

Community-Based Participatory Research as a Driver of Social Enterprise Development: A Case Study from a South African University

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Abstract

In recent years, South African universities have been called upon to address socio-economic challenges through forms of engaged scholarship that integrate teaching, research, and community partnership. Using a case study approach, this paper explores how a community-oriented student organisation at the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein approached the academic facilitator and students of an entrepreneurship module with a request to help them become a viable and sustainable social enterprise as a means to combat unemployment and improve the graduate employability of its members. This request necessitated the formation of a community-university partnership (CUP) that employed community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) to support the development of a social enterprise. The partnership formed part of an experiential learning initiative embedded within entrepreneurship education at UFS. Through the use of CBPR and PALAR, the student organisation was assisted in identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and an action plan, based on a social enterprise business model canvas (SEMC), was designed to help the organisation achieve its goals. Findings reveal that engaging students in CBPR and PALAR through their partnership with the student organisation facilitated deep, experiential learning. The paper also reveals how collaborative knowledge production can generate mutual benefits for students, communities, and the institution.

Keywords: *Community-based participatory research (CBPR); social enterprise development; community-university partnership (CUP); participatory action learning and action research (PALAR); entrepreneurial education*

Introduction

In South Africa, youth unemployment remains persistently high, and small, micro, and medium enterprises (SMMEs) continue to face significant survival challenges (Tlhagale & Nyoka, 2025). Given these circumstances, universities are expected to play a transformative role in equipping students with entrepreneurial skills while simultaneously contributing to community development (Pee & Vululleh, 2020). Over the past decade, universities have been called upon to demonstrate their relevance to society by addressing complex socio-economic challenges through community engagement initiatives (Machiha, 2025; Magaiza, Mukwada, Lutabingwa & Dube, 2025).

In response to this call, and to address socio-economic challenges in the community, the Department of Business Management at the University of the Free State (UFS) has integrated community-based participatory research (CBPR) into its entrepreneurship modules. This integration provides students with experiential opportunities to work alongside community partners, particularly social enterprises and SMMEs, in identifying and addressing context-specific challenges. Such partnerships extend beyond traditional volunteerism to embrace principles of co-creation, reciprocity, and mutual capacity building, where students, academics, and community stakeholders jointly design and implement interventions (Green, 2024; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker & Donohue, 2003). Thus, this case study reports on a community-university partnership between ACCESS (Active Community Citizens through Engaged Scholarship for Sustainability), a community-oriented student organisation at UFS, and UFS itself.

Background and context

Thirty one years after the demise of apartheid, South Africa continues to grapple with challenging socio-economic issues, including a high unemployment rate (33.2%), youth unemployment (46.1%), graduate unemployment (12.2%) and persistent inequality (StatsSA, 2025a; StatsSA, 2025b). Despite the commitment of the government, the private sector, and entrepreneurs to create jobs, the public sector and entrepreneurial ecosystems are limited and cannot absorb the current labour force or the growing number of graduates (Fraser, 2023; Goyayi, 2022; Jacobs, 2025). Thus the government's clarion call to young people to consider starting their own businesses instead of waiting for employment (Chabalala, 2025). It is within this context that universities are increasingly called upon to play a transformative role by educating and training people, most especially the youth, to be able to identify business opportunities, or create employment opportunities, or establish viable and sustainable businesses, which is of utmost importance in the country (Chabalala, 2025; Jacobs, 2025).

The study was conducted in the Free State province, which has the sixth highest unemployment rate among nine provinces (StatsSA, 2025c); therefore, creating employment opportunities or establishing viable and sustainable businesses in the province is of the

utmost importance. Unemployment negatively impacts a country's economic development, increases poverty, and fosters a breeding ground for other social vices, such as crime, in the community. The establishment of viable SMMEs may create more employment opportunities for the community.

