

# International service learning: Insights from the voices of host organisations

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**Dates:**

Received: 17 Feb. 2022

Accepted: 24 May 2022

Published: 30 Nov. 2022

**How to cite this article:**

Mansvelt N. International service learning: Insights from the voices of host organisations. *J transdiscipl res S Afr.* 2022;18(1), a1208.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v18i1.1208>

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Service learning is promoted by higher education institutions as a pedagogy that contributes to social justice ideals by providing opportunities for students and community members to engage and cooperate with one another in ways that are mutually beneficial. In international service learning programmes, the interaction typically takes place between students from developed countries who visit and provide assistance to communities in developing countries and in so doing contribute to social justice ideals. Whilst students' reflections have been documented expansively, the views and experiences of community members have received less attention, casting a shadow over the claim to social justice. This article explores the perceptions and experiences of staff from organisations who have hosted international students over a number of years. Adopting a qualitative approach and an exploratory design, independent field workers interviewed staff from host organisations. The participants shared uncertainty about students' motives, observations of students' emotional responses, interpretations related to race and views about the perceived benefits and challenges of service learning. The findings indicate the value of community voices and reflection opportunities and ways in which the feedback could enhance programme processes, practices and outcomes. Recommendations in relation to the practice of international service learning and further research are included.

**Transdisciplinary Contribution:** This article contributes to the body of emerging literature that captures the perspective of host organisations.

**Keywords:** international service learning; host organisations; reflection; higher education; South Africa.

## Introduction

Higher education institutions promote service learning as a pedagogy that contributes to social justice ideals by providing opportunities for students and community members to engage and cooperate with one another in ways that are mutually beneficial.<sup>1</sup> In international service learning programmes, the interaction typically takes place between students from developed countries who visit and provide assistance to communities in developing countries and in so doing contribute to social justice ideals. To ensure that learning takes place, students are guided to reflect on their experiences of working with community members.<sup>2</sup> Such experiences have been documented expansively.<sup>2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> However, the views and experiences of community members have received less attention, casting a shadow over the claim to social justice. A study conducted at a South African university aimed to answer the question: how do organisations that host international service learning students perceive and experience the presence of international students and their contributions to their organisations? Understanding the perceptions and experiences of organisations that host international students enhances our understanding of the value of community voices and ways in which the feedback could enhance programme processes, practices and outcomes.

In this article, literature on international service learning is reviewed, followed by an overview of the implemented qualitative approach and a thematic report of host organisations' reflections.

## International service learning

The practice of people from developed countries visiting developing countries to provide assistance to impoverished communities has been called by different terms: international service learning, volunteer tourism or aid work.<sup>8,9</sup> Unique to international service learning is that higher education institutions offer the programmes, the assistance is underpinned by academic learning objectives and reflection is embedded in the process.<sup>10,11</sup>

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Higher education institutions offer service learning programmes as an expression of their commitment to the community engagement goals of higher education.<sup>12,13</sup> Whilst students are learning how to put knowledge into practice, communities receive services that are meant to contribute to local community development and social change.<sup>14,15,16</sup> Service learning is thus intended to be mutually beneficial.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars are not in agreement about the merits of international service learning. On the one hand, concerns have been raised that range from the phenomenon contributing to exploitation of communities by the businesses and organisations sending inexperienced young Westerners to work in orphanages, schools and community organisations,<sup>18</sup> to elitism, paternalism and a different form of colonisation.<sup>19,20,21</sup> On the other hand, it has been found that cultural competence and cultural humility can be enhanced.<sup>6,22</sup> In attempts to gain more clarity about the value of international service learning, research has been conducted with the three stakeholders that are involved in the programmes – educators (as the ones who organise and design the programmes), students (as the ones who come from academic settings) and host organisations (as the ones who represent local communities).

## Educators' voices

Several researchers have explored the perspectives and experiences of the higher education staff members who teach service learning programmes.<sup>11,23,24,25,26</sup> These educators organise service learning components and design the curriculum.

