

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

# Using a student organisation to promote student-centredness at a South African university

## Utiliser une organisation d'étudiants pour promouvoir le centrage sur l'étudiant dans une université sud-africaine

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### ABSTRACT

This reflective article focuses on the Chemical Engineering Students Association (CESA) at a South African university, which was established as a voluntary student organisation to alleviate the problems of student isolation and inadequate orientation programmes by promoting student-centredness and development. The article aims to examine CESA's role in promoting student-centredness and to highlight CESA's role in community engagement. CESA was initiated by two lecturers in the chemical engineering department who served as departmental representatives. Following the Gibbs reflective cycle, data in the form of reflections were collected and analysed from the CESA departmental representatives to ascertain CESA's effectiveness in alleviating the problem of student isolation by creating a student-centred environment and engaging students in community service. The community engagement activities consisted of a Nelson Mandela Day stationery drive and a Women's Day sanitary towel drive to contribute to a local women's and children's shelter. The students actively participated in these activities, demonstrating their commitment to social responsibility and community service. CESA also organised various student development activities to equip students with essential skills and knowledge for their future careers. The students actively participated in these workshops, showing a keen interest in their personal and professional growth. Successfully implementing CESA was made possible through collaboration and support from other faculty members in the chemical engineering department, and the university's community engagement and marketing departments. The article emphasises CESA's practical contributions and presents it as a model for other institutions in establishing effective student organisations. Overall, the reflections indicated CESA's effectiveness in promoting student-centredness.

### KEYWORDS

*Student organisations, community engagement, student leadership development, student-centredness, social responsiveness*

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article de réflexion porte sur l'Association des étudiants en génie chimique (CESA) d'une université sud-africaine, qui a été créée en tant qu'organisation d'étudiants bénévoles visant à atténuer les problèmes d'isolement des étudiants et d'inadéquation des programmes d'orientation

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en promouvant le centrage et le développement des étudiants. L'article vise à examiner le rôle de la CESA dans la promotion du centrage sur l'étudiant et à souligner le rôle de la CESA dans l'engagement communautaire. La CESA a été initiée par deux membres personnel enseignant du département de génie chimique agissant en tant que représentants du département. Suivant le cycle de réflexion de Gibbs, des données sous forme de réflexions ont été recueillies auprès des représentants départementaux de la CESA puis analysées afin de vérifier l'efficacité de la CESA à atténuer le problème de l'isolement des étudiants en créant un environnement centré sur l'étudiant et en impliquant les étudiants dans le service à la communauté. Les activités d'engagement communautaire ont consisté en une collecte de papeterie à l'occasion de la Journée Nelson Mandela et une collecte de serviettes hygiéniques à l'occasion de la Journée de la femme, au profit d'un centre d'accueil local pour les femmes et les enfants. Les étudiants ont participé activement à ces activités, démontrant ainsi leur engagement en matière de responsabilité sociale et de service à la communauté. La CESA a également organisé diverses activités de développement destinées aux étudiants afin de les doter de compétences et de connaissances essentielles pour leurs futures carrières. Les étudiants ont participé activement à ces ateliers, montrant un vif intérêt pour leur développement personnel et professionnel. Le succès de la mise en œuvre de la CESA a été rendu possible grâce à la collaboration et au soutien d'autres membres personnel enseignant du département de génie chimique, ainsi que des départements d'engagement communautaire et de marketing de l'université. Cet article met l'accent sur les contributions pratiques de la CESA et la présente comme un modèle pour la création des associations des étudiants efficaces dans d'autres institutions. Dans l'ensemble, les réflexions démontrent l'efficacité de la CESA dans la promotion du centrage sur l'étudiant.

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Organisations étudiantes, engagement communautaire, développement du leadership étudiant, centré sur l'étudiant, responsabilité sociale*

