped in analysing the data and extracting the themes.

### ***Methodological triangulation and positionality of researchers***

Following Marshall and Rossman (2006)'s suggestion, triangulation has been used as a means of addressing transferability and dependability in this study. Specifically, the investigation used methodological triangulation by designing both in-depth interviews and FGDs from the same sample pool to obtain data for the study. Furthermore, achieving a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study were ensured by collecting data from both students and the Partners for the same moments in time. The data analysis also involved multiple members of the research team to establish inter-coder reliability and increase the dependability of the study findings.

Qualitative researchers acknowledge their own positionality rather than claiming scientific objectivity (Lichtman, 2006). In this study, for the researchers—comprising faculty members and a student (at the time of the study) with different years of experience in the College—the first challenge was to understand the learning process from the students' perspective rather than their own. Given their positions in the College, the researchers had a very easy relationship with study participants, a level of familiarity that made their roles feel both easy and odd. Finding comfortable researcher identities was the key. The researchers therefore constantly focussed on understanding the complex social actions and what the actions meant to those involved rather than what they meant to them (Erickson, 1986). Comparison of the interviews and FGD data allowed the researchers to check that participants' perspectives were accurately represented and that the qualitative criteria of validity were met.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Three main themes emerged from analyses of the in-depth interviews and FGDs with the study participants—comprising students and the Partners—and they are as follows:

1. Processes—equal investment, equal treatment
2. Impacts—mutual benefits
3. UCP Environment—respect and collaboration, and challenges

These themes are interrelated and illustrate the essence and complexity of students' and the Partners' perspectives on the College UCP model. The first two themes generated insights in understanding the first research question, that is, the meaning making processes of the collaborative practices of engagement and the outcomes of such collaborations. The third theme highlighted the learning environment of the academic institution that enabled or disabled the successful functioning of the College UCP and also helped answer the second research question.

### ***Processes—Equal investment, equal treatment***

The College UCP model constitutes a constructive iterative process where the Partners and students adopt an **egalitarian approach** in shaping the engagement events. The process begins at the initiation and clarification phase, where students have multiple meetings with the Partners to understand their needs. During this phase, a lot of negotiations take place through different communication modes, like meetings, emails, phone calls, and more. The Partners freely express their expectations and opinions that students take into consideration when writing event or programme proposals, which the Partners evaluate by providing comments and feedback. The quotes below from both student (IS) and Partner (IP) sharings substantiate this process:

So they... we had a meeting with them and they told us like what are the general skills that they hope we can teach them. So we worked on their suggestions, then we came out with our proposals, then we sent it to them, then they said was okay and we carried it out, yea. (IS0216A17A, ref 2)

Firstly, when you gave me a proposal, I look at it and I think that it is suitable for my seniors and I think it is something that my seniors will like it, I will run through the program. ...I... look through and see, and then I will screen through and think what kind of people who would really need this kind of activity. (IP0516A02, ref 1)

The students are given the autonomy to propose ideas and the Partners provide their expert input to ensure that the eventual plan is successful. This **collaborative process** is helpful because the Partners know the beneficiaries' needs and can share that knowledge for students to effectively plan engagement programmes. For instance, the vulnerabilities of the communities the students engaged with could potentially lead to complications, and the Partners' presence and assistance is helpful in enabling students to understand and act correctly to make the engagement activities a **safe learning space** for all involved. This is evident in the sharing by a Partner below:

And in the policy manual have certain guidelines where after they read through they will sign off for us. Ya. So is more for us uh non-disclosure agreement and as well as for the working students, the students that work with the children, uh on the guidelines that they are supposed to adhere to. So far we have no issues. ...Ya|so on every event we will have a briefing session one hour before, so that we can see and meet all the volunteers and brief them at the same time. (IP1116B05, ref 3)

Moreover, Partners being **open to different modes of communication** enhanced student's learning opportunities. This was best explained by a student through the sharing below:

One of the strengths that really made it easy for us is that...Open communication is very important and they were always very responsive to us, yea...Cause one of the teachers gave me phone number so it was easy to contact her even throughout the week on small matters like for example, we were going to teach them on how to tie a tie. So like on Thursday I could message her to remind her students to bring a tie the next day for Friday and then yea she will reply because sometimes like email is not the fastest way, yea.... (IS0216A17A, ref 2)

Further, the importance of **debriefs and reflections** as part of the post-implementation phase of the College UCP contributed to the success of the CE programmes. Student participants agreed that “good takeaways is they have this sharing, this post-activity debrief” (IS0216A16A, ref 2) which helps them “to step out of...comfort zone and interact with people from all walks of life” (IS0216A16A, ref 2), and they think “reflection at the end of the activity was very helpful in allowing us to have peer to peer sharing because we worked in different groups so...and every person's experience is very different, so I feel that reflections at the end of activities are very important” (IS0216A04, ref 1).

### ***Impact—Mutual benefit***

The College UCP model had impact on both students and the Partners, which made the partnership a mutually beneficial one. Although there is strong corroboration between students and the Partners on the beneficial nature of the partnership, there is little similarity between the benefits perceived by students and by the Partners. For the students, the benefits were mainly in the areas of personal growth, empathy building and

acquiring skills. For the Partners, the benefits were in having novel and enjoyable experiences, positive influences, acknowledgement of one's self, reprieve from stress, and self-esteem boosts for the community members they served.

### *Benefits for students*

The benefits gained by the students were weaved in their sharing as they talked about and discussed their process of perception building and reflections on their different experiences gained through the CE programmes. Participants highlighted the College's UCP model as the most significant enabling factor in fostering their holistic personal growth. In the FGDs, students mentioned that the different engagement programmes led to "exposure to different kinds of communities" (FG1, ref 1) and thereby **building deeper understanding** "of their needs, their strengths and their key characteristics" (FG1, ref 1) through **challenging their preconceived notions** of the different marginalised communities so that "there is less apprehension when approaching any kind of new community..." (FG1, ref 1). When students were asked about their perceptions of engaging with communities that were marginalised in some form, these were some of their responses:

always view elderly as like people that are not so creative and stuff, but I am so surprised that they can do like, things like art stuff which is more creative than normal students. (IS0216A18A, ref 1)

the youth at risk and also the one with the mental disabilities, ...So I guess it kind of removed some of the prejudices that I had against youth at risk. ...working with this youth at risk and say, two, three hours, really opened my eyes and to challenge my prejudice. (IS0216A04, ref1)

Analysing their sharing revealed that the students' personal growth occurred in a virtuous cycle wherein engaging with the communities led to **relationship building**, which in turn lowered their levels of apprehension and fear. The **conversations and direct interactions** with the communities helped them gain a better understanding of the diversity that characterises different communities as expressed in the following sharing:

...slowly through these interactions, and it was not something that I learnt through one session with them, so it's over a period of time when I realise how different each and every one of them are, ... and I guess you see certain things that like break your stereotypes of the community. (IS0216A17A, ref 2)

An important outcome of this virtuous cycle was **empathy building**, wherein students shared that "conversation really builds empathy" (FG1, Ref 4). Participants collectively agreed to this in one of the FGDs:

...I feel, it's not just exposure and understanding but this sense of empathy. And the ability to think from their perspective, how things are, or how much society would be better from the perspective of a migrant worker, for example, or a domestic helper who has experienced violence. I feel, yeah, like this whole sense of bridging two communities together and breaking down that wall of misunderstanding or fear. (FG1, ref 2)

Lastly, the College UCP model also helped students develop competencies in the areas of **organisation** where "there's a lot of liaising, talking in between the organisers and the partner communities" (IS0217B26A, ref 2),

and **communication** through “learning to negotiate” (IP0317B06, ref 2). Interestingly, these skills were not achieved singularly, but were connected to the overall CE experience and were acquired synergistically.

