

African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance (AJPHERD) Supplement 1:1 (October), 2014, pp. 69-83.

Critical success factors for institutionalising service-learning in a nursing programme at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

Scholars in the fields of community engagement contend that the service-learning (SL) policy implementation in higher education is more likely to be successful when there is a strong institutional commitment and the policy implementation is well conceptualised. Research indicates that most higher education institutions in South Africa failed to operationalise the national SL policy, which mandates the incorporation of social responsiveness in their academic programmes. This quantitative study investigated whether a university in the Western Cape had created an enabling environment for a school of nursing to institutionalise service learning in the nursing programme. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using total sampling (n=48) to collect data on the operationalisation of the critical success factors and the stage of SL institutionalisation for each of Furco's five dimensions. Furco's self-assessment tool for service-learning institutionalisation was modified. A descriptive analysis was done using SPSS version 19. The results indicated that all of the success factors were present in the institutional structures and policies. However, the institution is perceived to be performing best in the dimensions of student support, philosophy and mission, and institutional support for SL. It can thus be concluded that the institution has created an enabling environment for mainstreaming SL in the nursing programmes.

Keywords: Mainstreaming service learning; nursing education in higher education, service-learning institutionalization.

How to cite this article:

Julie, H. & Adejumo, O. (2014). Critical success factors for institutionalising service-learning in a nursing programme at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, October (Supplement 1:1), 69-83.

Introduction

The concept service-learning (SL) was introduced in South African higher education when the Joint Education Trust (JET) investigated the conceptualisation and potential role of SL at higher education institutions (HEIs) in 1997–1998 (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slammat, 2008). According to these authors the interest in SL was closely associated with the transformation agenda of the new democratic government. The government was exploring ways to translate the South African constitutional values into educational discourses (Department of Education, 1997). Hence, the Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) research project was established in 1999 in response to a call of the White Paper on Education (1997) for

“feasibility studies and pilot programmes which explore the potential of community service in higher education” (Lazarus et al., 2008). The Department of Education also commissioned the development of an SL policy framework for HEIs (HEQC, 2006a). The quality assurance of SL curricula is thus regulated legislatively at national level (HEQC, 2004a, 2004c), whereas the establishment of a conducive environment for the institutionalisation of SL rests with the respective HEIs (HEQC, 2006b). However, critical self-analysis and open discourse about the status quo at HEIs (Smith-Tolken & Williams, 2011) indicated that SL was not operationalised in the institutional plans of most of these institutions in South Africa (Lazarus, 2007).

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) was commended for the scope of its community engagement activities in its Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, Faculty of Education and Library Science. However, the HEQC recommended that UWC differentiate between the different types of community engagement by stipulating clear criteria for each of the types (CHE, 2007). In other words, the university needs to provide clear operational guidelines to effectively implement its SL strategy in the academic programmes. The Institutional Operational Plan 2010-2014 of this university was developed subsequent to the HEQC audit, and used to benchmark the progress made in policy formulation since the recommendation in 2008. This strategic document identifies SL as an operationalised form of community engagement (UWC, 2009).

The HEQC further stipulates that both structural and programme requirements are essential to advance and sustain SL policy, staff issues and recognition policy (HEQC, 2006a). The procedural elements of the above should be specified in the organisation’s mission statement and other central policy documents to ensure that such documents articulate with the SL policies of the HEI (HEQC, 2006a). The researcher argued that the gap identified by the HEQC (CHE, 2008), namely the operationalisation of SL at UWC, is crucial for mainstreaming SL in the nursing programmes. In other words, are the necessary structures in place, which were identified by SL scholars as critical success factors for SL institutionalisation (Furco, 2002; HEQC/JET Education Services South Africa, 2006a, 2006b)?

Furco’s *Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education* (2002) is the best-known developed self-assessment rubric for higher education. The instrument measures the current level of SL institutionalisation according to three stages against critical success factors for SL institutionalisation across five dimensions.

This study investigated to what extent the respondents perceived the HEQC’s SL guidelines to be implemented at UWC using Furco’s (2002) SL

institutionalisation stages. Specifically, the study determines if the critical success factors for SL institutionalisation summarised by Furco's five dimensions were embedded in UWC's policy documents. The second objective was to classify SL institutionalisation at UWC according to the developmental stages of Furco (2002).

