

## **Exploring the learning in service learning - an investigation into the impact of service learning on students, communities and educators at the National University of Ireland Galway**

Margaret Mc Grath, Ruth Mc Menamin

*National University of Ireland, Galway, Galway, Ireland*

### **Background**

In 2001 the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI, Galway) launched the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI). This project planned to promote civic engagement across the institution and strengthen links with local, national and international communities. With the support of seed funding from CKI the disciplines of Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language Therapy integrated Service Learning (SL) into their undergraduate curricula. SL has been associated with enhanced academic performance, increased civic awareness and improved personal and professional skills (Eyler & Giles 1999; Claus & Michel 2000).

Evaluation of our SL modules since 2005/6 indicates that the benefits to students, educators and community partners are consistent with findings in the literature (McMenamin & Mc Grath 2007; 2008) However given the significant cultural differences in approaches to both service and education in Ireland and the United States further investigation of the impacts of SL is necessary.

### **Methodology**

Interviews and focus groups were used to explore the impacts of SL from the perspective of key stakeholders - students (n=24), academic staff (n=8) community partners (n=10). Topic guides were based on a systematic review of the literature.

### **Results**

Preliminary findings indicate that participation in SL modules by undergraduate Healthcare students resulted in (i) improved communication skills (ii) development of personal and professional skills (iii) a link between theory and practice (iv) enhanced student motivation in relation to learning. Interestingly participants described a limited impact on their sense of civic responsibility. The discourse of SL and civic engagement does not appear to readily translate to an Irish context.

### **Conclusions**

Significant cultural differences in approaches to both service and education appear to influence the impact of SL. Further research is needed in a European context.

### **Contributions to practice in occupational therapy**

**Service learning appears to enhance students personal and professional skills**

**Service learning provides opportunities for knowledge sharing between universities and communities**

**Service learning did not appear to impact upon civic awareness in this cohort of students**