Apart from personal progression aspirations, educators are motivated to organise international service learning opportunities for students because they believe in the ideals of community development and active citizenship and in the transformative potential of community engagement.<sup>23,24,25</sup> Amidst these strivings, a study by O'Meara and Niehaus<sup>11</sup> revealed that educators are more focused on student learning than on community outcomes. Furthermore, educators consider the voices of students when they redesign and improve programmes, not the voices of communities.<sup>13</sup>

Studies about the needs and challenges of educators in relation to service learning have confirmed that educators struggle to incorporate community voices into their programmes and to build reciprocal relationships with communities.<sup>23,26</sup> This might explain the strong emphasis on students in practice and research with a weaker emphasis on communities.

## Students' voices

The voices of students who have participated in international service learning are well documented in the literature. By means of interviews, focus group discussions and blogs, it has been found that students' motives for participating in service learning include seeking learning opportunities and doing good by helping others.<sup>4,12,27</sup> In addition to sharing their experiences and personal feelings,<sup>6,28,29</sup> students have

also reflected on the perceived positive impact they have made on the communities in which they worked.<sup>12,27,30</sup>

From the author's experiences and observation in the context of international service learning, students reflect on their experiences not only when formal research is conducted but also through opportunities for reflection included in the design of many service learning programmes. In fact, reflection is so embedded in service learning that various authors refer to it in their definition of the concept.<sup>2,13</sup> Furthermore, to improve the quality and depth of reflections in service learning, several tools and assessment guidelines have been developed and published.<sup>31,32,33</sup>

The relevance of reflection can be understood in relation to the emphasis on learning as an essential component of the pedagogy of international service learning. Students are expected to learn whilst providing a service. Reflection is utilised as the vehicle through which learning from experience is encouraged. Students are provided with opportunities to think about their experiences in the community context to gain insight and determine implications on a personal and professional level.<sup>34,35,36</sup>

However, the development and elevation of students' voices through reflection in international service learning are not complemented with equal opportunities for reflection provided to host organisations.<sup>37</sup>

## Host organisations' voices

Compared with the amount of literature that explores the perceptions and experiences of students regarding international service learning, a dearth of literature focuses on the perspectives of host organisations. Whilst the reasons for the imbalance need further investigation, Guttentag<sup>3</sup> highlighted two challenges to obtain authentic feedback from host organisations. Firstly, he explained that host organisations may be reluctant to 'criticise a project to foreign researchers who resemble the volunteers'.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, host organisations may fear that their negative feedback may lead to the withdrawal of service learning programmes in their communities. Yet there is agreement from several authors that the voices of host organisations are important and necessary.<sup>3,12,13</sup> The organisations' perspectives could improve service learning processes, practices and outcomes.<sup>12,13</sup>

A closer look at the available literature where the perceptions and experiences of host communities have been explored indicates that the perspectives differ significantly from those of students. Whereas students are motivated to participate in service learning programmes based on the desire to learn and help, Strohmeier<sup>27</sup> determined that host organisations are motivated to participate owing to the donations they receive and awareness raised about their organisations. Another aspect observed in a programme in Kenya was a perceived lack of sincerity from students. Dickey et al.<sup>21</sup> found that whilst students verbalised noble intentions, host organisations observed notions of superiority and disrespect.

Perspectives from host organisations in Cambodia revealed that the generosity of students encourages dependency in communities.<sup>38</sup> Based on the reflections of host organisations, Luh Sin<sup>38</sup> concluded that international service learning does not always or automatically lead to positive impact.