Literature Review

Community-University Partnership

Community-university partnerships (CUPs) are defined as “collaborations between community organisations and institutions of higher learning for the purpose of achieving an identified social change goal through community-engaged scholarship that ensures mutual benefit for the community organisation and participating students” (Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan & Farrar, 2011, p.16). According to Magaiza et al. (2025) and Venter (2022), institutions of higher learning can serve as catalysts for transformative social change by engaging meaningfully with diverse communities. These authors emphasise that effective CUPs must be grounded in mutual respect, dialogical engagement, and collaborative knowledge production. Such partnerships are most impactful when driven by locally identified needs and when they foster shared ownership of both the process and outcomes of the engagement. In line with these principles, a collaborative partnership was formed between students enrolled in the entrepreneurship module and the social enterprise Active Community Citizens through Engaged Scholarship for Sustainability (ACCESS). According to scholars, effective CUPs should demonstrate the features presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Features of effective CUPs

| Feature | Brief description |
|------------------------|---|
| Mutual benefit | All partners should gain from the collaboration, be it resources, capacity building, or knowledge (Suarez-Balcazar, Davis, Ferrari, Nyden, Olson, Alvarez, Molloy & Toro, 2004; Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan & Farrar, 2011). |
| Shared decision-making | Research and project agendas are co-created, and power is equitably shared (Magaiza, 2025; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004). |
| Trust and respect | Partnerships thrive on trust, open communication, and mutual respect (Buys & Burnsall, 2007; Curwood et al, 2011). |
| Sustainability | Keys to success are long-term commitment, stable funding, and institutional support (Northmore & Hart, 2011). |
| Readiness and capacity | Institutions must be ready to collaborate, both in mindset and infrastructure (Curwood et al., 2011). |
| Community Empowerment | Emphasis is placed on empowerment, and the community is recognised as a knowledge producer and not a passive subject (Magaiza, 2025; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Curwood et al., 2011). |
| Integrated Learning | CUPs are often aligned with academic programmes through community-based research (CBR) and community service learning (CSL) (Curwood, et al., 2011). |

In the Global South, CUPs are recognised as transformative mechanisms for addressing complex socio-economic challenges. Therefore, they are seen as vehicles for social and economic development (Preece, 2013), decolonising knowledge and practice (Tagutanazvo, 2025; Preece, 2013; Hall, 2010), platforms for engaged scholarships and service learning (Preece, 2013; Boyle & Silver, 2005), instruments for addressing structural inequities, and strategic responses to global agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an inclusive and collaborative research approach that actively involves community members, academics, practitioners, students, activists and stakeholders in all stages of the research process. Unlike traditional academic research, which often positions communities as subjects of study, CBPR seeks to conduct research with and for communities, ensuring mutual ownership, relevance and benefit (Strand, 2000; Strand et al., 2003; Gallagher, Johnson, O'Dowd, Barret, Richardson & McNally, 2017). As Koch, Selim and Kralik (2002), and Gallagher et al. (2017) emphasise, CBPR is grounded in the principles of co-learning and shared power, aiming to address issues of concern to the community and promote collective well-being.

Kingwill, Todd, Davy, and Pama (2024) argue that CBPR should not be defined as a method but rather viewed as a research approach or orientation toward research that utilises a combination of qualitative, quantitative, or indigenous research techniques to ideate, conceptualise, and collaboratively address issues faced by a community. They also emphasise that adopting this research orientation requires actively including community members who have first-hand experience of the issues being studied. Thus, CBPR promotes a co-learning process in which all partners contribute and mutually benefit from each other's knowledge, skills, and insights (Walker & Boni, 2020). However, while CBPR presents significant opportunities for deepening community engagement and advancing engaged scholarship, scholars (Marovah & Mutanga, 2024; Appiah, 2020; Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003) have cautioned that it is not without challenges. They, for instance, highlight potential pitfalls, including power imbalances, knowledge hierarchies, tokenistic participation, limited capacity development, and ethical or cultural concerns. To address these risks, Appiah (2020) argues that authentic, equitable partnerships between researchers and community members must be intentionally built from the beginning of the research process. Similarly, Maistry and Lortan (2017) and Hall and Tandon (2020) suggest that when the participatory and collaborative principles of CBPR are genuinely upheld, they can help reduce hierarchical barriers and power imbalances by valuing and integrating the lived experiences, worldviews, and knowledge systems of the communities involved.