Looking at the impact of the College UCP for students as a whole, it is clear that there was an element of lifelong learning that took place as rightly stated by this FGD participant:

the value of community engagement comes from the times spend together, through whatever form of interaction you have with the different people. Even though at this point of time you might not gain anything out of it, but probably years down the road, when you let's say have your own domestic worker ... you are able to reflect on what you've done before... (FG1, ref 3)

### *Benefits for the Partners*

The benefits that the Partners accrued through the College UCP model were contextual to the community and the form of engagement. For instance, one of the benefits that the Partner who works with the elderly community emphasised was the **new and unique experiences**, which sometimes led to the creation of **good memories** for the beneficiaries. Some of these elderly beneficiaries do not have such memories due to various reasons, and thus the good memories created with the students helped in different reminiscing activities that the organisation had with them later, as expressed below:

This is creating the new memories...Many of them...—those with conflictual families for example, they don't have any memory of the past, nobody keeps photo albums, nobody is (mumbles), fire destroyed everything, water destroyed this, and they have nothing. So sometimes when we want them to bring photographs to do reminiscence and talk about their past, don't have. So now it's important for us to create...(IP0317B06, ref 5)

The Partners also shared that the new experiences were also **fun and enjoyable** for the beneficiaries, such that some of them looked forward to meeting the students again. Close analysis of the different transcripts and synthesising the patterns in the sharing revealed that though the benefits could be specific to the Partner's context, such themes could be generalised across other Partners too. For instance, the **positive influence** of the partnerships like the students' “youth energy gets rubbed off” (IP0317B06, ref 4) on the elderly, and being good role models for children and youth “who were quite inspired” (IP0317B08, ref 4), highlighted by the Partners were very insightful. The sharing indicated that the communities gained both tangible and intangible benefits through the College UCP like the sense of **acknowledgement** that beneficiaries felt from being heard and understood by others. The Partners explained that interacting with the students helped them feel this sense of acknowledgement and that society has not *forgotten* them, as expressed below:

The students learn, the migrant workers share their experiences and struggles...At least they get heard lah. Yeah, so I think many times nobody hears and nobody understands lah. So that is yeah getting heard. (IP0516A01, ref 5)

The sense of acknowledgement further created positive ripple effects by helping beneficiaries like the migrant workers gain a *reprieve* from the stress of their lives, as evidenced below:

...emotional well-being that I think is important for them lah...So all these events help take this stress and take their mind off the situation and gives reprieve for them while waiting lah. So it is helpful, that's why...to have these different events, different groups coming along to interact with them. (IP0516A01, ref 3)

For many groups of beneficiaries, the Partners shared that a pattern of **improvement in self-esteem** had been significantly noted. Specifically, for youth beneficiaries “who are really disengaged from the community”, this came from the students interacting with the youth, which made them feel noticed and created a “sense of pride and a sense of confidence” (IP0616A03, ref 1). Other times, it was the act of being able to teach something or having the chance to show their skills, like Chinese migrant workers who get to “show off their skills in making dumplings, and teaching students” (IP0516A01, ref 1).

### ***UCP Environment—Respect and collaboration and challenges***

Respect and collaboration are the lifeblood of the College UCP environment and they are achieved through the **support of the College community and the academic and social atmosphere** that the College LLP enables. Specifically, the College Fellows play a critical role in the partnership in terms of providing intellectual, emotional, and social support to the students and guiding them in building relationship with the Partners. The students unanimously agreed that they received aid and support from the College whenever they asked, as highlighted in the FGD below:

I think there are avenues to seek help. ... If you need like mental support there is College Support. If you need support in terms of, for example logistic support or administrative support, you go to College Office. (FG5, ref 1)

While this support may be perceived as being mainly instrumental, i.e. financial or other tangible forms of aid, interestingly, the data revealed that the majority of support was in the form of freedom given to students to do what they felt passionate about regarding a social issue/community. Thus, while the conventional idea of support was an active presence, students also appreciated a more **passive presence** that the College UCP enabled because as a student shared in the interview, they were “...given the freedom to try, and I think that is very valuable. ‘Cos if we didn’t try, we won’t learn all these things right?” (IS1016B09, ref 2).