The critical success factors for SL institutionalisation are specified in the five dimensions namely, philosophy and mission of SL; academic support for and involvement in SL; student support for and involvement in SL; community participation and partnerships; and institutional support for SL. These dimensions are further divided into sub-components as in Table 1. These dimensions are graded according to three stages to indicate at which level of SL institutionalisation the HEI is operating. At stage 1, the critical mass building stage, the HEI is primarily focused on building a critical mass of SL scholars and developing SL activities across the campus. During stage 2, the quality building stage, institutional activities are focused on enhancing the quality of rather than upscaling the scope of SL programmes. Stage 3 is focused on sustaining SL by institutionalising SL in the core functions and operations of the HEI.

Methodology

A descriptive design (Burns & Grove, 2007) was used to explore and describe whether the factors for successful SL institutionalisation were embedded in the institutional structures of UWC.

The study was conducted during May and June 2011 at the school of nursing, because it is currently the largest residential nursing school in an HEI in South Africa (Jeggels, Traut & Africa, 2013). The school has positioned itself as an innovative school of nursing and midwifery in the county, and advocates a community-, problem- and competency-based curriculum (UWC, 2013).

The accessible population included 25 nurse academics, 27 clinical nurse supervisors and 7 senior academic officers in the employment of the school of nursing during the data collection phase. Therefore the total population was used (Terre Blanche, Durham & Painter, 2006).

Furco's (2002) *Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education* was used as the data collection tool to determine the status of SL institutionalisation at UWC. No permission was sought as the instrument is freely available from the public domain and the author states that "there is no one right way to use the rubric ... the dimensions and components of the rubric should be adapted to meet the needs of the campus" (Furco, 2002). His rubric was used to develop the structured questionnaire and adapted based on feedback received on face and content validity from experts. The responses for

the five dimensions were converted to a Likert scale (1–3) to correspond with the three stages of Furco’s rubric.

The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient yielded was 0.89, indicating a high internal consistency (Brink, van der Walt & Van Rensburg, 2008). The face and content validity of the questionnaire were determined by pretesting and modified based on feedback received from four academics, a statistician and the study mentor regarding clarity and conceptualisation. All questions were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 19) to provide descriptive statistics. The prescribed ethical procedures of UWC were followed and this study received ethical clearance from the Senate Ethics Committee, project registration number 11/1/37.

Results

The key in Table 1 was used to interpret the progression of SL institutionalisation to phases 2 and 3 for the different dimensions and their sub-components.

Table 1: Key for staging the Furco scores of the dimensions

Dimensions	Stage 1 Critical mass building	Stage 2 Quality building	Stage 3 Sustained institutionalisation
Dimension 1 Philosophy and mission	Operational level according to Furco scores: 0 – 33.3%: Entry level	Institutional activities for the sub-categories: 0 – 11.1%: None evident	
Dimension 2 Academic support	33.4 – 66.6%: Transitioning to the next stage	11.2 – 22.2%: Noteworthy	22.3 – 33.3%: Substantial
Dimension 3 Student support	66.7 – 100 %: Established operational stage		
Dimension 4 Community participation			
Dimension 5 Institutional support			

Philosophy and mission of SL (Dimension 1)

The disaggregated data in Table 2 provide a detailed overview of the level of SL institutionalisation for this specific dimension.

Table 2: SLinstitutionalisation stage for the philosophy and mission statement of SL

Components	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Critical mass building No. %	Quality building No. %	Sustained institutionalisation No. %
Definition of SL	32 66.0	12 25.0	4 8.3
Strategy for SL	18 38.3	22 46.8	7 14.6
Alignment with institutional mission	36 75.0	5 10.4	7 14.6
Alignment with educational reform efforts	23 67.6	7 20.6	4 11.8

The data indicate that the university is performing best in strategy for SL because the quality building activities (22; 46.8%) surpassed the critical mass building endeavours (18; 38.3%) and it has even moved to stage 3 by receiving a score of 7 (14.9%) for sustained institutionalisation. This trend was also evident in UWC’s endeavours to align SL with the educational reform efforts in strategic policy documents, as indicated by the score of 7 (20.6%) for stage 2. An interesting finding is that institutional activity for sustained institutionalisation was noted (7; 14.6%) for alignment with institutional mission, even though UWC has not yet progressed to stage 2 according to Table 2.