Furthermore, Walker and Boni (2020) argue that meaningful participatory processes must be grounded in a decolonial ethical orientation, one that actively confronts colonial-era power imbalances in knowledge production, challenges Western-centric

epistemologies, advances epistemic justice for marginalised groups, and places community self-determination at the centre of research priorities. This viewpoint is echoed by Lepore, Hall, and Tandon (2020), who argue that both academics and community-based knowledge practitioners can contribute to the advancement of the UN SDGs by co-creating knowledge that is rooted in local realities but globally relevant. Marovah and Mutanga (2024) further support these perspectives, asserting that for CBPR to achieve conceptual clarity and methodological rigour, it must embrace decolonisation and draw on the Ubuntu philosophy. They describe decolonisation as the removal of practices and traditions that overlook or exclude local knowledge systems, culture, and ways of knowing. In this regard, they posit that Ubuntu provides a hopeful and democratic foundation for knowledge co-creation, particularly within African research contexts. Therefore, to ensure that CBPR is conducted appropriately, researchers should follow the foundational principles outlined by Israel, Schulz, Parker and Becker (2001), adapted here to suit social science research contexts on which this case study is situated. The key principles are that researchers should (i) recognise the community as a unit of identity; (ii) build on strengths and resources within the community, (iii) facilitate collaborative, equitable involvement of all partners in all phases of the research; (iv) integrate knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners; (v) promote a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities; (vi) involve a cyclical and iterative process; (vii) disseminate findings and knowledge gained to all partners and (viii) involve a long-term commitment by all partners.

Social Enterprise Development

A social enterprise is defined as “an organisation or venture that achieves its primary social or environmental mission using business methods”, usually by operating a revenue-generating business (Katz & Page, 2010, p. 59). Social enterprises are recognised as vehicles for addressing pressing societal challenges, such as unemployment, environmental issues, drug abuse, illiteracy, and social inequality (Rankhumise, 2020). Yet, despite their potential, they often face numerous challenges due to their distinct profile, including limited resources, inadequate formal structures and a lack of strategic planning capacity. Through CUPs, universities can provide valuable support to build enterprise capabilities, foster innovation, enhance organisational competencies, and improve access to knowledge and networks. This case study, therefore, positions social enterprise development not as an act of charity but as a process of reciprocal engaged scholarship, in which the enterprise, students, and academic facilitator collaboratively co-create strategies that respond to community needs.

ACCESS is a student-led, co-created, action-learning initiative affiliated with UFS, dedicated to leadership development, skills training, and promoting engaged scholarship. The organisation mobilises students who are passionate about addressing critical societal issues under three themes – environmental affairs, social justice for impact and health and wellbeing – through collaborative, community-based action. The organisation is

situated in the Division of Student Affairs and supported by the Directorate of Community Engagement. ACCESS, though a student enterprise, is considered a ‘community enterprise’ within the context of community engagement, because it also accommodates community members who are not UFS students, particularly environmental champions and local social entrepreneurs who share their expertise on sustainability with the students. Additionally, some graduates have chosen to remain involved as ACCESS members even after completing their studies. Furthermore, the organisation actively partners with and serves the community outside the university to address needs, promote social responsiveness, and facilitate mutual learning and knowledge exchange. Also, the organisation regularly engages in community-focused activities and operationalises its mission through a range of sustainability-focused initiatives, collectively referred to as Living Labs. These include innovative programmes such as vermiculture (worm farming), urban gardening, earth building, recycling, menstrual health management, soap and candle making, advocacy, volunteerism, and entrepreneurship. It also spearheads awareness campaigns such as #KovsiesCare, which addresses gender-based violence (GBV) and other community health concerns, aligning with the broader aims of community engagement.

Through participation in these initiatives, UFS students engage in participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), gaining meaningful, hands-on experience beyond the traditional classroom setting. Thus, CUPs enhance teaching through experiential learning, providing students with real-world experience in applying their skills (Buys & Burnsnall, 2007). This form of engaged scholarship not only enriches their academic and professional development but also contributes directly to sustainable community development. The organisation was established in 2023 and was just a year old at the time of this project in 2024. Yet, despite its young age, it was already gaining traction on campus. By the end of 2024, more than 600 students had participated in ACCESS-related activities, demonstrating the programme’s growing reach, relevance, and impact across the university and its surrounding communities (ACCESS, 2024; Bolleurs, 2025).