The students perceived the College UCP as a **safe space to fail** and learn valuable lessons through the failure. It was evident that the College’s UCP environment enabled students to cultivate a lifelong learning mindset, stated by a student as “bigger than ourselves” (IS0317B28A, ref 10).

The sharings also reflected the **challenges** of implementing the College UCP model that surfaced through these engagement programmes. While continuous engagement with the Partners helped build relationships, they also planted doubts in students whether new knowledge were being generated in the repeated engagements, as evident in the sharing below:

I started this project with ..., we did that for a semester and it was great ... had a meaningful time engaging with children with special needs and they, you know, tried to break the boundaries they might have had, break stereotypes they might have had about special needs children. But the thing is, now it has been done, it's the third semester that it is being done. So to me, if I do attend ... for the third semester, is there anything new that we are doing? Are we creating a new experience ...? (FG1, ref 2)

Further, student participants also shared their concerns in the FGDs regarding the limitations of the College UCP in the area of expertise building beyond exposure through the different CE activities, as highlighted below:

Beyond exposure ... we do have conversations about understanding and stuff, then there's a question of like, there is no expert in this. It's all peer-run and everything, so even if someone was to bring up like a great point about a social issue, like what more can we do about it, that kind of thing. And where and how do we grow this kind of conversation. (FG1, ref 2)

Even with reflections and debriefs, there was a problem of balancing these among different groups of participants, “like those people who come one-off versus those who come for like twelve weeks” (FG1, ref 2). Further, the passive support was also criticised by some students through their sharing. For instance, the drawback of these forms of support occurred when there was lack of proper understanding of exercising autonomy in shaping CE programmes and seeking support. The College UCP emphasised giving autonomy to the students and support was contingent upon students asking for support. Thus, in many instances, when students were not fully aware of the different intellectual, social and technical support and guidance they needed in a new initiative, they ended up not seeking it and thereby failing to have a positive learning experience overall.

### ***Discussion***

In summary, the significant findings of this study highlight the power of the relationships built between the students and both the Partners and the College, and how that determines the success of the College UCP model. Interpersonal factors and relationship building have been found to be fundamental in the smooth functioning of UCPs (Miller & Hafner, 2008; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). In bringing a CE programme from ideation to execution, and generating a positive learning experience by the College UCP model, reveals the extent of relationship building within and between academic institutions and communities that these collaborations enable. The iterative process of the College UCP rightly supports the claim that UCP processes are non-linear and are “cyclical and iterative in nature” (Buys & Bursnall, 2007, p. 83). However, the non-linearity should not lead to a compromise on the egalitarian approach as seen in the College’s UCP model where contributions from all participants are equal and influences the model’s success (Strier, 2011). For instance, when the Partners provided their expert input, the College students respected that by taking the input into account while writing their proposals for the engagement programmes. Reciprocally, the College students were given the autonomy to propose ideas and the Partners trusted them and freely expressed their expectations and opinions in executing an activity. Throughout this egalitarian and open process, the College UCP model promoted communication between both parties and helped to enhance the overall learning experience for all. Further, the challenges of the College UCP also revealed that autonomy given to students must be critically evaluated to understand the full scope of learning through the CE programmes.

The evidence of mutual benefits gained by both students and the Partners in this study supports the larger literature on UCPs, where it emphasises that students receive “transformative service-learning experiences through the application of discipline-specific skills and interdisciplinary collaboration”, and “local communities gain through participatory processes resulting in design and planning concepts that supports sustainable development” (Laniga, Austin & McClure, 2011, p. 12). Important to note is that there is indication of a difference in benefits experienced by different stakeholders in UCPs, which is also reflected in our findings. However, through the meaning-making process of CE by students and the Partners, it is insightful to learn that there are strong agreements on the mutually beneficial nature of the partnership, though the actual benefits are contextual to the programme and the participants involved in any given CE activity.