## Introduction

### **The Chemical Engineering Students Association: Background and mission**

Student isolation remains a problem in the higher education environment, as it negatively impacts students' success rates and employability after graduation (Lim & Vignarajah, 2018). To help alleviate this problem, the Chemical Engineering Students Association (CESA) was formally re-established in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown by two lecturers. Sensing the students' isolation during the lockdown, CESA aimed to establish a sense of connectedness and community among the students. As a voluntary organisation, only interested students were admitted. During the lockdown (2020 and 2021), an online module was created to communicate with the students through shared announcements and facilitate discussions regarding funding and graduate employment opportunities. CESA has two goals: to coordinate and promote student events, and to function as a liaison between students and lecturers in the department, to ensure that any issues between students and lecturers are amicably resolved. After the lockdown was lifted, CESA held its first physical interactions. Two class representatives were voted from each undergraduate year, while two honours students were voted as CESA chair-people to facilitate the student events. These events include community engagement, peer mentorship programmes, and student development and support programmes. The community engagement initiatives include donation drives to collect stationery, clothing, and sanitary towels to support a local women and children's shelter. We

argue that CESA helps to create a sense of community among students, thus promoting student-centredness.

### **Significance of CESA and impact on student development**

Orientation programmes and first-year seminars are transient strategies to help students acquaint with their new peers, lecturers, and the higher education learning environment. Considering that orientation generally occurs in one day, new students may not have adequate time and focus to fully grasp the nuances of the higher education terrain – which is vastly different to that of high school. The ‘small fish in a big pond’ require additional measures of much-needed support, guidance, and mentorship to excel in their studies and create well-rounded identities for themselves – not just as students, but as future leaders. We argue that the inadequate orientation programmes play a role in student isolation. CESA aids in compensating for the deficiencies of student orientations (Lillis, 2011; Cuseo, 2010). Additionally, CESA helps to promote leadership development (Ferdiansyah & Meutia, 2017) and instilling a sense of social responsibility and impact through community engagement (Bender, 2008), while the student development opportunities aid in career development (Ferdiansyah & Meutia, 2017). These reported deficiencies of student orientations comprise the knowledge gap being addressed in this article.

Aligned with Tinto’s theory of educational departure (Tinto, 1986; Schreiber et al., 2014), CESA uses the tool of student engagement to promote academic performance and student-centredness. The theory expounds that if students are adequately engaged in the learning environment – not just in class, but outside as well – they are more likely to foster a desire to succeed. A sense of belonging, individuality, and community is required to promote a student-centred environment that is conducive to students’ short- and long-term development and success.

### **Article purpose and structure**

The aims of this article seek to address the problem of the reported deficiencies in traditional student orientation programmes. This reflective practice article firstly aims to examine the role of CESA as a long-term strategy to help students (new and returning) to connect with each other, create a sense of community, and to collaborate with, and seek the mentorship of other students. Second, this article aims to highlight the role of CESA in community engagement involving student participants, and the role of community engagement participation on student leadership within a major South African university. Through these aims, the authors highlight how CESA is used to promote student-centredness, thus alleviating student isolation. As a reflective practice article, the authors’ reflections are captured and analysed to ascertain whether CESA can address the deficiencies of student orientation programmes and alleviate student isolation using the Gibbs reflective model. Considering that the authors served as sources of data, no ethical clearance was required in this study. However, reflections were undertaken in relation to the literature and based on the Gibbs reflective model to promote objectivity.

### **The Gibbs model of reflection**

Gibbs (1988) proposed a reflective cycle to guide the process of reflecting after an experience. According to Jasper and Rosser (2013), reflection enables learning from experiences, to incorporate the new knowledge to inform future practice (Husebø et al., 2015). The Gibbs reflective cycle is comprised of key questions, which must be answered to yield knowledge from previous experiences by invoking feelings, thoughts, and future recommendations (Husebø et al., 2015). The Gibbs cycle is comprised of six steps: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan (Gibbs, 1988).

The Gibbs reflective model is integrated into the article's structure by outlining the experiences of the authors as CESA facilitators, their feelings and thoughts, an evaluation and analysis of the overall CESA impacts, and the conclusion and action plan for CESA, enabling a reflection on experiences, outcomes evaluation, and formulation of a future action plan.

### **Describing the experience of managing CESA**

#### **Rishen's experience of CESA's inception and the role of the chairpersons**

During the initial lockdown, the CESA interactions were limited to remote and online. Post-lockdown, physical interactions occurred for the first time under the leadership of the new departmental chairpersons. A colleague and I (two new departmental lecturers) served as the departmental chairpersons/representatives, a role which included developing CESA's mission and goals, physically engaging with classes at each year of study to promote CESA, and encouraging students to join, planning, promoting, and facilitating CESA events, and serving as liaisons between the students and lecturers within the department. The main aim underpinning CESA's goals is to cultivate a student-centred environment 'for the students, by the students'. Hence, we were required to innovate and implement methods through which students felt supported, included, cared for, and purposeful. Considering that human beings are social creatures, this notion applies especially to students undertaking a challenging field of study, such as chemical engineering. Hence, we strive to make every student feel included, safe, and comfortable within CESA. Much of the inspiration to achieve such student-centredness stems from our own experiences of shortcomings during our undergraduate studies, which we are actively trying to change, such that the new generation of students feel more 'at ease, and at home'.