Research Design and Methodology

This paper discusses the process of establishing a community-university partnership to support the development of a social enterprise. The study involves a project which is embedded within the Entrepreneurship curriculum at the University of the Free State (UFS). This module was intentionally redesigned to move beyond traditional, theory-driven approaches, incorporating experiential learning pedagogies that aim to equip students with practical, real-world skills. In line with this shift toward applied learning, the curriculum emphasised active engagement with local entrepreneurs and community-based organisations. Rather than undertaking conventional summative assessments such as written examinations, students were required to complete group-based consultancy projects. Each group, typically comprising five to six students, was partnered with a small, medium, or micro enterprise (SMME) operating in the local community. These partnerships

enabled students to address authentic business challenges faced by the entrepreneurs, thereby applying theoretical knowledge to practical contexts.

Research aim and objectives

The primary aim of the study was to investigate how community-based participatory research (CBPR) facilitated the development and strengthening of ACCESS, a social enterprise within a community-university partnership in South Africa.

The study was guided by three primary objectives:

- i. To examine how CBPR shaped the processes and dynamics of the community-university partnership.
- ii. To analyse the ways in which CBPR contributed to strengthening the organisational capacity and sustainability of ACCESS.
- iii. To explore how power, agency, and reciprocity were negotiated within the community-university partnership.

Participant selection

In previous iterations of the group-based consultancy project, participating enterprises were typically for-profit SMMEs. However, for this project, ACCESS was included as one of the six enterprises with which students would engage. ACCESS was the only social organisation in the cohort. Its inclusion was informed by two intersecting circumstances. First, prior to the commencement of the semester, ACCESS approached the academic coordinator for support in transitioning into a sustainable social enterprise. Second, the academic coordinator was enrolled in the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Consortium UNESCO African Centre CBPR Mentor Training Programme, which required participants to implement a CBPR project within their immediate community. These two developments created a strategic opportunity to integrate ACCESS into the module's consultancy project as a CBPR case.

A group of six students from the entrepreneurship module, who expressed an interest in working with a social organisation, were purposefully allocated to ACCESS. The remaining students were assigned to various for-profit enterprises. The ACCESS-assigned group functioned as business consultants, supporting the organisation in strengthening its operational capacity and developing pathways toward sustainability as a social enterprise. In contrast, the other student groups engaged in traditional business consultancy tasks using analytical tools such as SWOT analysis, the TOWS matrix, and the BCG matrix. As these groups did not participate in the CBPR-oriented component of the project, they fall outside the scope of this study.

ACCESS was represented by eight founding student members, referred to as 'champions', who had prior exposure to the PALAR process through internal training

within the organisation. Additional participants included the academic coordinator of the entrepreneurship project and the two ACCESS coordinators. A total of 17 participants were involved in the CBPR process. Through this collaboration, students and ACCESS members formed an action learning group, thereby establishing a structured community-university partnership for the project's purposes.

Research design

A qualitative case-study design was adopted, underpinned by CBPR and PALAR. This approach was selected because it aligned with the values of co-creation and participatory engagement. Also, it facilitated a contextual exploration of partnership processes, as well as supported mutual learning among students, academics, and the social enterprise. PALAR was chosen to align with the CBPR ethos of reciprocal engagement between the university and community partners, while also fostering reflective and action-oriented learning among students.

PALAR as Participatory Pedagogy

Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) methodology is a collaborative and democratic approach that prioritises mutual learning, co-inquiry, and empowerment among all stakeholders (Wood, 2020). As a participatory pedagogy, PALAR is particularly effective in engaging communities in processes that support their own sustainable development, as it positions all stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients (Wood & Zuber-Skeritt, 2013).

The research process adopted in this study was guided by PALAR principles and processes, which operate in a cyclical and iterative manner. These include relationship building, negotiating shared vision and ethical considerations, collaborative data generation and analysis, and the development of action-oriented solutions (Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skeritt, 2015; Wood & Zuber-Skeritt, 2013). Each principle shaped the dynamics of the community-university partnership and structured the participatory learning experience.