## Methodology

The context of the study is a South African city where an international service-learning programme has been offered by the local university for 15 years. The programme is a partnership between host organisations (consisting of nongovernmental and community-based organisations and a government school), the international office of the university (responsible for recruiting, placing and monitoring international students in the programme) and the social work department (as the facilitator of the academic component). Students who participate in the programmes choose an organisation where they volunteer once a week over a period of one semester. They attend biweekly workshops and reflection sessions on campus and are expected to write regular journal entries to increase their understanding of their experiences. Meetings between the international office, the social work department and the managers of participating organisations take place twice a year to conduct evaluations.

An exploratory descriptive qualitative study was conceptualised to gain understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the staff from host organisations. Semistructured individual interviews were conducted with staff of purposefully selected organisations that had been hosting students from the service learning programme for at least 2 years. Staff who had been engaging directly with international students were invited to participate. Twenty-one staff members volunteered to participate in the study. Eleven of the 21 participants have professional qualifications – 10 as teachers and one as a social worker – whilst the other 10 participants have secondary education and had received in-service training to work as caregivers or volunteers who received stipends. One of the participants is employed in a management position and the rest as direct service delivery staff.

After giving informed consent, the participants were interviewed either at their workplaces or via an online platform (depending on the preference of the participant and considering Coronavirus Disease 2019 [COVID-19] protocols). Data were collected by fieldworkers who have no interest in the service-learning programme, because the existing relationships between the stakeholders might inhibit honest and critical reflections when interviews were conducted between people who were known to one another. The field workers underwent extensive training, preparation and practise of the interviewing process, and a pilot study confirmed the appropriateness of the interview schedule (please see the schedule in Table 1). Each interview took between 30 min and 60 min to complete. Afterwards, the fieldworkers reflected that the interviews that had been conducted with care workers and volunteers via an online

**TABLE 1:** Semistructured interview schedule.

Number	Question
1.	It has been explained to me that international students placed by the local university have been volunteering at your organisation for the past number of years. Can you tell me more about this?
2.	From your understanding, why do these international students visit this organisation?
3.	In what ways have you been interacting with them?
4.	What is it like to have the international students here at your organisation?
5.	What positives have you seen or experienced from having the international students here?
6.	What negatives have you seen or experienced from having the international students here?
7.	What contributions, if any, have the international students made to this organisation in the immediate and the long term?
8.	Do you want to share with me anything else about having the international students volunteering here?

**TABLE 2:** Types of organisations where participants work.

Number of participants	Type of organisation
2	Youth organisation
5	Community outreach centre
4	Home for abandoned babies
10	School

platform generally had yielded less rich data than face-to-face interviews, possibly because the care workers and volunteers as participants were unfamiliar with online interviews.

A systematic data analysis process was undertaken to code and categorise the data to identify key issues and arguments raised by the participants. Thematic analysis according to the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke<sup>39</sup> was applied. Although the use of fieldworkers enhanced the credibility of the data-collection process, it brought limitations to the data-analysis process. Because the author – who analysed the data – did not conduct the interviews (and thus did not have access to the participants), the author was unable to conduct member checking to explore the interpretations and emerging themes with the participants.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the university's Research Ethics Committee (Human) and consent was received on 26 August 2021. The ethics approval number is H21-HEA-SDP-005. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, the names of organisations are withheld and pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.

## Findings and discussion

The findings of the study that are discussed in this section are derived from semistructured interviews with the staff from different host organisations (see types of organisations in Table 2).

Apart from the community outreach centre, all the organisations whose staff participated in the study, are providing services to children. The community outreach centre provides a range of services to different population groups, which include (but are not limited to) children.

As the study intended to explore the voices of host organisations, a considerable number of extracts from the interviews (in the form of quotations) are included.

