

Advocating for Honours Psychology Students to Engage in Service-Learning for Access and Provision of Mental Health Care: A South African Case

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Abstract

South Africa is facing a growing mental health crisis, worsened by high unemployment, limited access to care, and under-resourced services. Despite increasing rates of anxiety and depression, only a small portion of the national health budget is allocated to mental health. This policy brief proposes a practical, cost-effective solution: integrating service-learning into the Honours Psychology curriculum. Service-learning allows students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges through structured, supervised community engagement. Honours psychology students, though not yet professionally registered, possess valuable foundational skills that can be mobilised to support mental health initiatives in underserved communities.

By formally recognising these students as contributors through policy reform, South Africa can potentially address two pressing issues simultaneously: the shortage of mental health service providers and the rising unemployment among psychology graduates. The brief outlines a step-by-step implementation plan, including curriculum integration, community partnerships, needs assessments, and student-led interventions. Real-world examples, such as the “Mindful Moments” initiative, demonstrate how students can safely and ethically support vulnerable populations while gaining essential skills.

This approach benefits all stakeholders: communities receive much-needed support, students gain practical experience, and institutions fulfil their social accountability mandate. The proposal aligns with national mental health policies and global best practices, offering a scalable model for sustainable change. Ultimately, embedding service-learning into psychology education fosters a new generation of socially responsive professionals while strengthening South Africa’s mental health system.ⁱ

Problem Statement

Post the worldwide Covid-19 lockdown period, the state of mental health remains a concern, and observations show an increase in the rate of common mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression (Shisana et al. 2024). South Africa has a high burden of people living with mental illnesses, with many factors such as unemployment, stigma, poverty, and other non-communicable diseases contributing to it (Shisana et al. 2024). With this burden, it is noted that there is a shortage of mental health care service providers, along with primary and community-based mental care systems being underfunded and under resourced (with only about 5% of the national healthcare budget allocated to mental health care (Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), 2018; Shisana et al., 2024)) which likely contribute to

many remaining undiagnosed and unable to access needed care (Shisana et al. 2024). A recent investment case conducted to assess potential returns on mental health investment showed that the cost to the South African economy far outweighs the cost of investing in mental health. This study estimated the annual loss due to mental health disorders at R161 billion (Shisana et al. 2024), mental disorders that are often comorbid with HIV and other chronic (Jack et al. 2014) and non-communicable diseases (Stein et al. 2019).

Greater investment in the mental health care service sector is needed to contribute towards addressing these challenges and, in turn, strengthening the health system (Shisana et al. 2024), as this is often identified as a contributor to most supportive interventions developed not being sustained long-term. A shortage in human resources can be a barrier to service delivery and access (Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) 2018; Shisana et al. 2024). South African unemployment rates remain staggeringly high, with the graduate unemployment rate increasing by 3.0% to 11.7% in the first quarter of 2025 (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) 2025). Career prospects for graduate Service learning for honours psychology students can be used as a medium through which to meet the shortfall in service delivery. Service learning is defined as “a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such away as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (12)” (Hatcher and McIntosh 2006, as cited in Felten and Clayton 2011,76).

Service learning for health science students is not a foreign concept. However, for psychology honours students in South Africa, the focus on service learning appears not to be given. With unemployment amongst honours psychology graduates being a persistent issue and mental health service provision and access being hindered, it's important that innovative employment and skills development opportunities are created. Task sharing through service-learning can be such an avenue. Task sharing or task shifting is the distribution or sharing of tasks from highly qualified health workers to health workers with shorter or without specialist training or fewer qualifications to make use of available human resources for quality and accessible service provision. Cost-effective interventions need to be developed and implemented to contribute towards meeting the mental health care system and mental health illness burden. Preventative measures at a primary level, such as clear referral pathways, awareness campaigns, and mental health education, are ways to reduce the economic, human health, and health systems burden before mental health severity can manifest (Majokweni et al. 2024). These include involving psychology honours students in service-learning activities such as mental health awareness campaigns and stress management sessions/interventions. These can be considered cost-effective methods to improve access to mental health care/services to communities (Khalaeng et al. 2024).

Current Policy/Law

At present, several policies and guidelines pose potential blockages in our quest to advocate for honours psychology students' engagement in service learning. These include the Health Professions Act, 1974, and the Health Professions Council of South Africa's guidelines for Psychologists (especially for Student psychologists) that leave limited room for the expansion of tasks towards first-level postgraduate students (i.e., honour students), and do not formally

recognise honours psychology students as eligible for supervised basic skills training. However, there are (international and national) policies and regulations that can be leveraged to support our advocacy, such as the South African National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2023-2030, the South African Mental Health Care Act 17 of 2002, the WHO health worker classification chart, Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) intervention guide for mental, neurological and substance use disorders in non-specialised health settings (mhGAP-IG) and our institutions Community Engagement and Citizenship Policy which highlight the severity of the mental health care need and call for civic engagement and innovative, decentralised methods (e.g. quality service provision through non-traditional methods such as task sharing through service learning) to engage with communities to feasibly meet pressing need.

