

## Challenges and Solutions in Integrating Service Learning into Teaching Practice: A Study on Economics Pre-Service Teachers' Experience

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### Abstract

*In the processes of incorporating service learning into teaching practice, there are notable challenges. This study thus, addressed this gap by investigating the specific challenges faced by pre-service teachers during service learning in Nigeria and exploring solutions for improving its implementation. The study used a mixed-methods research design, to gather comprehensive data on pre-service teachers' experiences with service learning. The sample consisted of 60 students from 300 and 400 level students of Economics Department in University of Ibadan, 2021/2022 academic session using purposive sampling techniques. A self-developed Pre-Service Teachers' Service Learning Teaching Practice Challenge Questionnaire of 10 items ( $r= 0.78$ ) and Teaching Practice Solution Questionnaire of 10 items ( $r= 0.79$ ) of Likert format of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1) were used to collect data. While Focus Group Discussion Guide was used to collect the qualitative data. The quantitative data was analysed using frequency counts, simple percentage, mean and standard deviation. while and Thematic analysis was done for quantitative data using Atlas.ti. The results revealed that most respondents faced challenges such as inadequate knowledge of service learning, time constraints, and difficulties in balancing service learning commitments with academic workloads. To address these challenges, thoughtful strategies and best practices needed were suggested. They are aligning service learning activities with the academic curriculum, providing effective supervision models, building strong community partnerships, and incorporating reflective practices. These practices help students process their experiences, identify areas for improvement, and connect their service learning with broader educational goals.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Instructional strategy, Service learning, Teacher Education, Teaching Practice

### Introduction

The integration of service learning into teaching practice has gained increasing attention in educational discourse, particularly in the context of teacher education programmes. In Nigeria, where the educational landscape is characterized by diverse challenges such as inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms, and significant socio-economic disparities. There is a

growing recognition of the need to prepare future educators not just as instructors but as agents of social change (Adio & Gbadamosi, 2023; Ajiboye, Amosun, Ajitoni, & Gbadamosi, 2018). Service learning, which combines academic coursework with community engagement, offers a powerful framework for achieving this goal by linking theory to practice and fostering the development of critical professional competencies in pre-service teachers.

Service learning is defined as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (Olagoke-Oladokun, Mokhtar, Gbadamosi, & Dugguh, 2020; O'Meara, 2017). Service learning is characterized by its experiential nature, where students engage in structured activities that address community needs while simultaneously fostering their own academic growth. In the context of teacher education, service learning often involves pre-service teachers working in schools, community centres, or other educational settings, applying their theoretical knowledge to practical situations. Studies have shown that, service learning offers pre-service teachers a holistic and transformative learning experience that not only prepares them for the challenges of teaching but also enhancing their community relationships, opportunity firsthand experience a soft skills development among others (Darling-Hammond, 2021; O'Meara, 2017).

Despite these benefits, the integration of service learning into teaching practice remains limited. This is due to several factors, including a lack of institutional support, inadequate training for educators on how to effectively implement service learning, and logistical challenges such as transportation and resource constraints (O'Meara, 2017; Heffernan, 2022). Furthermore, there is often a disconnect between the theoretical knowledge imparted in teacher education programmes and the practical realities faced by pre-service teachers in the field, making it difficult for students to fully benefit from service learning opportunities (Olagoke-Oladokun, Mokhtar, Gbadamosi, & Dugguh, 2020). It is noteworthy that, some of challenges documented were addressed in the developed countries with little or no attention in Nigeria

While, literature have shown substantial barriers when engaging in service learning in some countries such as South Africa, China, and USA and provides solutions to them (Olagoke-Oladokun, Mokhtar, Gbadamosi, & Dugguh, 2020; Heffernan, 2022). However, the absence of a

standardized and well-structured framework for integrating service learning into teacher education programmes leading to inconsistent experiences and outcomes across different institutions in Nigeria. As a result, many pre-service teachers are unable to fully benefit from service learning, limiting their professional growth and the positive impact they can have on their communities. There is therefore, the need to identifying and promoting best practices for integrating service learning into teaching practice for overall effectiveness of teacher education programmes in Nigeria. This study therefore, seeks to address the gap in understanding by investigating the specific challenges faced by pre-service teachers during service learning in Nigeria and exploring solutions for improving its implementation. This study is therefore premised on John Kotter's organisational Change theory which emphasises that successful change in organisations requires a structured approach. This theory therefore provides a framework for analysing and addressing the challenges of integrating service learning into teaching practice.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the challenges faced by students when service learning is integrating service learning into teaching practice?
2. What are the solutions and best practices for integrating service learning into teaching practice to enhance its effectiveness?