## Perspectives about purpose and student motives

When the participants were asked about their understanding of the reasons why students visited their organisations, varying views were shared. Most of the participants believed that the students were choosing to volunteer to gain experience and develop skills, because they wanted to help others and they had the desire to learn about different contexts and cultures. Some participants believed that students spent time at organisations because of the requirements of their studies. All these reasons are in line with those cited in literature as indeed the reasons why students would choose to participate in international service learning.<sup>4,12,27</sup>

Another finding that emerged from the reflections on the reasons why students participate in service learning was participants' uncertainty about students' motives. This is evident from the first words in the comments of participants indicating a lack of certainty in their understanding:

*'I think it's kind of a skills development programme.'* (Nomsa, female, home for abandoned babies)

*'Maybe to give their assistance.'* (Unathi, female, school)

*'I guess they are in different areas of the work they learn or programmes and then they want to come here and then they want to see how we do it.'* (Zandi, female, community outreach centre)

Furthermore, some participants suggested that the question rather be posed to the management structures of their organisations, because 'management knows why and how this whole volunteering system works' (Khululwa, female, youth organisation) and 'the long-term process of these students is known between the principal, HODs [*heads of departments*] and the SMTs [*school management teams*]' (Tembisa, female, school). This indicates that within host organisations, there is a differentiation between those who have knowledge and understanding of the purposes, intended outcomes and processes of service learning (the management structures) and those who do not (direct service delivery staff). The group that has been engaging directly with international students is the second group – direct service delivery staff. This finding highlights that host organisations are not homogenous entities and suggests that internal hierarchical structures may affect service-learning contexts. The question thus arises: does it matter that the staff of host organisations who engage with international students are not clear on the purpose and motives of students who participate in international service learning? According to Yarbrough et al.,<sup>40</sup> a lack of knowledge about motivations can lead to a lack of understanding, frustration and outcomes not being met. Furthermore, Doughty<sup>37</sup> argued that a lack of clarity on

purpose points to low consideration for and minimalist engagement with communities. Therefore, it is suggested that opportunities for reflection and dialogue regarding the purpose of service learning programmes and students' motives be created within programme processes. Such opportunities should include all staff who engage with the students.

## Experiences of students' sadness

In describing their experiences of having international students present as volunteers at their organisations, participants referred to situations where emotions of sadness had been displayed. This was mainly when students were exposed to community conditions of extreme poverty:

*'We go out with them to home visits and then when we are there in the home visit and they see the situation of the client, they become very emotional. Worse when they see even the environment, the lifestyle of the patient, sometimes they see a lot of shortage in food ... you can see from their eyes they feel emotion.'* (Phumi, female, community outreach centre)

Another participant's description suggests that host organisational staff believed that students were overwhelmed by the poor conditions in which people lived:

*'When you are being exposed to something that you have never seen before, you become emotional. Or maybe you feel like, no, you don't want to participate, because of that's not what you are used to. ... So they want, like, to give their all to help, but the thing is, they get too emotional because of the difference. So at times we feel like no, this is too much for them to handle.'* (Tara, female, community outreach centre)

Emotions of sadness were also observed when students left organisations at the end of the service learning programme. Upon asking a participant from a school how the children adjusted to the students leaving at the end:

*'You know, when international students leave, they become so ... they cried ... it'll be a sad moment.'* (Thandi, female, school)

Previous research confirms that emotional experiences are common for students participating in international service learning.<sup>16,41,42</sup> Yet no research capturing the emotional experiences of host organisations' staff in relation to working with international volunteers could be found. Whilst the processing of and learning from such emotional incidents are taking place through the use of reflections for the students, no evidence was found in this study of formal reflection opportunities created for host organisations. As the staff are present when students experience emotions of sadness, it may affect them as well. In addition, they may feel obligated to provide support to students. However, as a number of the staff members may be volunteers themselves (like the participants in this study), they may not be prepared or equipped adequately to provide support.

From these findings, it is clear that host organisations are aware of and witness the emotional responses of students. They may also have to deal with their own and children's

emotional responses associated with the relations with students. Yet the participants do not have the opportunities that students have to reflect on the experiences. Thus, there is an imbalance in opportunities that could be viewed as ignorance of the effect of emotional experiences on the staff of host organisations, and a higher value is placed on the experiences of international students.

