

**International Conference on
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Abstract for Day 1

Grooming Future Service Leaders from Lingnan University through Service Learning Summer Practicums in NGOs and Social Enterprises

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We conducted a formative evaluation study of a summer practicum programme for undergraduates, organized by Lingnan University and hosted by partner organizations that were predominantly NGOs or social enterprises. The programme aimed to provide opportunities for students to practice service leadership while working full-time on a ‘mini mission’, involving responsibility for relatively self-directed and unprestructured tasks to further the broader mission of the respective host organizations. Each partner organization appointed at least one representative (POR) to serve as a co-educator. We held three half-day plenary meetings with the students; the first introduced ten service leadership attributes and took place before the practicums began; the second was a mid-way review; the third was a round-up review. Students submitted fortnightly self-assessment and organizational analysis diaries, and a final reflective learning report. PORs submitted summative appraisal reports.

During the 2014 run of the programme, we collected qualitative data through participant observation during the review meetings, documentary analysis, individual interviews with all 16 participating students, and interviews with PORs from all 10 host sites. We identified three key factors that governed the success or otherwise of the practicums as vehicles for service leadership development.

Factor One: Meaningful and sufficiently challenging job assignments. In successful practicums, students shouldered responsibility for planning, developing, organizing and implementing activities that were of significant scale, entailed face to face service encounters, and had discernable impact. In less successful practicums, students spent more time on routine clerical duties such as inputting data, or on technical tasks such as video production or leaflet design.

Factor Two: Developmentally-ready students. Some students contributed to successful practicums by voicing ideas, initiating substantial proposals, facing up to challenges by stepping out of their own ‘comfort zone’, and maintaining a positive outlook in the face of difficulty. Less-successful students waited passively for instructions, lacked confidence and self-direction, and shied away from exposure.

Factor Three: Supportive, available PORs. Some PORs contributed to successful practicums by serving as co-educators, ensuring that students had opportunities to pursue meaningful mini-missions, and providing coaching, feedback and encouragement. Other PORs detracted from successful practicums by being unavailable, or by assigning routine tasks out of expediency.

It appeared that these three key factors were to some degree ‘mutually bootstrapping’. For example, with a supportive POR, initially reticent students could become more developmentally-ready to step outside their comfort zone. Alternatively, a developmentally-ready student could inspire an initially less-supportive POR to become more engaged as a co-educator, and to smooth the way for more meaningful assignments. However, there also were cases of ‘downward spiralling’, where the relative absence of two key factors led to general

decline in practicum effectiveness. For example, a less developmentally-ready student without a supportive POR withdrew into the 'comfort zone' and declined a major opportunity to undertake a challenging task.

Our main contributions are to highlight the value of service leadership practicum experiences as distinctive forms of community based, structured development for students, and to provide a road map for their setting-up and implementation.

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