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather comprehensive data on pre-service teachers' experiences with service learning. The population of the study were all pre-service teachers in University of Ibadan.

The population of the study is all pre-service teachers in University of Ibadan. The sample is the pre-service teachers whose teaching course is Economics in 300 and 400 level of the University of Ibadan in 2021/ 2022 Session. The sample was purposively selected because they have offered service learning in Economics Methods I and II courses (ASE 224 and 324) and carried out service project during teaching practice.

A self-developed Pre-Service Teachers' Service learning Teaching Practice Challenge Questionnaire (PSTC) of 10 items and Pre-Service Teachers' Service learning Teaching Practice

Solution Questionnaire (PSTSQ) of 10 items of Likert format of Strongly Agree (4) , Agree (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1) were used to collect data. The content validity was ensured by given them to two experts in educational evaluation. Pilot testing was done and reliability coefficient of PSTC is 0.78 and 0.79 for PSTC using Cronbach Alpha.

While Two Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted to complement the quantitative data to provide in-depth insights into pre-service teachers experiences of service learning during teaching practice. The frequency counts, simple percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to analyses the quantitative data while Atlas.ti and thematic analysis were used for quantitative data.

## Results

**Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents**

S/N	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage		
1.	<b>Gender</b>	Male	28	46.700	Table 1 displayed the
		Female	32	53.300	
		<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.00</b>	
2.	<b>Level</b>	300L	21	35.00	
		400L	39	65.00	
		<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

demographic distribution of the respondents. As presented in table 1, gender showed that male 28 (46.7%) and female 32 (53.3%) students participated in the study. Table also displayed students from different levels participated in the study. Also, 39 students were from 400 level (65.0 %) while 21 (35%) of the students were 300 level students.

**Research Question 1:** What are the challenges faced by students when participating in service learning during teaching practice?

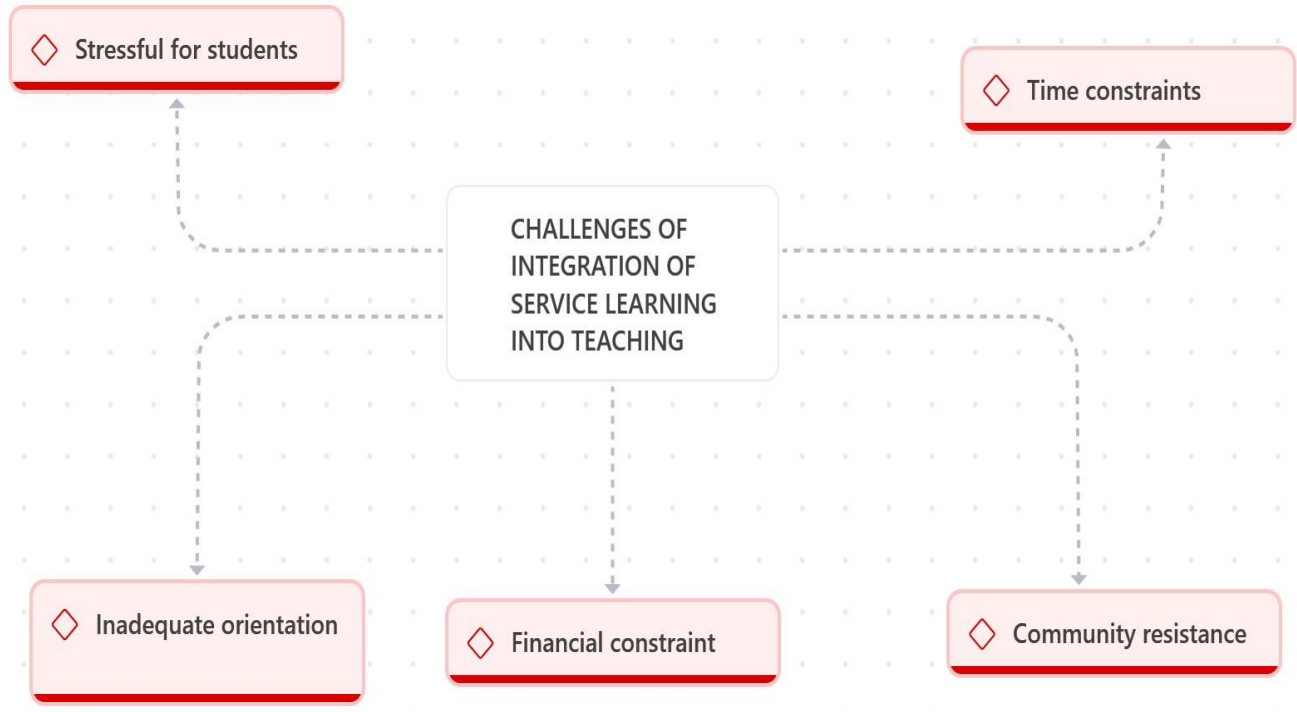
**Table 2:** Challenges faced by students in participating in service learning during teaching practice