Policy Solution

As part of our policy solution, there should be, at the government, regulatory, and institutional levels, formal recognition and support for task-sharing embedded in service learning to meet basic community (rural or otherwise) mental health service needs. At a regulatory level, the student psychologist category should be extended to include honours students and credit given, post-service engagement, by the Health Professionals Council of South Africa (HPCSA). At a national level, more of the national budget should be extended to mental health care, as the mind and body cannot be thought of as separate entities, but each affects the other. Greater investment into mental health care far outweighs the economic burden, and this extension can, as argued previously, be in the form of recognising and creating funded internship opportunities as lay counsellors, amongst others, for honours psychology graduates within government departments or NGOs.

Finally, at a private institutional level, there should be a policy specific to service-learning to act as a guideline and support social accountability standards incorporation and be intentionally implemented or revision of the existing policy to incorporate social accountability standards. From an implementation standpoint, there should be an integration of service-learning for honours psychology students as part of the curriculum, particularly in the community psychology programme, which can result in our institutions' campuses identifying and building partnerships with existing community-based organisations in their surrounding communities. With this, there should be an understanding of community mental health needs to ensure that all activities and interventions developed or implemented are aligned with the community. Furthermore, community initiatives should be supervised by registered professionals but initiated and led by students, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be put in place, and community initiatives should be documented and disseminated through various publicly accessible mediums.

Action Steps/Summary/Recommendations

Following the discussion above and for social accountability to be realised in the Faculty of Humanities at the IIEs Varsity College, a structured, step-by-step approach will be taken. The following section outlines each step and how it will be implemented across multiple campuses within the faculty.

Step 1: Embedding service-learning component into community psychology modules in psychology honours programme

To develop students' thinking and experience about social accountability, a service-learning component will be embedded into the community psychology module that forms part of the Bachelor of Arts Psychology Honours programme offered across the different campuses. Community Psychology was identified as a key vehicle for service-learning, as the outcomes of this module align well with understanding community needs. As part of community psychology, students are exposed to key theories, models, and approaches that allow for the understanding, exploration, and addressing of community needs. The module runs over a semester (i.e., 5 months). This module also exposes students to more advanced approaches than those that they are introduced to in their undergraduate study programmes. An important consideration for instilling social accountability was ensuring that the module used to embed it is credit-bearing.

Step 2: Campuses to identify and build partnerships with existing community-based organisations in their surrounding community (envisaged for long-term engagement)

An important step to facilitate the placement of the psychology honours students is for each campus to identify and build long-term partnerships with existing community-based organizations located near the campus. Establishing these partnerships is crucial for embedding service-learning into our psychology honours programme. According to Danhondo et al. (2018), partnerships with communities play a crucial role in embedding social accountability. As part of their service-learning activities, students will be engaged with representatives from these organisations to collaboratively identify key community mental health needs and co-create intervention strategies to address those needs. Students will be expected to draw on the knowledge and skills taught in their community psychology module to conceptualise a viable, fit-for-purpose strategy to intervene with community need.

Step 3: Understanding the community mental health needs to ensure that all activities/initiatives/interventions are aligned (collaborative process)

As an initial step to engaging with the community organisations to address a community mental health need, students will be expected to establish key relationships with representatives and community members. This will allow the students to generate a clear understanding of the context in which the community mental health need exists. Once rapport has been established, students will be expected to plan and implement a needs assessment at the community organisation. This process will be undertaken under the supervision of a trained psychology lecturer. It is crucial that the community organisations' representatives and community members are actively involved throughout the process and are allowed to express their viewpoints equitably. Students will be expected to write a detailed report using the approach taught in their community psychology module.

Step 4: A part of the service-learning component, students will develop fit-for-purpose intervention plans in collaboration with the community organisation (i.e., understanding roles/organisational structure)

Once rapport has been established and students have generated the report, students will be expected to engage with the community organisation to collaboratively develop a fit-for-purpose intervention plan to address the community mental health need. Students would have to consider key aspects such as financial and human resource needs, timeframes, and monitoring and evaluation procedures as part of their planning. Key to this process would be establishing clear communication with the community organisations to keep them informed about the status of the development. Students will also be expected to engage with their campus supervisor to ensure that the interventions are well-positioned and aligned to address the community's mental health needs.

Step 5: Students to implement the interventions to address mental health needs

Once a clear plan has been developed, students will be expected to implement the intervention at the community organisation. As part of the implementation, students will provide feedback on their experiences of undertaking the service-learning journey to the community organisation and community members.

Step 6: Monitoring and evaluating the intervention to assess effectiveness

All interventions will be evaluated by the campus supervisor, as well as a representative of the community organisation and a community member. Triangulating the evaluation process will allow for important feedback around relevance to the community, effectiveness of the intervention, and the relevance of the psychology honours curriculum.

