

## **A new Triple Helix**

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### ***Synopsis***

A triple helix is not a new concept for a science student -It's comprised of congruent geometrical helices along with the same axis differing by translation. A bio-science student may even relate this to the DNA structure. Third year science students of the University of Colombo are offered a credit bearing course that resembles a triple helix. Here, the University, Corporate organizations, and Community represent the helices. The bond between the helices is the Service Learning program.

Service Learning is a new pedagogical tool that provides opportunity for the students to acquire learning outside the classroom activities. As it associates an effective learning method of experiential learning, the students can extract firm understanding of the concepts taught in the classroom. However, Service Learning is yet to become a natural choice in Sri Lankan university curricula despite of its benefits. Unemployment rates in Sri Lanka over the past several years have been at a healthy rate of 4%-5%. However, graduate employability rates paint a different picture with average unemployment rate at 26.4% in 2012. Employers - especially in the private sector from where the large part of Sri Lanka's economic growth comes from, employers lament over lack of soft skills in fresh university graduates.

On the other hand, having selected through a highly competitive selection process, the main expectation of the students out of university education is to get employed immediately after graduation. However, the education students receive in Sri Lankan universities is not primarily targeted at employment. In a developing economy like Sri Lanka, universities hold a key responsibility in preparing the knowledge workers to participate in economic development process early as possible. Therefore its timely for the educators to adopt innovative solutions for improving employability within university curricula. Service Learning can be a catalyst for sharpening soft skills that are valuable to fresh graduates in securing employment

Service Learning uses an experiential learning and intuitive learning method that uses reflection as an integral learning mechanism or learning. Reflection allows the student to critically evaluate the situations and questions the general assumptions. This is a way to build the thought process inductively that develops the student beyond memorization. There are multiple opportunities for reflecting throughout the Service Learning program. At the first stage, students learn ahead of the program by gathering background information, developing project plans, and visualizing possible issues ahead of the actual experience. At the second stage, students reflect during the delivery of the service. Operational issues can be analyzed and best possible action for the given situation can be formulated through the reflection process. Thirdly, by end of the delivery of the service, students reflect on behavior and resources that worked well, that didn't work well and how they can be organized for a similar situation in future. These three stages of reflection can be done individually or in a group facilitated by a coach. Collaborating with corporate organizations in Service Learning programs is mutually beneficial for the parties involved. By providing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects, corporate organizations can support the students to get real life cases at less or no cost burden to them or the university. At the same time, corporate organizations who have constraints in mobilizing adequate people resources to carry out their CSR projects are also benefited from engaging students in their CSR projects. The universities benefit from improving the quality of education provided to the students and building closer links with the corporate organizations and the communities.

CSR has become a common practice with the multinational organizations and Sri Lankan blue-chip companies. By engaging the employees in CSR activities organizations can reinforce a positive relationship between the employees and the organization. Small and Medium Enterprise organizations (SMEs) are likely to face a challenge to sustain CSR activities as they find it difficult to allocate dedicated organizational resources for activities with fluctuating intensity and resource requirements. However, this situation can be addressed by involving university students in their CSR activities. Well timed and planned activities by the corporate organizations and delivered in good coordination with the universities can deliver good results that benefit mutually

Service Learning program from the science faculty of University of Colombo offers students to take part in multiple Service Learning projects each year. The partnership between the university, a corporate organization and a group of students benefited resembles a triple helix.

A CSR project of a reputed corporate organization that is hypothetically referred to as National Bank provided university students a project to implement a stand-alone learning tool for key course subjects that was supposed to reinforce and complement the taught content in several schools. This project provided university students the opportunity to gain deeper insights into some of the challenges faced by school children and teachers due to lack of sufficient numbers of teachers for key subjects like Science, Mathematics and Commerce. Getting to students to the habit of self-learning can be supported if required infrastructure is available. However, in rural areas availability proper infrastructure remains to be a challenge in Sri Lanka. The insights from the project includes some of the challenges faced during project roll-out, available opportunities, and options for them.

There are other stakeholders that are important to Service Learning program delivery: Career Guidance Unit of the university is responsible for the logistical arrangements and assessments of the students. The program mentor plays a vital role in helping the students reflect on the situations faced and developing solutions for the issues. Since the learning at large comes from the interactions with the community and the society, the most expected learning outcome from Service Learning programs is social competence – This covers the ability to critically evaluating complex situations and finding sustainable solutions that suits multiple stakeholders. In addition to this, students sharpen their Communication skills, Team skills, Leadership skills, Analytical skills, and Problem-solving skills. These skills are closely associated with employability skills that are sought after by employers. Students go beyond their familiar domain of the university into where they meet other players in the society such as regulators, business leaders and communities and their leaders. The contacts and networks they build may even become useful in their search for the first employment. In combination of skills and the networks students build through stakeholder engagement, Service learning gives a boost to their employment.

This case may be used to bring up multiple threads of discussions during topics of Talent and Skills Development, Employability and Career Development, CSR and Sustainability. Such

discussions would help the learners to appreciate the multiple factors that can be considered in finding a robust solution to associated issues. This case may also be useful to educators, program developers and educational policy makers as Service Learning is a new concept that can be adopted not only in the universities but also in other educational institutions such as primary and secondary level schools.