Relationship Building:

The participatory nature of PALAR promotes the building of relationships between academic researchers and community members by fostering trust and creating equal partnerships that challenge traditional power dynamics. The '3Rs' of PALAR – relationships, reflection and recognition – highlight the importance of establishing relational foundations that challenge hierarchical power dynamics.

In this project, the relationship between ACCESS and the student consultancy group was established during a series of meetings. Initial meeting sessions focused on building trust, clarifying expectations, and jointly creating the framework for the research partnership. ACCESS introduced its student 'champions' and one coordinator to the student consultancy

group, delivering a presentation on the organisation's mission and community impact. During this initial encounter, ACCESS outlined its operational needs and challenges, which later informed one of the study's research objectives. In turn, the student consultancy group met with ACCESS to discuss roles, agree on shared goals, and establish plans for ongoing collaboration, formally initiating the community-university partnership.

Vision and Ethics Negotiation:

A second core principle of PALAR is the co-negotiation of a shared vision and ethical framework. Rather than imposing pre-defined research agendas, PALAR requires that goals, expectations, and ethical commitments be negotiated collectively, ensuring transparency and shared ownership.

In the subsequent meetings, the student consultancy group and ACCESS collaboratively crafted a shared vision and articulated a common purpose for the partnership. This included negotiating the focus of the consultancy work, agreeing on ethical considerations such as confidentiality, representation, and decision-making processes, and setting boundaries regarding the roles of the student consultancy, ACCESS members, and the academic coordinator. The participants also co-developed an ethical agreement, clearly outlining the roles, responsibilities and expectations of both parties. This negotiation ensured that the project aligned with ACCESS's self-identified needs while also meeting the pedagogical aims of the entrepreneurship module and the requirements of the CBPR framework.

Data Collection and Analysis:

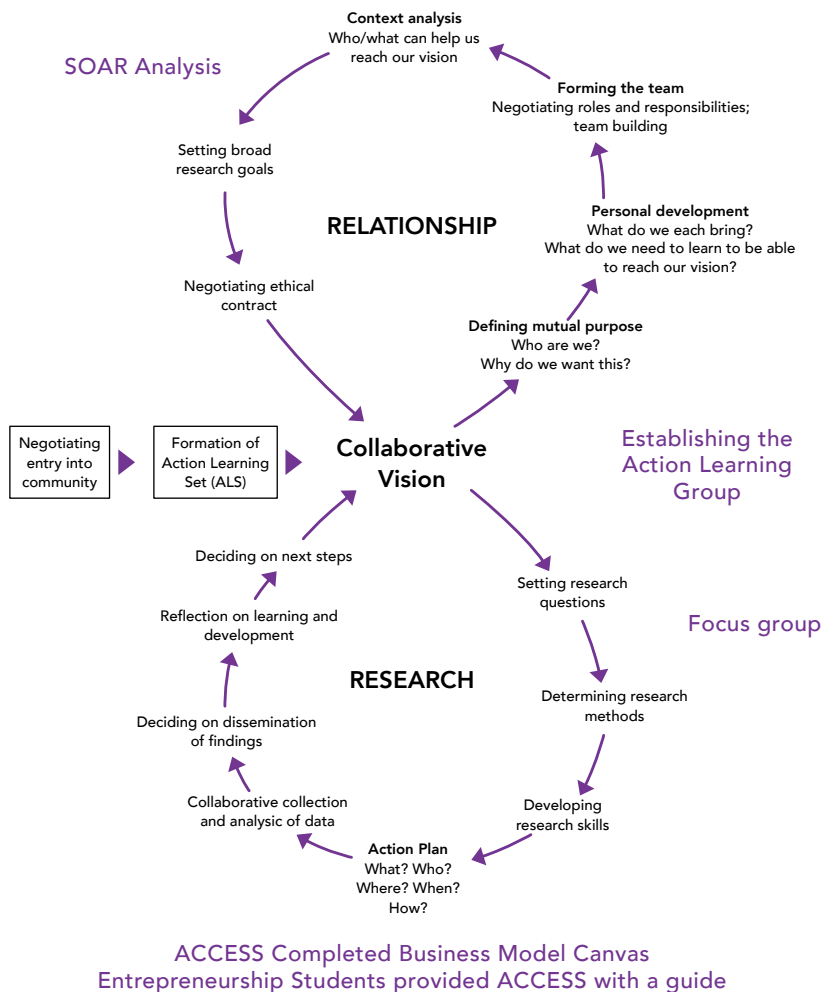
These activities are integral parts of the observe/evaluate and reflect stages of the cycle. The process involves collecting various forms of data (often qualitative) and collaboratively analysing them to generate new knowledge relevant to the community's context. Data gathering and collaborative analysis occurred during the second and third meetings. The data collection was guided by the overarching project question: What strategies can be implemented to enhance the sustainability and survival of ACCESS?