Academic support for and involvement in SL (Dimension 2)

Table 3 indicates that SL institutionalisation for academic support at UWC was operating at stage 1, except for the sub-component academic leadership which has advanced to stage 2 by scoring 18 (37.5%).

Table 3: Academic support and involvement in SL (n=48)

Components	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Critical mass building No. %	Quality building No. %	Sustained institutionalisation No. %
Academic knowledge and awareness of SL	40 83.7	6 12.5	2 4.2
Academic involvement and support	39 81.3	6 12.5	3 6.3
Academic leadership	25 52.1	18 37.5	5 10.4
Academic incentives and rewards	40 83.3	6 12.5	2 4.2

Student support for and involvement in SL (Dimension 3)

The university was performing best in this dimension and has moved to the quality-building stage, with student awareness and student opportunities each receiving scores of 22 (45.8%) stage 2.

Table 4: Stage of SL institutionalisation for student support (n=48)

Components	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Critical mass	Quality building	Sustained institutionalisation
	No. %	No. %	No. %
Student awareness	23 47.9	22 45.8	3 6.3
Student opportunities	22 45.8	22 45.8	4 8.3
Student leadership	31 64.6	13 27.1	4 8.3
Student incentives and rewards	32 66.7	13 27.1	3 6.3

This trend towards building quality in this dimension was also reflected to a lesser degree for the other two sub-components, namely student leadership and student incentives and reward. The findings indicate that this dimension was the most developed critical success factor for SL institutionalisation at UWC, although there was no evident institutional activity to sustain it.

Community participation and partnerships (Dimension 4)

Table 5 indicates that UWC was transitioning from stage 1 to stage 2 for community partner awareness and mutual understanding. These same components have even transitioned to stage 3. However, the institution should give more opportunity for the community partner voice and leadership which was operating at stage 1.

Table 5: Stage of SL institutionalisation for community participation and partnerships (n=48)

Components	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Critical mass building	Quality building	Sustained institutionalisation
	No. %	No. %	No. %
Community partner awareness	31 64.6	11 22.9	6 12.5
Mutual understanding	24 50.0	14 29.2	10 20.8
Community partner voice and leadership	38 79.2	7 14.6	3 6.3

Institutional support for SL (Dimension 5)

The Furco scores in Table 6 indicated that most components were operating at stage 1. The exceptions are the coordinating structure (16 or 33.3%), policy making structure (16 or 33.3%), and staffing (11 or 22.9%) which obtained high scores for stage 2. The policy making structure has even transitioned to sustained institutionalisation (6 or 12.5%).

Table 6 indicates that UWC was predominantly operating at stage 1, the beginning level of SL institutionalisation for the components of funding, administrative support and departmental support, and evaluation and assessment. The exceptions were the coordinating, policy structures and staffing, which had transitioned to stage 2.

Table 6: Stage of SL institutionalization for institutional support (n=48)

Component	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Critical Mass No. %	Quality building No. %	Sustained institutionalisation No. %
Coordinating structure	27 56.3	16 33.3	5 10.4
Policy making structure	26 54.2	16 33.3	6 12.5
Staffing	35 72.9	11 22.9	2 4.2
Funding	40 83.3	18 16.7	0
Administrative support	37 77.1	8 16.7	3 6.3
Departmental support	35 72.9	8 16.7	5 10.4
Evaluation and assessment	37 77.1	9 18.8	2 4.2

Discussion

Scholars argue that SL institutionalisation is a prerequisite for promoting a scholarship of engagement in HEIs (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2002). The Furco scores indicated whether the factors required for SL institutionalisation were present in the structures of UWC. These success factors correspond with the SL quality indicators of the input, process and output stages proposed for evaluating SL institutionalisation in South African HEIs (HEQC, 2006b).