#### **Naadhira's experience as the previous (pre-COVID-19) CESA chairperson**

As the previous CESA representative from the chemical engineering department, I observed an active student body running the CESA initiatives which were inherited from the previous students. I took over with no handover from the previous department representative, not really knowing the role I should fulfil. Hence, I assisted students by facilitating meetings, booking and organising boardrooms and coordinating the Chemical Engineering Ball and charity initiatives. I assisted students in creating posters and posting around campus for donation drives and the Engineering Ball. My office was the

collection point for the stationery and baby clothes and supplies for the donation drives. Through the offered assistance, I was able to create a safe space for students to come to me to seek help and encouragement, a student-centred environment. Overall, there was a lack of structure in the CESA initiatives, and the previous CESA students were much more ‘hands on’ than the current ones.

**Rishen’s initial feelings, thoughts, and expectations as the latter CESA chairperson**

Taking over from Naadhira, I was initially unsure where to begin regarding the re-establishment of CESA in the department. I was aware that students were facing isolation amidst the global pandemic, which accentuated the socio-economic challenges faced by most. Hence, I felt pressured to create a reliable ‘starting point’ which could be improved upon with the passage of time. Considering that teaching and research responsibilities are the dominant key performance areas for academics, the pressure to succeed in creating a glimmer of student-centredness through CESA was overwhelming. It was important that this starting point would also become a tangible gesture to enable the remote students feel an immediate sense of connection to each other, and a sense of belonging to the department, faculty, and institution. Throughout the lockdown, I ran the online organisation like a blog, in which I would post announcements regarding useful funding, bursary and graduate employment opportunities. I hoped that students would perceive my posts as messages from someone who cared for their development, future success, and overall well-being. My line manager instructed that CESA required a formal grounding, such that if I left the institution, another colleague could easily take over. Hence, when the lockdown was lifted, another colleague was recruited as the second CESA (co-)chairperson to help formalise the structure, and aid in implementing physical events.

**Challenges in forming and developing CESA**

An overview of the main challenges in forming and developing CESA, along with their corresponding mitigation factors are shown in Table 1, based on reflections by the CESA departmental representatives.

**Table 1: Challenges in forming and developing CESA**

Challenge	Description
Lack of structure	The CESA departmental representatives experienced a lack of formal guidelines for student associations. As such, they found it stressful to balance interventions that could potentially help the students, while remaining within the vicinity of the university’s strategic objectives. In other words, the student organisation must strive to create and promote student-centredness, while aligning with the university’s strategic objectives. Careful thought and planning were required to ensure such alignment, which included consultations between the departmental CESA representatives and the department head (internally) (to ensure that CEAS’s goals aligned with the university’s strategic objectives), the community engagement department (externally) (to help plan community engagement projects and ensure alignment with the university’s policies), and the faculty’s marketing team (to help plan and promote CESA events).

Challenge	Description
Lack of time	Academics are preoccupied with teaching and research throughout the year, while students are busy studying and preparing for assessments. As an academic, it is indeed difficult to devote time to facilitate CESA. However, we began to note CESA's impact on students' development, leadership, and overall involvement within CESA. Some students respond seriously to communications and physical meetings. They also show up when help is needed to coordinate CESA events. Such engagement is important in their development into caring, compassionate future leaders. We believe that awakening such compassion and humanity in students will prevent them from undertaking any unethical or unjust practices in the industry. These intrinsic experiences kept us motivated to work on CESA.
Lack of recognition	Running a student organisation generally does not receive adequate recognition. Even if it does, such recognition certainly does not equate to that of research or teaching achievements (in that order of priority) in the scorecards. However, part of being an academic is to develop students to become future leaders. Such a task cannot be achieved solely through in-class learning. Hence, sharing the positive experiences of student organisations can motivate other academics to undertake similar practices, and perceive the value of such.
Lack of financial support	Unless academics do not specifically request a budget to undertake CESA activities and events, budgets are not readily available. Even so, requesting a budget requires effort to source quotations from suppliers – additional administrative work, over and above the dominant research and teaching responsibilities of an academic. To mitigate this challenge, it is helpful to co-run a student organisation with another or a group of interested colleagues to share the additional administrative work.