In response, ACCESS submitted a series of requests outlining its operational needs and challenges. These were refined into the following project objectives:

- i. To assist ACCESS in registering formally as a social enterprise.
- ii. To identify key resources required to build organisational capacity for sustainability and growth.
- iii. To position ACCESS for greater market impact and the creation of measurable social value.
 - A SOAR Analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results) was conducted to identify strategic priorities for ACCESS's development. This analysis occurred during the PALAR process, which was facilitated by ACCESS champions.

- A focus group discussion was facilitated using Blackboard Collaborate to facilitate dialogue and the collection of data between the students and ACCESS champions.
- A business model canvas for social enterprise was completed together to map out ACCESS's value proposition, customer segments, competitors, revenue streams, cost structures, and other core business elements. The Canvas presentation was facilitated by the students' consultancy group.
- Based on the data gathered, the student consultants compiled a strategic analysis plan and produced a short consulting video presenting the proposed solutions and implementation steps to the research objectives ACCESS had outlined.

Figure 1: The PALAR research process. Source: Wood (2020, p. 106)



Action-Oriented Solutions:

The final principle of PALAR is the development of action-oriented solutions that support real-world change. This is the core purpose and outcome of the entire PALAR methodology. The action learning cycles move from reflection to planning, action, observation, and further reflection, ensuring that solutions are contextually relevant and practically implementable.

In the fourth and final meeting, the student consultants presented ACCESS with strategic recommendations focused on formalisation, resource mobilisation, and market positioning. These solutions were designed to enhance the sustainability and social impact of the enterprise while offering the students a meaningful opportunity to apply business and management principles in a real-world context, thus, reinforcing principles of experiential learning and reciprocal community engagement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully embedded throughout the CBPR process. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State's General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). All participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, process, and scope of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time, and were informed about issues related to confidentiality and data protection. The ethical approach adhered to the core principles of research ethics as stated in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979):

- Respect for persons: recognising the autonomy and dignity of all participants.
- Beneficence: ensuring that the study contributes positively to participants and the broader community.
- Justice: ensuring fair and voluntary participation, particularly in the selection of the student consultancy group, which was based on classroom volunteering.

To maintain anonymity, no personal identifiers such as names or symbols were collected. Instead, pseudonyms or numerical codes were used to distinguish individual contributions during data collection and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

At the end of the semester, the student consultants and ACCESS champions were invited to reflect on the partnership and their experiences with the CBPR process. An open-ended questionnaire was uploaded to the university's learning management system, Blackboard, to ensure convenient access for all participants. The reflections formed the basis of the analysis, which explored participants' learning, engagement, and perceptions of the project (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013; Curwood et al., 2011). To facilitate clear and systematic

interpretation, the findings are organised into key themes that shaped participants' overall views of the CBPR partnership.

Exposure to a new research paradigm

Members of the student consulting group expressed strong appreciation for the CBPR approach. They noted that the process differed significantly from their usual engagement, which was predominantly quantitative research methods. Student consultant 2 stated that:

...we use qualitative technique. I now know how to conduct focus group interviews where everybody has a voice and it is recognised....

The data suggested that for all students involved, the project represented their first exposure to qualitative data collection, participatory inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving. Working directly with ACCESS enabled them to learn about the PALAR process, witness its practical application, and co-create solutions grounded in the organisation's self-identified needs. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2004) advocate for the use of both quantitative and qualitative research strategies, emphasising that community researchers value not only numerical indicators but also the rich narratives and participant voices that explain and contextualise those numbers.

