Unintended outcomes? Building organisational capacity with PACE International partners

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PACE International is a component of Professional and Community Engagement (PACE), a Macquarie University-wide initiative that provides opportunities for students and staff to contribute to more just, inclusive and sustainable societies by engaging in activities with partner organisations in Australia and internationally. Underpinning PACE is a commitment to mutually beneficial learning and engagement. To align with this commitment, PACE-related research engages partner perspectives and those of students and academics. The dearth of scholarly research on partner perspectives of community engagement (Bringle, Clayton & Price, 2009) underscores this imperative. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with community partner representatives from Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, India, and Peru, this paper examines some of the apparently unexpected benefits of engagement with PACE that community partners report have contributed to their improved organisational capacity. We conclude by speculating that what can be perceived by universities as unexpected and unplanned by-products of student engagement, may actually be intended and strategically planned outcomes of community partners. The paper highlights the need for universities to develop a deeper understanding of the organisational objectives of community partners and their broader motivations for developing institutional relationships in order to ensure the nurturing and facilitation of such highly-valued outcomes through student engagement programs.

Keywords: Capacity building, community partners, mutually beneficial learning, international service-learning