### **Describing the planning and execution of CESA activities**

The typical CESA events/activities include community engagement, peer mentorship, student development, awards and recognition. Each activity is conceptualised by the CESA departmental representatives. Once the details are finalized, they are presented to the department head for approval. Once the approval is obtained, flyers are created to promote the events, which are then posted to the online CESA group. A meeting is then set to clarify and guide the CESA students regarding their participation. The CESA student representatives for each year, and the student chairpersons then further delegate responsibilities among the CESA students. The student leaders are consulted to ensure that things are 'on track' and that challenges are dealt with. Development aspects such as leadership, communication, and management attributes (planning, organising, leading and controlling) are inherently passed down from the CESA academic coordinators to the student representatives through this structure. The sense of involvement aids in student retention.

## Feelings and thoughts

### Reflection on personal experiences as the chairpersons

#### *Rishen's reflections*

I often reflect on my unpleasant experiences as an engineering undergraduate student. Many of my colleagues agree that studying engineering was a 'cold and clinical' experience with zero to very limited engagement with other students or lecturers. Reflecting on my own undergraduate experiences, many were very stressful. There were times when I was severely depressed and distraught due to the lack of support and motivation. Based on my experiences, I wanted to create an entirely different learning environment for my students. I want them to feel heard, supported, and cared for. I also wanted my students to feel confident, purposeful, motivated, encouraged, and feel like individuals who are established within a community – not just as numbers. Based on these core values, first, I teach the way I wanted to be taught. Second, I try to create a fun, light-hearted and supportive student community through CESA. I believe that helping the less fortunate is a value that all South Africans can relate to, in the spirit of ubuntu. Hence, I implemented community engagement as one of CESA's pillars. Through community engagement, the local community benefits from the combined efforts of students and staff, while the students benefit from a sense of connection with their fellow students, and their lecturers. For me, it is important to break down the barriers between students and lecturers. I believe that students can only learn when they start to perceive their lecturers as older versions of themselves. Such perceived relations can inspire students to believe in the potential within themselves. After all, their lecturers were once in the same phase of life as them.

My overall experiences as a CESA co-chairperson/department representative have been positive. Despite the challenges, I remain motivated and committed to working with and through CESA to positively impact my students. Through CESA, I get to develop my own students (second year) and those in other years of study. I also become familiar with first-year students, build a rapport with them, and look forward to teaching them in second year. As a new academic, I joined the university just before the pandemic lockdowns. Hence, I did not get the opportunity to engage with my colleagues and establish myself in the department for almost two years of the lockdown. Hence, CESA also gave me a chance to find my purpose in the department, and to connect with my colleagues and students in my role as a co-chairperson.

#### *Naadhira's reflections*

As the previous CESA departmental representative, I had an overall positive experience although maybe not entirely making the greatest impact we could have. The greatest benefit was working with students from all years of study and facilitating and assisting them in their CESA projects. I was able to create relationships with students that have now become colleagues and friends. CESA ran very few initiatives with two charity drives and a Chemical Engineering Ball as well as awards for the best lecturers every year. Students looked forward to the awards and ball as social highlights of the year.

### **Evaluating the impact of CESA activities on participants and the community**

Last year, CESA facilitated a stationery collection drive in honour of Nelson Mandela Day and a sanitary towel drive for Women's month. The combined drives culminated in the collection of 70 packs of sanitary towels, at least four bags of clothing, and some stationery items, which were donated to a local women and children's shelter. An official handover ceremony took place towards the end of the year, where the donations were presented to the founder of the identified shelter. The event was attended by the faculty's marketing coordinator, the university's community engagement representative, the chemical engineering department head, the chemical engineering CESA co-chairs, and the CESA students. After each of the esteemed guests reflected on their experiences in the pilot drives, the founder of the shelter expressed her gratitude by indicating that the donated items were much needed and welcomed. During the emotional event, all the attendees experienced the social impact of their contributions to the local community and vowed to try harder to secure more donations in the forthcoming drives. Growing up in a tough economic climate and being plagued by social ills, such as substance abuse and gender-based violence, both staff and students valued the positive impacts made through CESA's community engagement initiatives.