Development of interpersonal and collaborative skills

Students reported that participating in the CBPR project enhanced their interpersonal, reflective, and collaborative competencies. They emphasised that the process taught them to engage respectfully with diverse perspectives, remain open to alternative viewpoints, and work collectively toward shared goals. Student consultant 1 stated that:

I learned to listen to ACCESS and appreciate their viewpoints. When you work with a client, you do not have all the answers. Listen to them too, you can learn from them. They know a lot about community work.

The data above suggests that the PALAR approach, in particular, encouraged students to listen attentively, question their assumptions, and embrace the value of 'learning with' rather than 'learning about' community partners. This finding aligns with Wood (2020), who emphasises that collaboration is a defining feature of PALAR due to its participatory nature. Similarly, Fam, Smith and Cordell (2017) highlight communication-related competencies, such as active listening, relationship management, trust-building, consensus-building and negotiation, as core skills that underpin all participatory action research.

Application of theory and enhancement of employability

The student consultants also expressed appreciation for the practical orientation of the entrepreneurship module. They noted that the project provided a meaningful opportunity to apply theoretical concepts in a real organisational setting, thereby deepening their understanding through experiential learning. Student consultant 3 stated:

I liked the fact that as a project we were given real life companies to work with thus giving us practical experience and I also liked the fact that the module has no exam.

Student consultant 4 remarked:

I liked the practical aspects of the module. The practical sessions and the group assignment helped dive into a pragmatic experience, and taking what we learn theoretically and turn it into skills.

In this instance, the student consultants noted that working with a live enterprise enhanced their confidence in using business tools and strengthened their problem-solving and consultancy skills. They felt that this hands-on experience contributed significantly to their employability by exposing them to authentic workplace dynamics and enabling them to demonstrate applied competence beyond traditional classroom assessments. This finding is consistent with Magaiza et al. (2025), who argue that youth participation in social entrepreneurship can generate accessible and viable employment opportunities.

Capacity building among ACCESS champions

The ACCESS champions similarly reported substantial learning gains from the partnership. They indicated that they acquired new business knowledge from the student consultancy group, particularly related to business modelling and strategic planning. ACCESS champion 2 stated:

We taught the business management students about PALAR and they reciprocated and present to us a business model canvas, and analysis plan to make ACCESS be a sustainable enterprise.

Another ACCESS champion remarked:

We learned from business management, and they learned from us. Now I know strategic analysis plan and business model canvas.

Through the collaborative sessions, they learnt how to correctly complete a business model canvas and how to formulate business strategies aligned with ACCESS's sustainability goals. The champions reflected that these skills strengthened their organisational capacity and provided practical tools for advancing ACCESS as a social enterprise. This aligns with Polanyi and Cockburn's (2003) assertion that CBPR fosters learning and builds the capacity and commitment of participants to collectively address real-world challenges. Moreover, Northmore and Hart (2011) emphasise that genuine reciprocity and mutual learning are key characteristics of sustainable partnership working, principles clearly reflected in the collaborative relationship established between the students and ACCESS.

Increased awareness of social issues and social enterprise models

The project also exposed the student consultants to alternative, socially oriented forms of business. Through their engagement with ACCESS, they became more aware of social

challenges within their communities, and began to recognise the potential role of social enterprises in addressing such issues. Student Consultant 3 stated that:

One key lesson I took from their journey is the commitment to helping others, they receive very little funding but they still carry on with the lessons they give to communities.

Student Consultant 1 stated:

...it is important to give back to the community in order to uplift your community and its members.

Student Consultant 4 said:

If you become an entrepreneur, you don't actually need to benefit yourself, but you should look to provide a solution to the people around you.

In this instance, the students demonstrated a shift from a profit-driven to a socially responsive view of entrepreneurship. They noted that the experience broadened their understanding of how business tools can be used not only for profit generation but also for social impact. They further reported that the partnership deepened their awareness of ACCESS's work and its contribution to student development and community upliftment on the university campus. This finding supports Magaiza et al. (2025), who states that involvement in social entrepreneurship offers a meaningful pathway for youth development.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with a relatively small group of participants, being six student consultants and eight ACCESS champions, within a single university-community partnership. While this provided rich qualitative insights, the findings may not be easily generalised across diverse institutional contexts or social enterprises. Second, the study was limited to one academic semester, which restricted the extent to which long-term outcomes, sustainability trajectories, or shifts in organisational capacity could be observed over time. Third, because the reflections were collected through open-ended questionnaires rather than in-depth interviews or focus groups, opportunities for deeper probing or follow-up clarification were limited. Finally, the dual role of the academic coordinator, as both facilitator of the module and participant in the K4C CBPR programme, may have introduced positionality influences, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and promote equitable participation.