Philosophy and mission statement

The findings in Table 2 indicated that this dimension was rated as the second most developed SL institutional dimension at UWC. The strategy for SL and alignment with educational reform efforts are leading and have actually progressed to the sustaining stage. SL thus complements many aspects of UWC’s mission statement, which frames UWC as an engaged institution that advocates SL teaching methodology as a corporate strategy (Frantz, Rhoda & De Jongh, 2013; UWC 2009). This institutional claim was also externally validated in the form of the commendation that UWC received from the HEQC regarding the scope of community engagement activities (CHE, 2008). Nonetheless, these noteworthy institutional activities were reportedly peripheral and not fully

integrated into the core business of the university as nuanced by HEQC's recommendation (CHE, 2008:19) which relates to quality indicator 2.3 of institutional input which states: "*The institution's commitment to service learning is reflected in its strategic planning, with clearly defined procedures, time frames, responsibilities, reporting and communication arrangements*" (HEQC, 2006b).

The findings also concurred that the SL definition in the university's mission statement needs to be operationalised, because although a draft SL definition was formulated interpretations of the definition by campus constituencies were inconsistent according to the Furco score for the definition of SL in Table 2. This operational concern has been noted previously by UWC-based SL champions and the institutional audit report of UWC (Daniels & Adonis, 2011; CHE, 2008). These concerns confirm the national contention that the lag in implementation of the SL policy guidelines in South Africa could be ascribed to the conceptual confusion prevalent in many South African HEIs (Bender, 2008; Hall, 2010). It is therefore imperative that UWC takes cognizance of criterion 1.4 of institutional input that specifies that the mission of the HEI should give SL "due recognition" and promote SL as a "scholarly activity (e.g. in terms of a scholarship of engagement)" (HEQC, 2006b).

A clearly defined SL definition that differentiates between the different types of community engagement at institutional policy level needs to be developed, especially as the current national thinking is towards a contextually defined SL definition (Hall, 2010). These conceptual issues were also linked to UWC's strategy for SL. The findings reflected that specific SL goals needed to be formulated and operationalised in a strategic plan in order to provide implementation guidelines at the operational level of academic programmes. This concern was also voiced previously by SL experts at institutional and national level (CHE, 2008). It can be concluded that existence of a draft definition of SL and the continued SL discourse at institutional level are evidence that UWC is striving to incorporate SL into its educational reform endeavours. Cognizance is also taken that interpretation of these SL policy statements is influenced by the mind maps of individuals (Choi & Ruona, 2011).

Academic support for and involvement in SL

The overall Furco score for academic support was established at stage 1. Academic leadership was the outlier for this dimension, because this component was perceived to be operating at stage 2 (quality building). The score for academic knowledge and awareness of SL indicates that very few members know how SL is differentiated from other forms of community engagement activities. This finding warrants concern, especially since the draft SL definition was available for at least a decade (Daniels & Adonis, 2003) and the university is

professing SL as a teaching methodology (UWC, 2009). It is therefore imperative that a school of nursing initiate or intensify discourses about how UWC's 'engaged institution' brief can be translated at the operational level of the school's academic programmes. This seems to be a feasible strategy, as the findings in Table 3 indicate that only a few influential academics at UWC provide academic leadership for SL. An additional reason was that such a SL discourse could develop institutionalised experiences and shared assumptions in a school, regarded as foundational requirements for the organisational change associated with SL institutionalisation (Blackman & Henderson, 2005).

UWC should therefore pay close attention to the overall institutional support that it provides to develop SL scholarship among academics, because the findings in Table 6 identified this aspect as a gap in SL institutionalisation. UWC should therefore also pay attention to criteria 7 and 18 of institutional audits (HEQC, 2004a) and indicator 4 of institutional input that mandates "adequate resource allocation for delivering quality service-learning as part of the institution's core function" (HEQC, 2006b).

Student support and community involvement in SL

UWC was excelling in these two dimensions, in that the institution was focused on both recruitment and quality-building activities according to the findings in Tables 4 and 5. This means that UWC has made progress in terms of raising awareness among its community partners about UWC's community developmental goals through student SL projects (Furco, 2002; HEQC, 2006b). These findings are congruent with UWC's ethos of being an engaged institution (UWC, 2009). However, in spite of UWC's pursuit of "mutual understanding and reciprocity" (Furco, 2002), disparity was identified (Table 5) in terms of providing opportunities for the community voice and leadership, as stated in indicator 5 for institutional input (HEQC, 2006b). This could, however, be due to the stage of partnership development at institutional level.