Last year, an informal workshop was held on developing good LinkedIn profiles to help students who were near completion of their studies to possibly market themselves and secure employment using LinkedIn as a professional networking platform. Almost none of the students had previous experiences with LinkedIn, and asked questions, took notes, and requested additional resources. At the end of the workshop, the attendees expressed their gratitude and asked further questions.

Reflecting on the social, and developmental impacts made by CESA's activities last year, Rishen was motivated to build on these experiences and intensify CESA's activities this year by introducing a peer mentoring programme, in which student mentors and mentees volunteer to impart and seek professional and developmental advice from each other.

### **Analysing personal growth, skills development, and leadership opportunities**

CESA provides an opportunity for students to grow as well-rounded contributing members of society by demonstrating that becoming engineers and professionals in the workplace is not on its own an adequate contribution to society. Learning to care for the well-being of the less fortunate and becoming proactive in community engagement even as students without much financial agency, is just as important as contributing to the productivity of a company in their future engineering professions.

Soft skills, such as time management, effective communication, peer collaboration, conflict resolution, and intrinsic learned behaviours, such as compassion and empathy, all contribute to the development of future leaders within CESA.

By joining the CESA community and actively participating in the exciting activities, students are afforded a break from their academic studies in a constructive and fulfilling manner. New students are also afforded a long-term opportunity to integrate into the wider university community and network with senior students for information. Such



opportunities are not possible during the shorter orientation programmes for new students.

### Identifying the strengths and weaknesses in managing CESA

Based on the reflections of the CESA departmental representatives, the strengths and weaknesses of managing CESA are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Strengths and weaknesses in managing CESA**

Strengths	Weaknesses
The strengths of managing CESA include experiential learning. The initiatives can only improve through reflections of pilot runs.	Networking and relationship building: Student organisations provide avenues to network with peers, faculty, alumni, and professionals in the field, fostering valuable connections and relationships (Dugan & Komives, 2010).
CESA is a fun and exciting organisation that enables working alongside the diverse student population.	Working in a diverse team setting may present challenges related to communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Interpersonal conflicts can arise, requiring effective leadership and conflict management skills.
Managing a student organisation provides opportunities for leadership development, communication skills, teamwork, and organisational abilities (Astin, 1998; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Kuh et al., 2010).	Facilitators involved in student organisations often juggle various roles and responsibilities, which can lead to increased stress and potential burnout (Posner & Brodsky, 1992).
Networking and relationship building: Student organisations provide avenues to network with peers, faculty, alumni, and professionals in the field, fostering valuable connections and relationships (Dugan & Komives, 2010).	Student organisations do not typically receive the same level of recognition and support as teaching or research initiatives within the institution (Posner & Brodsky, 1992). Effort is often required to link organisational activities to teaching and research outcomes.

## Evaluation and analysis

### Assessing CESA's outcomes and achievements

The four stages in the framework for reflexive evaluation in student engagement (Healey & Jenkins, 2009) were used to guide the CESA departmental representatives' assessment of CESA's outcomes and achievements in Table 3.