### Interpretations related to race

The majority of students who participated in the programme where the research was conducted were white people from the United States of America or Europe. In contrast, most of the staff of the host organisations were black South Africans. Although no questions in the interview schedule were focused on race, a number of participants referred to it during the course of the interviews. It was viewed as either a source of energy for children or as a positive factor that contributed to nonracialism.

In the classroom setting, participants reported that racial differences led to disruptions. Because of preconceived notions and unfamiliarity with white people, children were said to be distracted from their schoolwork and compete for the attention of the different-looking students:

'I think it's because of the colour. They know that white people have money. They have that mentality that white people have money; I'm not sure, but they become crazy when they see the students. ... There will be a lot of noise outside. Everyone is following the students. And the school is becoming disruptive.' (Zodwa, female, school)

'Children will be excited to see all these white people.' (Tara, female, community outreach centre)

Thandi also observed that the children had a higher regard for the (white) students than for their (black) teachers:

'You know, our children they have that tradition of – I don't know ... it's because of ... when they see white people they expect a good thing, but when they see us, they are just listening, you know.' (Thandi, female, school)

For the staff themselves, the encounters with white students had brought insight about the potential for inter-racial cooperation:

'We were afraid of them because they are white people, but nothing disturbed that in our school.' (Nandipha, female, school)

'If we can have people like them irrespective of colour and our schools can mix even with other races, that will be a rainbow race that we can see. Because the way when they are here when we interact with them, we are ... in the same tune, there's no race ... I wish that we can get the teachers that are different in race like them on a class so that we can interact, because everyone learns from another.' (Thandi, female, school)

Whereas the influence of colonialism is still evident from the participant quotations, it is significant to observe that host organisations are critically aware of the influence of racial dynamics on service learning relationships. On the one

hand, the ways in which children (as the beneficiaries of the services of organisations) respond to international students indicate a higher regard for white volunteers than for black teachers. This is not because of any specific reported behaviour of the students but (according to the participants) as a result of the children's preconceived notions of race. Interestingly, Green<sup>43</sup> reflects that white service learning students are unaware of racial dynamics within service learning relationships. The organisational staff's awareness provides support for Green's<sup>43</sup> stance that students need to be sensitised to be conscious of racial and associated power differences. Such consciousness would not remove the differences but could increase sensitivity, minimise harm and promote 'decolonising relating'.<sup>44</sup>

Participants' experiences of interracial cooperation in the classroom indicate that international service-learning programmes can contribute positively to environments where equality and human dignity prevail. In contrast to the findings of Dickey et al.<sup>21</sup> that international students act with superiority and disrespect in service-learning contexts, the findings of this study reveal that there are possibly instances where the social justice ideals of international service learning are fulfilled.

### Perceived benefits

When asked about the contribution of service learning, the most prevalent response from participants was about the different forms of donations that come from students – from buying physical items: '... donate yogurts for the children and maybe nappies' (Sindiswa, female, home for abandoned babies) – to contributions to large resources: '... they even built us a school library and furnish the school library with books' (Vivian, female, school).

Apart from donations, the participants identified benefits to themselves as organisational staff and benefits to the children that organisations served. For the organisational staff, the students provide assistance with daily activities, which eases the workload of the staff. The students' presence and positive attitude also affect the energy and attitude of the staff positively:

'We are working seven to seven. By the time they arrive here in the afternoon, we are tired. So having them kind of takes the weight off, knowing that you have someone that will help you.' (Nomsa, female, home for abandoned babies)

'They are eager. A person like that makes you eager as well.' (Avela, female, home for abandoned babies)

'You can see from us also, maybe sometimes our spirits come down, but by coming, them also coming, then we at least, you get also power to empower also yourself.' (Babalwa, female, community outreach centre)

Regarding benefits for the children, the participants reported that they saw improved language skills owing to the time that students spend with children (students converse in English whilst the children's mother tongue is isiXhosa):