The formation phase of partnership development is characterised by activities related to establishing working groups comprising key stakeholder representatives and funding issues (HEQC, 2006a). The main focus of the implementation stage of partnership development is formulation of intervention plans based on outcomes of the collaboratively defined needs assessment. Formalisation of the expectations, roles and procedures is regarded as crucial for the success of this stage (HEQC, 2006a). The last stage, the maintenance stage, is concerned with monitoring of the intervention plans, and hence requires the necessary infrastructure for feedback, skill development, etc. Issues of equity in terms of power and products are key features of the outcome phase of partnership development (HEQC, 2006a). The findings thus suggest that most of

UWC's community activities seem to reflect the implementation phase of community development.

Institutional support for SL

The HEQC states that both structural and programme requirements are essential to “advance and sustain service-learning policy, staff issues and recognition policy” (HEQC, 2006a:140). This dimension requires that the university should ring-fence substantial resources, support, and workforce towards the SL institutionalisation process (Furco, 2002). This dimension was rated as the third most developed SL institutionalisation success factor at UWC. Table 6 indicates that the coordinating structure and policy making structure have transitioned to stage 2, but that other aspects like funding, administrative support, departmental support and evaluation and assessment need institutional attention.

It can therefore be concluded that the respondents regard UWC as an engaged institution and concur that “engagement is integral in the ethos of UWC” (UWC, 2009) in terms of its policy structure. Recognition is also given to the coordinating structure, the Community Engagement Unit (CEU) that was established with the sole purpose of advancing and institutionalising SL on campus. However, the services were perceived to be serving only a limited constituency. This finding is corroborated by Adonis (2005), who stated that SL at UWC has since the inception of the CEU been selective in terms of capacity building for SL module implementation. The Audit Report also identified that UWC had pockets of SL and community engagement activities (CHE, 2008).

In terms of institutional process quality indicators, the findings reflect that SL is managed, facilitated and coordinated partially according to quality indicator 6.1. In terms of providing the necessary support for the development and implementation of SL, UWC is complying with criteria 7.1 and 7.3 (HEQC, 2006b). The factors that advanced SL at UWC included institutional commitment and support from the Deputy Vice Chancellor, funding of human resources, office space and scholarship development activities (Adonis, 2005). The continuous institutional commitment to SL scholarship was demonstrated recently when the Deputy Vice Chancellor's office financed 10 academics from a school of nursing to complete an accredited short course on SL and community engagement. The university has also embarked on building an effective culture of change (UWC, 2009) in that community engagement and hence SL is incorporated in the rules for academic promotions. Hence the university is relatively advanced in terms of the good practice institutional process indicators (HEQC, 2006b).

However, the findings indicate that UWC should pay attention to the funding of SL activities, because although several departments offer SL opportunities and

modules, these are not primarily supported by institutional funds (Table 6). The implication is that academics have to secure external funding, which are typically short-term and thus impacts on the sustainability of SL projects and SL scholarship. Also, an organised, campus-wide strategy to account for the number and quality of SL activities was lacking. Hence a SL quality monitoring and evaluation system specifying the institutional output and impact indicators was lacking (HEQC, 2006b).

Benchmarking against institutional quality indicators

The Furco scores for all five dimensions indicated that UWC has created an enabling environment for successful SL institutionalisation (Furco, 2002; HEQC, 2006b). UWC has also moved to the quality building stage for dimension 3 (student support), dimension 1 (philosophy and mission) and dimension 5 (institutional support). However, the findings also suggested that UWC was not fully compliant in terms of the two national policy documents regulating SL institutionalisation: *Criteria for Institutional Audits* (HEQC, 2004a) and the *A Good Practice Guide and Self-evaluation Instruments for Managing the Quality of Service-Learning* (HEQC, 2006b). Therefore the major findings were benchmarked against the evaluative stages of the core functions of HEIs, as discussed below (HEQC 2006b).