**Table 3: Assessment of CESA’s outcomes**

Stage	Description	Elaboration
1	Describe	<p>This stage documents the observable aspects of CESA, which is comprised of chemical engineering students who join voluntarily. The activities hosted by CESA fall under the broad categories of community engagement, peer mentoring, student development, and student support. CESA’s community engagement initiatives occur in partnership with the university’s community engagement department. As of last year, physical meetings take place between the students and the department representatives. CESA has a linear structure in the sense that the CESA students report to two student representatives per year of study. All the student representatives report to the student chairpersons, who report to the department representatives/ chairpersons.</p>
2	Analyse	<p>Regarding the observed experiences and interactions, CESA members across every level of the organisation were found to interact meaningfully. During CESA meetings with the department representative, students seem adequately comfortable to speak about their challenges, share their ideas, and add on to others’ ideas. Such confidence in themselves, and respect and consideration for others was perceived positively. Students also support engagement by asking questions and seeking clarity when needed.</p> <p>Reflecting on the motivations and power dynamics within CESA, the motivations that drive the organisation include the following: students have a desire to make a difference using their time and resources; students have a desire to succeed and become upstanding members of society; students want to stand out and be recognised for their contributions within the organisation; students recognise that we are connected to each other, hence the displays of altruism; students want to be extraordinary by engaging in activities that the average student overlooks or ignores; students understand the value of CESA’s initiatives and want to engage for their own benefit. Voluntarily joining the organisation means that students are motivated in one, or all the above ways. Power dynamics are neutralised within CESA, as everyone (students and staff) share collegial and respectful relationships.</p> <p>Socially, the general CESA student demographic emerges from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and are culturally and/or religiously inclined, as exhibited in their free, yet respectful behaviour and practices outside academic settings. These students are compassionate and empathetic, which are ideal traits for motivating students to undertake community engagement. Being raised in underprivileged circumstances also drives students to succeed and grab onto opportunities that can expedite their professional development. This scenario also drives students to join CESA and take advantage of the developmental opportunities. Finally, some students are shy and may lack the confidence to speak out about the challenges and issues affecting them. Hence, joining a student association allows them to</p>

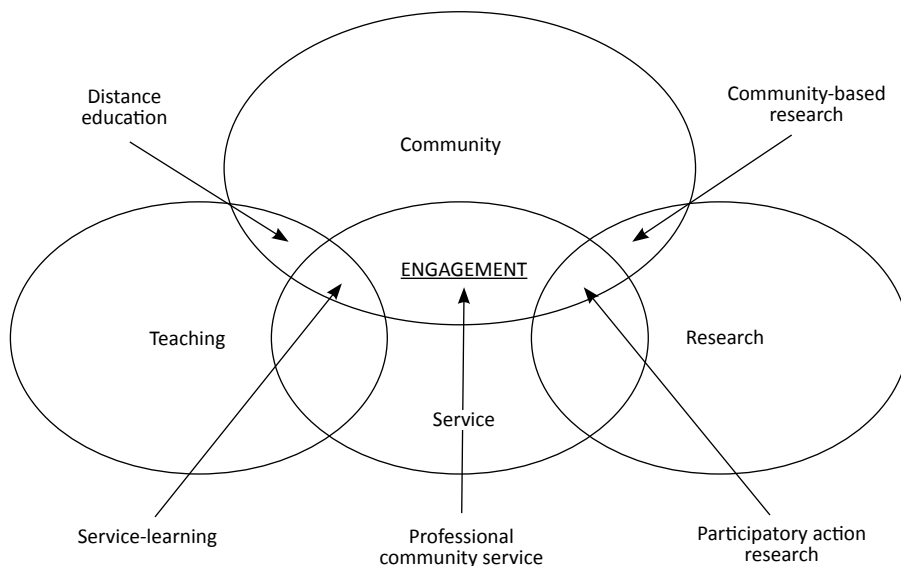
Stage	Description	Elaboration
		take a united stand against such or similar issues. From an institutional perspective, the department supports CESA by funding its initiatives – if funding requests are well substantiated and made in advance. These combined factors enable the functioning of CESA.
3	Interpret	<p>Delving into the deeper significance of the experiences and interactions; generally, students believe in ‘giving back’ which drives them to participate in CESA’s community engagement projects. This behaviour was explained to the CESA departmental representatives by the students concerned, when questioned regarding their motivations for participation. This attitude is linked to their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the students are also motivated to succeed and make good use of every support structure afforded them. Hence, they choose to participate in the developmental aspects.</p> <p>The emotional impacts of charitable work when undertaking community engagement include feeling happy and joyful, fostering empathy and compassion, finding a sense of purpose, and meaning, and gaining a sense of self-esteem and self-worth (Post, 2005; Akin et al., 2012; Lyubomirsky et al., 2004). These are some of the emotional impacts reported by the CESA students. Socially, students feel integrated into the university, and society. Such feelings of belonging and integration are correlated to student retention (Lillis, 2011). By engaging in CESA’s student development activities, students become more well-rounded, and gain deeper insights from fellow and senior students. Such engagements lead to an informal learning environment in which students can seek help from each other with challenging areas.</p>
4	Evaluate	A SWOT analysis is used to reflect on the effectiveness and value of CESA’s activities and initiatives. CESA’s strengths include the eagerness of the current student participants and the experiential learning gained from the activities piloted thus far. The weaknesses include the time and energy required to participate and run the organization – from students and staff alike. Opportunities include the potential to expand CESA’s initiatives to the faculty and university levels. Threats include the lack of resources and budgetary constraints. Based on the SWOT analysis, the strengths and opportunities outweigh the weaknesses and threats.