Lastly, open communication promoted and practiced in the College UCP model “...helps clarify the direction of partnership and resolve issues.” (Buys & Bursnall, 2007, p. 84). Often, UCPs struggle with incorrect identification and selection of issues that need to be addressed in a community, due to decision-making that excludes the community’s input (Cooper et al., 2014). Getting the Partners’ input and collaborating with them in every aspect of the partnership strengthens the critical pedagogy approach to learning and ensures the success of the engagement programmes as has been evident in the College UCP model. The critical pedagogy of reflection and debrief exercises emphasised by the College UCP model further warrants lifelong learning for students.

### ***Limitations***

This study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the sample was selected based on snowball and stratified convenience sampling. However, care was taken to ensure the correct representation of key criteria of the sample, like gender, year of study and so on, for students who participated in the interviews and FGDs. Similar conditions applied for Partner selections to ensure a fair representation of a myriad of marginalised groups with whom the College engages. Secondly, the researchers’ positionality as College faculty members and student heavily informed the guiding questions for the interviews and FGDs. Thus, students’ responses at times may have been aligned more with the guided cues than their own perceptions. However, care had been taken to use appropriate probes during the interviews and FGDs to extract participants’ perceptions. Thirdly, the participants had to construct their experiences retrospectively when answering questions instead of recollecting soon after experiencing them. This could have affected the quality and authenticity of their answers.

Regardless of the limitations above, the findings of the study significantly contribute to the scholarship of understanding the ways in which UCPs are implemented by higher education institutions, and how students learn from those collaborations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Balancing positive gains in students’ learning and building relationships with community partners through the UCP is a delicate act. This systematic inquiry of the College UCP model in conducting CE programmes shows how this balance can be enacted. Understanding through the meaning making processes of both students and the Partners revealed that despite the challenges, promoting relationship building with partners through communication and collaboration as the College UCP model’s primary goal determines the extent of learning that takes place through the engagement programmes. The partnerships are successful because the College’s LLP environment is invested in relationship building and reciprocal learning. There is genuine care, which is not just transactional and transformational, but also mutual and relational, and that helps the College’s UCP to evolve and become more robust. Furthermore, this kind of model of UCPs where the focus is alignment (i.e. all stakeholders are aligned in terms of expectations from the partnership and their goals of the partnership) and learning (i.e. stakeholders perceive the partnership as more important than actual outcomes, because there is no fixed standard as to what the outcomes should be) can result into forms of collaborations that can effectively address social change. The quote below from one of the Partners rightly testifies to this insight:

Why I think we can hold a partnership for so many years is obviously ... they are, not just polite you know, ... It’s a desire to do this well, and want to do it well together. So coordinating with us, and keeping that word, I mean the integrity thing I think for that age group, or what you’re training them to be. ... And I think by doing community work of any kind, with any population group offers this to the young people. Such as planning activities and all that. I think making them think “Why?” and us explaining to them why need to try to do this with our seniors. ... I think the collaboration is important factor. (IP0317B06, ref 3)

The College UCP model provided the framework, grounded in respect and reciprocal learning, to create intellectual and social opportunities through CE that aligned with the College’s belief of the effective way of enabling the holistic growth of students within higher education settings. Relationship building and critically reflecting on the engagement with marginalised communities and learning to interact appropriately with community partners are the most significant outcomes of the College UCP model. It contributes towards shaping students for success in their professional and personal lives in the larger society.

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## **ENDNOTE**

1. STEM refers to “Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics” subjects.

## **APPENDIX A. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

## **APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

## **APPENDIX C. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

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