Step 7: Dissemination of findings by means of research/artifacts developed for use in communities

After the intervention has been implemented, student will be expected to write up their findings of the investigation. The information would have to be curated and packaged in a manner that is easily consumable by the target audience and broader community. A key consideration would be the practicality of the means used for dissemination and whether the target audience would be able to access the resources with ease. Factors to consider for this step would be language, culture, accessibility, and practicality.

Step 8: Reflection

As a final step in the process, students will be expected to participate in a short focus group discussion with their fellow classmates to reflect on their experiences of participating in service-learning. Key themes that will be explored in these focus groups will be personal experiences, lessons learned, gaps identified, and implications for their development as prospective mental health professionals.

Each campus will keep a record of the service-learning activities each year, and these activities will be presented at the faculty level, where representatives from each campus will be able to engage with one another to share successes and key lessons. An important part of this process would also be assessing the implementation process to identify areas of improvement to the service-learning programme, the Community Psychology module, and

the Psychology Honours curriculum overall. Community representatives and community members will also be invited to participate in this process.

Evidence of Service-Learning Benefits/Shortfalls

Currently, there exists a shortage of Master's psychology posts for graduating honours students, resulting in an increase in unemployed honours graduates. By engaging in service learning during honours studies, students can graduate with the necessary understanding of community mental health needs and will be better equipped to start contributing meaningfully to the mental health landscape in South Africa. Additionally, further benefits include increased self-awareness and an understanding of the mental health workforce landscape in South Africa. Including them in these areas potentially works to contribute towards addressing the mental health care service shortage, building the economy, and upskilling the graduates for future job prospects in the field and beyond.

Real-world examples do exist that highlight the benefits of service learning as a component for our Honours psychology students. As a community engagement initiative at our institution, students are offered opportunities to take what they learn in the lecture rooms and apply it to real-world problems as a mechanism of further learning and skills development. One such initiative exists, coined "Mindful Moments".ⁱⁱ

The Mindful Moments Initiative bridges a critical gap between psychological theory and ethical community practice by offering honours psychology students the opportunity to gain real-world volunteer experience in supervised, ethically sound settings. Unlike traditional academic programs that often delay direct exposure to community engagement until after professional registration, this initiative introduces students early to structured, hands-on psychosocial work. Through carefully designed support groups and tailored workshops, students are empowered to engage meaningfully and safely with vulnerable populations, cultivating both professional competence and social responsiveness.

At its core, the initiative contributes significantly to both education and public mental health. Students are equipped with essential practical skills such as empathy, group facilitation, time management, teamwork, and psychological first aid. Each psychology student works within a small team assigned to a specific partner organisation. These teams are coordinated by a Project Leader who oversees planning, communication, and implementation. Support groups are co-facilitated, fostering shared responsibility and allowing team members to learn from one another in real-time. Workshop content is collaboratively developed by the students and continuously adapted based on feedback from beneficiaries and community partners, ensuring relevance and responsiveness.

The initiative is professionally supervised by two registered mental health practitioners who provide ongoing mentorship and ensure adherence to ethical standards. These supervisors monitor the quality of interventions, offer professional guidance, and act as bridges between the academic institution and the community. Their involvement ensures that students' learning is grounded in accountability and best practice while also supporting meaningful community outcomes. Importantly, the initiative adopts a bottom-up, culturally sensitive approach to programming. Students are encouraged to tailor their interventions to the unique challenges and cultural contexts of each site. Regular feedback loops between students,

supervisors, and community stakeholders promote a culture of continuous reflection and adaptation. This iterative process requires students to remain responsive, flexible, and respectful, key attributes for future practitioners in the field of psychology. In doing so, the Mindful Moments Initiative not only enhances student development but also fosters sustainable, ethical, and contextually relevant mental health support for underserved communities.

Service-learning opportunities such as the above initiative by tertiary education institutions provide a mechanism for service provision and further education that benefits students, communications, and the institution acting as the change agent. Cuban and Anderson (2007, 145, as cited in Dubus 2014) describe institutionalising service learning as a means of 'correcting power imbalances, taking the perspective of and advocating for marginalised groups, and harnessing resources for social change with universities as major change agents. Here we see that service learning becomes a means of addressing community problems and needs from a system-oriented method.

Conclusion

Including a compulsory service-learning component in the honours psychology curriculum enables psychology students to engage in community-based activities (supervised by a registered clinical or counselling psychologist/professional) and to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to contribute meaningfully towards the development of fit-for-purpose mental health support for communities. Credit earning and/or incentivised opportunities that lead to recognition and creating internship opportunities for honours students and beyond as lay counsellors (or other equivalent category) in government, non-government or non-profit organisations, community centers and the like that provide mental health services should be created to support potential employment once postgraduate studies have commenced and to ensure service provision continues. This is a challenge that South African institutions can endeavour to participate in for the sake of ensuring social accountability from a psychological perspective.

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Endnotes

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