### **Evaluating personal development and lessons learned as the chairpersons**

Managing CESA has helped the CESA chairpersons to develop several skills: leadership, time management, communication and interpersonal skills, organisational and planning abilities, networking, and relationship building, problem-solving and adaptability, self-confidence and self-efficacy and personal growth and self-reflection (Astin, 1998; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Posner & Brodsky, 1992; Kuh et al., 2010).

One of the biggest lessons learned is that initiatives to create student-centredness do not receive as much recognition as research and teaching related achievements in academia. Hence, effort is required to link CESA’s activities and initiatives to teaching

and research outcomes. According to Lazarus et al. (2008), community engagement combines and integrates service with teaching and research related and applied to identified community development priorities. As such, Figure 1 shows the ways in which community engagement can be linked to other key aspects of academia (Bringle, 1999). Future work will focus on attempting to integrate community engagement as a key CESA activity with research and teaching.



**Figure 1: Variations of community engagement (Bringle, 1999)**

### **Discussing the relationship between CESA's activities and student-centredness**

CESA uses its initiatives and activities as tools to promote student-centredness and development. Community engagement enables students to apply leadership and organisational skills in the 'real world' and provides a greater sense of personal identity, spirituality, and moral development (Bandy, 2011).

Regarding student development, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) psychosocial development theory outlines seven factors that govern student development: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, establishing, and clarifying purpose, and developing integrity (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006). Considering that each of these development factors were correlated to students' involvement in student clubs and organisations (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006), it is evident that CESA aids in student development through its student initiatives.

In addition, Magolda and Astin (1993) investigated the effects of students being involved in extra-curricular organisations. The study found that public speaking, leadership, and interpersonal skills correlated strongly with the time students spent participating in student organisations. Magolda and Astin (1993) believed that a

student's peer group greatly influences their cognitive and affective development, as peers can involve each other more intensely in shared experiences (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006). However, it is worth clarifying that positive outcomes are typically only achieved when engaging with 'good quality' peers. In CESA's case, students join voluntarily with the desire to improve themselves and uplift others, thus befitting the "good quality" category. Interactions with peers of such calibre contributes to interpersonal competence, cognitive complexity, and humanitarianism (Kuh, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1996). Comparatively, new students who join student organisations have higher scores on developing purpose than those who do not join (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). Hence, getting first-year students to join CESA remains a priority.

Such claims were supported by Foubert and Urbanski (2006) who quantitatively found that participation in student organisations correlated to psychosocial development, in terms of students' purpose, educational involvement, career planning, life management, and cultural participation. Considering that students who participate in student organisations demonstrated higher levels of development (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006), they outlined the significance of creating meaningful involvement opportunities for students, to promote overall development. Hence, the motivation to use experiential learning to ensure CESA's continuous improvement.

## **Conclusion and action plan**

### **Summarising the key experiences, thoughts, and evaluations of the CESA departmental representatives**

The key experiences, thoughts, and evaluations can be summarised as follows: the inception of CESA under the leadership of the departmental chairpersons aimed to create a student-centred environment and address the shortcomings of student isolation and deficient student orientation programmes. The chairperson role involved developing CESA's mission and goals, engaging with students, planning and facilitating events, and acting as liaisons between students and other lecturers.

The re-establishment of CESA was initially unclear. The pressure to create a reliable starting point that would foster student-centredness was overwhelming. Running the online organisation like a blog during the lockdown helped to provide support and promote students' development and well-being.

Forming CESA was challenging, due to a lack of structure, time constraints, limited recognition, and financial support. Mitigation strategies included aligning CESA's goals with the university's strategic objectives, highlighting the impact on students' development, sharing positive experiences to motivate the participation of other academics, and co-running the organisation to share administrative work.

Community engagement initiatives formed a significant part of CESA's activities, aiming to benefit both the local community and the students. Examples included stationery and sanitary towel drives, as well as student development workshops. The positive impact of these activities was evident in the donations received and the gratitude expressed by the community.