[A]t the first time, they were very difficult to communicate, because of the language. But as the time goes, the children know how to – even if they use sign language.’ (Lumka, female, school)

Another observed advanced reading skills as well: ‘Also, their speaking skills in English improved during their presence. Also, the learners’ reading skills were improved because of them.’ (Nandi, female, school) Linked to the finding in the previous section about race and power, caution needs to be exercised when a language other than that of the local community is elevated by the international students.<sup>45</sup> Similar to Green’s<sup>43</sup> arguments about raising consciousness of the dynamics of race, students could also be made aware of and encouraged to reflect on the dynamics of language.

Khululwa deduced that students contributed to the academic development of children by comparing the children’s progress during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (when international students were unable to visit South Africa because of strict lockdown regulations) with their progress when the international students were assisting with homework:

‘I worked with those learners who used to be assisted by international students and can see that ... some of them, they dropped their academics and so forth. And the thing is that the international students ... they help them every day and they were up to date with their homework and so forth. And now we get students that did not submit their work, and I think that is one of the things ... that I’ve noticed personally about having the international students not coming anymore to assist them. And so, yeah, they’ve left a hole ... In general, their presence was felt.’ (Khululwa, female, youth organisation)

In contrast to the findings by Strohmeier<sup>27</sup> that host organisations mainly benefit from the donations they receive from students, a significant finding in this study was that the benefits of international service learning extend beyond donations to host organisations. The benefits that have been identified are similar to what Maakrun<sup>46</sup> found in her study of a service learning programme at a school in Kenya, namely that both children and staff were affected positively through the engagements with international students. These benefits occur during the encounter between students and staff or students and children – which Sharpe and Dear<sup>20</sup> advocate for as the true end-goal of service learning. Benefits such as improved language skills could be viewed as long-term contributions but – as Gibson et al.<sup>17</sup> recommended – more focused research is required to confirm this. In the meantime, the feedback from host organisations could be helpful for students to be aware of their influence and to consider ways to expand on the recognised benefits.

## Challenges

When participants were asked about the challenges they had experienced with international service learning, more than a third declared that there were no challenges. This could be understood as an indication of host organisations’ satisfaction with the programme. However, one must also

be mindful of Guttentag’s<sup>3</sup> warning that staff could be hesitant to give negative feedback out of fear that they might lose the partnership or donations. In addition, against the broader context of students from developed countries visiting communities in developing countries, Paulo Freire’s conceptualisation of a ‘culture of silence’ suggests that a sense of powerlessness may have suppressed critical awareness.<sup>47/48</sup>

Three participants reflected on situations where students’ behaviour had to be addressed by host organisations, because it was not in line with organisational expectations or inappropriate. One referred to idle students:

‘Well, I don’t think I have too much negative except for those who are lazy. Maybe if there are two of them, there will be one who is working more than the other and so you have to now go back to them and ask that one do this and this ... When you have to ask someone to do something, it’s not good, it’s not nice.’ (Nomsa, female, home for abandoned babies)

Challenges that came with the positive relationship between students and children at their school were described as follows:

‘It’s only the children who always follow the students during break time. Only that is the negative, because they like kids too much ... It also happens in my classroom ... I always talked to them that these are teachers. I told them that these students are teachers, they must respect them.’ (Zodwa, female, school)

Andrew referred to situations where students would allow children access to their (the students’) mobile phones and cameras. On the one hand, this creates a culture where the children think it is acceptable to request people’s phones for their own convenience. On the other hand, he observed that the time spent on technological devices replaced interaction between students and children. Consequently, the staff of their organisation had to break down this culture:

‘If you allow that things, you encourage negative behaviour in our children, which is the idea that we are trying very hard to teach them not to do ... then we have to try actually reteach that it is wrong to do ... It’s those things that I think are problematic, that people have an idea that in order to please the children, they have to hand over their valuables.’ (Andrew, male, youth organisation)

From the given quotations, two challenges to international service learning emerge: concerns about the commitment of some students and reluctance from staff to communicate such concerns to students. Similar findings were accentuated in Blouin and Perry’s<sup>49</sup> study about community-based organisations’ perspectives on service learning, and these authors attribute the challenges to a lack of clarity on expectations of the different stakeholders’ roles and functions. Students may not be clear on the tasks they are expected to complete, and host staff may not be clear on their obligation in terms of addressing concerning behaviour.

