

Can university students learn empathy in their degrees? New research says yes

University students who complete community placements as part of their degrees develop a greater sense of empathy than those who just learn theory, new research has found.

Growing interest in experiential learning models such as service-learning or community engagement, where students complete compulsory community work as well as learn theory in lectures and tutorials, has seen a proliferation of programs offered at universities worldwide.

However little research has investigated whether community placements can lead to an increase in empathy among students, until now.

Researchers at Australian Catholic University (ACU) analysed the experiences of 1410 university students, taken from 35 separate studies, who were involved in face-to-face service with community members who experienced some form of disadvantage and marginalisation.

The meta-analysis and qualitative meta-synthesis, published in [Educational Research Review](#), found students who completed organised community placements through their universities were more empathic and understanding of people whose personal circumstances were different to theirs. The research paper is the first systematic evidence that shows service-learning contributes positively to student empathy.

ACU Research Fellow Dr Chloe Gordon, one of the lead researchers, said as well as showing evidence of increased empathy, the research revealed that direct interactions with community members was an influencing factor.

“One student in a study acknowledged how easy it was to read about people’s stories, but when you were watching them tell their story, with tears in their eyes, you felt a degree of the pain they felt and it resulted in a transformative experience,” Dr Gordon said.

Dr Gordon said the research might be useful to employers, since an increasing number of professions want graduates who can connect with, and work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.

“Soft skills are increasingly seen as critical skills in the workplace, where employers want graduates who are able to work with a diverse range of people,” Dr Gordon said.

“Empathy, which is defined broadly as the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person, is one of these critical skills.

“Our research shows that learning models such as service-learning or community engagement can help students to become more empathic.”

Dr Gordon said the former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was a powerful example of one leader who made a strong impact with her empathetic approach.

“A strong theme in our findings was service-learning leading to identifying with another person and recognising their common humanity,” Dr Gordon said.

“One of the most impactful global examples of this was when Jacinda Ardern grieved with Muslim families following the Christchurch attack, wearing the hijab as a sign of respect. Her ability to show authentic empathy and translate this into action as a world leader was inspiring.

“Even in the wake of her resignation as Prime Minister, she was still trending for being a strong leader who was empathetic.”

Dr Chloe Gordon is available for interviews.

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