These limitations provide avenues for future research where studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how community-university partnerships evolve over multiple semesters and how the skills, mindsets, and organisational changes generated through CBPR projects are sustained over time. Comparative studies across different universities, social enterprises or disciplinary fields could also help determine how contextual factors shape the effectiveness of PALAR and CBPR methodologies. Additionally,

incorporating mixed-method or participatory evaluation techniques, such as focus groups, narrative inquiry, or participant-led documentation, could deepen the understanding of the relational, decolonial, and humanising dimensions of such partnerships. Finally, future research may explore policy-level implications by examining how institutional structures, curriculum frameworks and community engagement strategies can more effectively support the integration of CBPR in entrepreneurship education across the Global South.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper presents the findings from a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project that integrated participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) within an entrepreneurship module, examining how a student consultancy group and the ACCESS social organisation collaboratively engaged in co-learning, organisational capacity building, and action-oriented problem-solving through a structured community-university partnership. The study demonstrated that CBPR, when embedded within entrepreneurship education, creates a meaningful space for reciprocal learning, critical reflection, and the co-creation of sustainable solutions.

The data revealed that the project broadened students' exposure to new research paradigms, particularly qualitative and participatory methodologies, and enhanced their capacity for collaboration, problem-solving, and respectful engagement. The student consultants also gained first-hand experience in applying theoretical business concepts to real-world organisational challenges, thereby strengthening their employability. Importantly, the partnership also heightened their awareness of social issues and deepened their understanding of how social enterprises function as vehicles for community upliftment.

For ACCESS, the project contributed to organisational strengthening by enhancing the operational skills of its champions, refining its business model canvas, and supporting the development of practical business strategies. The PALAR approach ensured that knowledge and solutions were co-created, grounded in ACCESS's lived realities, and aligned with its sustainability goals.

The findings also reflect broader principles of decolonisation and Ubuntu. By engaging students and ACCESS champions in a participatory process, the project disrupted traditional academic-community power dynamics and promoted a decolonised mode of engagement rooted in reciprocity and shared agency. The partnership was centred around co-learning rather than hierarchical knowledge transfer between universities and communities. Instead of positioning academic knowledge as superior, the PALAR and CBPR approaches created a space where lived experiences, community insights, and academic tools were equally valued and collectively applied to address real challenges. This aligns with decolonial scholarship that calls for shifting from extractive research to reciprocal, context-driven collaboration.

At the same time, the partnership embodied Ubuntu through its emphasis on mutual respect, collective problem-solving, and the recognition that knowledge emerges through

shared effort. The students' increased awareness of social issues and ACCESS champions' strengthened organisational capacity illustrate how Ubuntu-informed engagements can advance socially responsive entrepreneurship while affirming the dignity, agency, and contributions of all stakeholders involved.

In view of the above findings, it is recommended that universities institutionalise CBPR and PALAR methodologies in entrepreneurship curricula, as they could deepen experiential learning and encourage critical reflection (Wood, 2020). Also, social enterprises, particularly emerging student-led organisations like ACCESS, should proactively collaborate with universities to access business expertise, strategic insights, and human resource support. Such partnerships can enhance organisational capacity and contribute to long-term sustainability. Given that many students are more familiar with quantitative approaches, lecturers should provide structured guidance on qualitative inquiry and PALAR principles before implementing CBPR projects.

In conclusion, the objectives of the study were met. How community-based participatory research (CBPR) shaped the processes and dynamics of the community-university partnership has been established, and the ways in which CBPR contributed to strengthening the organisational capacity and sustainability of ACCESS has been analysed. Lastly, how power, agency, and reciprocity were negotiated within the community-university partnership has been explored.

Notes on Contributor

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