Institutional input indicators

The institutional input indicators consist of five indicators and 17 sub items/quality criteria. Indicator 1 states that *the* “institution’s mission, purpose and goals with regard to service-learning are indicative of its responsiveness to the local, national and international context” (HEQC, 2006b). The findings indicate that UWC was fully complying with indicator 1 of the institutional input indicators for development of SL, in that the mission statement and values of UWC reflect contextual responsiveness ranging from local to international communities (UWC, 2009). UWC was partially compliant in terms of indicator 2 with regard to its commitment to SL, as reflected in “policies, procedures and strategic planning” (HEQC, 2006b) as evidenced in its commitment to SL and attempts to integrate SL in other UWC policies. However, criteria 2.3 and 2.4 require institutional attention, in that strategic plans need to be converted into “clearly defined procedures, time frames, reporting and communication arrangements” and “effective mechanisms for managing the quality of SL” (HEQC, 2006b).

With regard to indicator 3, which refers to institutional leadership, management and organisational structures, the conclusion is that UWC has ‘pockets of excellence’, as was alluded to earlier. The scale of the accountability structures for SL is not ‘campus wide’ as specified. Criterion 3.3 should be strengthened so

that “institution-wide structures take responsibility for the planning, implementation and review of service-learning” (HEQC, 2006b). The institution was also not fully compliant with regard to indicators 4 and 5 of the institutional input criteria for SL institutionalisation. Indicator 4 refers to “adequate resource allocation for delivering service-learning as part of the institution’s core functions” (HEQC, 2006b). Indicator 5 requires that UWC should have designated structures and processes to establish regional collaborative partnerships, clear guidelines for partnership agreements with SL partners and national networking with HEIs engaged in SL (HEQC, 2006b). However, cognizance is taken that these structures were present – even if not yet campus-wide; for example, these are available for international collaboration but to a lesser degree for the other levels.

Institutional process indicators

The institutional process has four indicators divided into 12 quality criteria. Indicator 6 deals with the effective management, facilitation and coordination of SL at institutional level. Reciprocity and effective coordination between UWC and stakeholders was implied by the Furco scores. However, SL is not currently accommodated in UWC’s management information system as specified in criterion 6.2 (HEQC, 2006b). Indicator 7 refers to institutional support that should be adequate to support SL development and implementation. The findings reported insufficient institutional support for SL capacity building and SL implementation, despite awareness of the CEU on campus.

All four criteria of indicator 7 were identified as problematic, i.e. SL capacity building activities; SL development opportunities for staff, students and SL partners; and institutional recognition for excellence and innovation (HEQC, 2006b). However, the findings indicate that UWC has made progress in criterion 8.2 of indicator 8 which states that SL is “supported as a vehicle for academic transformation in the direction of more contextualized curricula and learning materials towards South Africa and Africa” (HEQC, 2006b). However, closer attention should be paid to criterion 8.1 in terms of providing sufficient continuous support to “*promote good practice in teaching and learning through the pedagogy of service-learning*”, and 8.3 regarding the role of community partner input and the use of appropriate assessment methods for SL (HEQC, 2006b).

Indicator 9 deals with institutional support for SL-related research. Criteria 9.1 identifies staff members and postgraduate students in this regard; 9.2 focuses on the marking of SL research findings, while 9.3 deals with creation of collaborative research opportunities across disciplines, institutions and nationalities (HEQC, 2006b). This indicator needs strengthening in terms of

coordinating the calls for teaching and learning research projects across all faculties of the university.

Institutional output and impact indicators

However, indicators 10 and 11 that deal with monitoring and evaluative mechanisms to measure the institutional output and impact of SL, as well as the regular review of SL policy as a coordinated event, were reported to predominantly be absent on campus. A plausible explanation is that these activities become focal points primarily during stages 2 and 3 of the SL institutionalisation development process of HEIs.

This exploratory baseline survey was confined to one school in one of the faculties of the university, and should be extended to include the other faculties and departments of UWC.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that UWC has created an enabling environment to institutionalise SL in the nursing programmes, because all the success factors for SL institutionalisation were embedded in the policy and organisational structures of UWC. UWC policy should formulate clear guidelines to promote good practice in teaching and learning through SL pedagogy, and monitor and evaluate all SL activities on campus.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the National Research Foundation for providing funding for this study.

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