As a consequence of the possible lack of clarity on expectations, staff of host organisations may be left with the perception that student behaviour leaves them with additional work to do. This could work against the benefit that was identified earlier, whereby staff reported that the students provided extra hands to make their workload lighter. If this feedback were known whilst students were engaging with organisations, the students could be guided to adjust their perceived negative behaviour, instead of the staff having to address it afterwards. Furthermore, educators (as the organisers of service learning programmes) could facilitate communication before, during and after service learning programmes to clarify mutual expectations, roles and functions.<sup>49,50</sup>

## Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made in relation to the practice of international service learning:

- Opportunities for dialogue about purpose and motives should be created at the beginning of service learning programmes. Students could share their intentions and host organisations (including the staff who will be engaging directly with students) could also clarify their own reasons for inviting students to their placements.
- Staff of host organisations could be capacitated to provide practical and emotional support to students when emotional incidents occur. Opportunities for the processing of emotions could also be considered for host organisations.
- Students should be conscientised regarding the dynamics of race and language and also be encouraged to reflect on it throughout their encounters with communities.
- Regular feedback on the benefits host organisations observe should be sought from them. Future programmes could then be designed to focus students' efforts to expand on the benefits intentionally.
- Opportunities for swift reporting of challenges need to be created to ensure that it can be addressed timeously. This could prevent the burdening of host organisations with additional work to minimise the negative effect of student behaviour.

The exploratory descriptive design utilised in this study served to enable a basic understanding of the perceptions and experiences of host organisations of international service learning – a topic that has been underexplored. Further studies that explore the identified themes regarding motives, emotional responses, race, benefits and challenges in more depth are recommended. As literature and the findings of this study concur that host organisations are not familiar with the practice of giving feedback and reflection, it is recommended that several or regular research studies be conducted to gradually break the culture of silence.

With regard to further research, it is recommended that:

- the motives and expectations of host organisations be explored

- the long-term benefits and effect of international service learning on host organisations and communities be studied
- the extent to which community service learning contributes to social justice ideals be investigated
- a model for service learning that is socially just and underpinned by equal opportunities for all stakeholders involved should be codeveloped by host organisations, students and higher education institutions.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study contributes to the body of emerging literature that captures the voices of host organisations. It has been revealed that host organisations observe benefits to receiving international students – not only donations but also contributions to the academic development of children and experiences of interracial cooperation. By listening to host organisations, components of service learning programmes that require attention have also been identified. Staff who engage directly with students are not clearly informed of the motives of students for visiting their organisations. The effects of hierarchical structures within host organisations and racial and language dynamics on service learning contexts have come to the fore, and discomfort regarding the emotional responses of students was discovered. Highlighted challenges indicate how host organisations often have to take additional steps to deal with perceived negative behaviour of students and a lack of clarity on expectations.

The reflections from host organisations have brought to the fore a range of valuable insights and issues, confirming that reflection opportunities for both students and host organisations must be created. If stakeholders in international service learning are serious about upholding the social justice ideals that higher education is promoting, the feedback from reflections should not merely satisfy curiosity but should be consciously applied to influence and improve service learning processes, practices and outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the field workers for conducting the interviews and the participants for sharing their views and experiences. The author further acknowledges the valuable input of Prof. Ruth Albertyn as critical reader.

## Competing interest

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Author's contribution

N.M. is the sole author of this article.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of the study are not openly available and may be requested from the author.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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