Managing CESA provided personal growth opportunities, skills development, and leadership experiences. It allowed the chairperson to create a different learning environment for students, foster a sense of connection and belonging, and develop students into caring and compassionate future leaders.

Strengths in managing the organisation included experiential learning and the opportunity to work with a diverse student population. Weaknesses included challenges related to structure, time, recognition, and financial support, but these could be mitigated through careful planning, collaboration, and sharing responsibilities.

Overall, the chairperson experience was positive, and the commitment to positively impact students through CESA remained strong.

### **Reflecting on the lessons learned from the CESA experiences**

Based on the reflections of the CESA chairpersons, regarding their personal development and lessons learned, various skills were required to manage CESA, such as leadership, time management, communication, organisational abilities, networking, problem-solving, and self-confidence. Acknowledging that student-centredness initiatives are not as recognised as research and teaching achievements in academia, the chairpersons plan to integrate CESA's activities with teaching and research outcomes to highlight the importance of student-centredness.

The reflective article considered the relationship between CESA's community engagement activities and student development. Community engagement provides students with opportunities to apply leadership and organisational skills in real-world contexts, fostering individuality, spirituality, and moral development. Overall, the article suggests that involvement in student clubs and organisations, such as CESA, correlates with positive student development outcomes, as referenced in literature findings. Studies by Astin and Sax (1998) and Foubert and Urbanski (2006) support the idea that participation in student organisations enhances students' cognitive and affective development. Positive peer interactions in student organisations contribute to interpersonal competence, cognitive complexity, and humanitarianism. The article emphasises the importance of involving first-year students in CESA to foster purpose development. Participation in student organisations is associated with psychosocial development in areas such as educational involvement, career planning, life management, and cultural participation. In conclusion, these combined benefits effectively cultivate a culture of student-centredness. Hence, the reflections support the argument of the article.

### **Proposed action plan for CESA's future improvement and growth**

A seven-step action plan is proposed to ensure CESA's future improvement and growth (Table 4).

**Table 4: CESA action plan**

Phase	Description	Elaboration
1	Identifying current needs	A comprehensive needs assessment must be conducted with all CESA's members to identify CESA's current strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. The data can be collected through surveys and interviews with the current members (Spillane et al., 1999). However, such data collection will require ethical clearance at faculty level. Hence, this first step will require a research proposal to present to the faculty's ethics committee.
2	Developing a strategic plan	Based on the results of the needs assessment, a strategic plan can be developed to indicate CESA's vision, mission, goals, and growth strategies. By using the results obtained from CESA's members, the plan will align with the members' aspirations and expectations (Dugan & Komives, 2010).
3	Enhancing leadership development	Aligning with the recommendations of Posner and Brodsky (1992), the existing skills development programs (LinkedIn profile development, CV creation, job interview preparation) can be enhanced and offered on a regular basis, as opposed to once a year. Additionally, leadership development programmes and training opportunities can be offered for members to enhance their leadership skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. The CESA mentorship programme can also be expedited each year to encourage new students to join and encourage returning mentees to provide mentorship.
4	Improving member engagement	More CESA leadership roles can be created to offer diverse and meaningful opportunities for members to contribute. These roles can include committee involvement, project leadership, or event planning to create a sense of belonging and community among members (Kuh et al., 2010).
5	Enhancing transparent communication	Currently, all CESA communications are announced via CESA's module page on the learning management system. However, Haber (2011) recommend streamlined communication channels to ensure effective information sharing, transparency, and inclusivity. A WhatsApp group can be used for emergency communications, while a quarterly newsletter can be presented for more comprehensive feedback and updates to keep members informed about organisational activities and decisions.
6	Fostering collaboration	Supporting the recommendation of Magolda and Astin (1993), collaborative partnerships can be formed with other student organisations, academic departments, and community organisations to widen CESA's reach and impact. Such collaborative projects can provide diverse learning experiences and expand CESA's network.
7	Monitoring progress	The progress of the action plan outlined in step 2 must be regularly assessed to evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies. Additional feedback from members can be used to make informed adjustments and improvements to CESA's activities and initiatives.

### **Ethical considerations**

No ethical clearance was required, as the data were sourced from the authors.

### **Potential conflict of interest**

There were no conflicts of interest involved in authoring this article.

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