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Remark
1.	Inadequate knowledge of service learning	18	34	8	-	3.17	.64	Agreed
2.	Time constraints	21	34	5	-	3.27	.607	Agreed

3.	Service learning is a waste of time and a burden	4	9	33	14	2.05	.811	Disagreed
4.	The struggle to find meaningful ways to connect service experiences to academic content and learning objectives	11	34	12	3	2.88	.761	Agreed
5.	Difficulties in balancing service learning commitments with academic workloads	19	34	5	2	3.17	.717	Agreed
6.	Lack of resources poses a challenge to implementing and sustaining service learning initiatives.	18	35	5	-	3.22	.594	Agreed
7.	Lack of interest on the part of pre-service teachers	18	34	7	1	3.15	.685	Agreed
8.	Lack of regular communication between students and facilitators	16	33	7	1	3.05	.775	Agreed
9.	Matching students skills with community needs	20	32	7	1	3.18	.701	Agreed
10.	Poor monitoring by the facilitator	17	26	13	3	2.97	.850	Agreed
<b>Aggregate Mean</b>						<b>3.01</b>		<b>Agreed</b>

As displayed in Table 2, majority of the respondents affirmed that during the exercise, they were faced with challenges such as inadequate knowledge of service leaning, time constraints, the struggle to find meaningful ways to connect service experiences to academic content and learning objectives and difficulties in balancing service learning commitments with academic workloads among others. However, the respondents disagreed with the statement that ‘Service learning is a waste of time and a burden’. The aggregate mean of 3.01 indicates that, on average respondents agreed that the items listed represent challenges faced by students when participating in service learning during teaching practice. Since the benchmark of 2.50 is exceeded, this suggests that the challenges are significant enough to be widely recognized by the respondents.

Furthermore, the qualitative data revealed the challenges faced by students in integrating service learning into teaching practice. The responses generated during the interview session corroborate the identified challenges from the quantitative data. As shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Challenges faced by students in integrating service learning into teaching practice

From the figure 1 the challenges include:

### **Financial constraint and stress**

On the constrain and stress for instance a respondent said that *“I think the limitation is the stress involved, financial problem (in terms of money), and community research in trying to know how to balance what is obtainable in the community in relation to what is being taught as stated in the school curriculum. Another respondents corroborate the submission on financial constraint and said that “One possible or very clear limitation is access to resources. For example, if you need to execute a project, you need money. How do you raise this money? Lack of financial resources to execute the project you want to carry out will limit me”*

### **Resistance of the host School and community**

In another vein, a respondent said that *“inadequate orientation, sometimes communities do not cooperate with the students in carrying out service learning exercises. Another respondent said “lack of cooperation from the community are other possible limitations”*

### **Inadequate knowledge**

Inadequate knowledge of the implementation of service learning is another challenge. *A respondent said, some of my team members had little knowledge of what to do in our service learning project, in fact I have to explain several times before they had reasonable knowledge of what to do. Another respondent said that another thing is a*

*lack of understanding of the purpose of service learning. When you don't know the purpose of a thing, you can't make good use of its value. Wrong perceptions on the part of the students may be a significant limitation to the integration of service learning into teaching practice.*

**Research Question 2:** What are the solutions and best practices for integrating service learning into teaching practice to enhance its effectiveness?

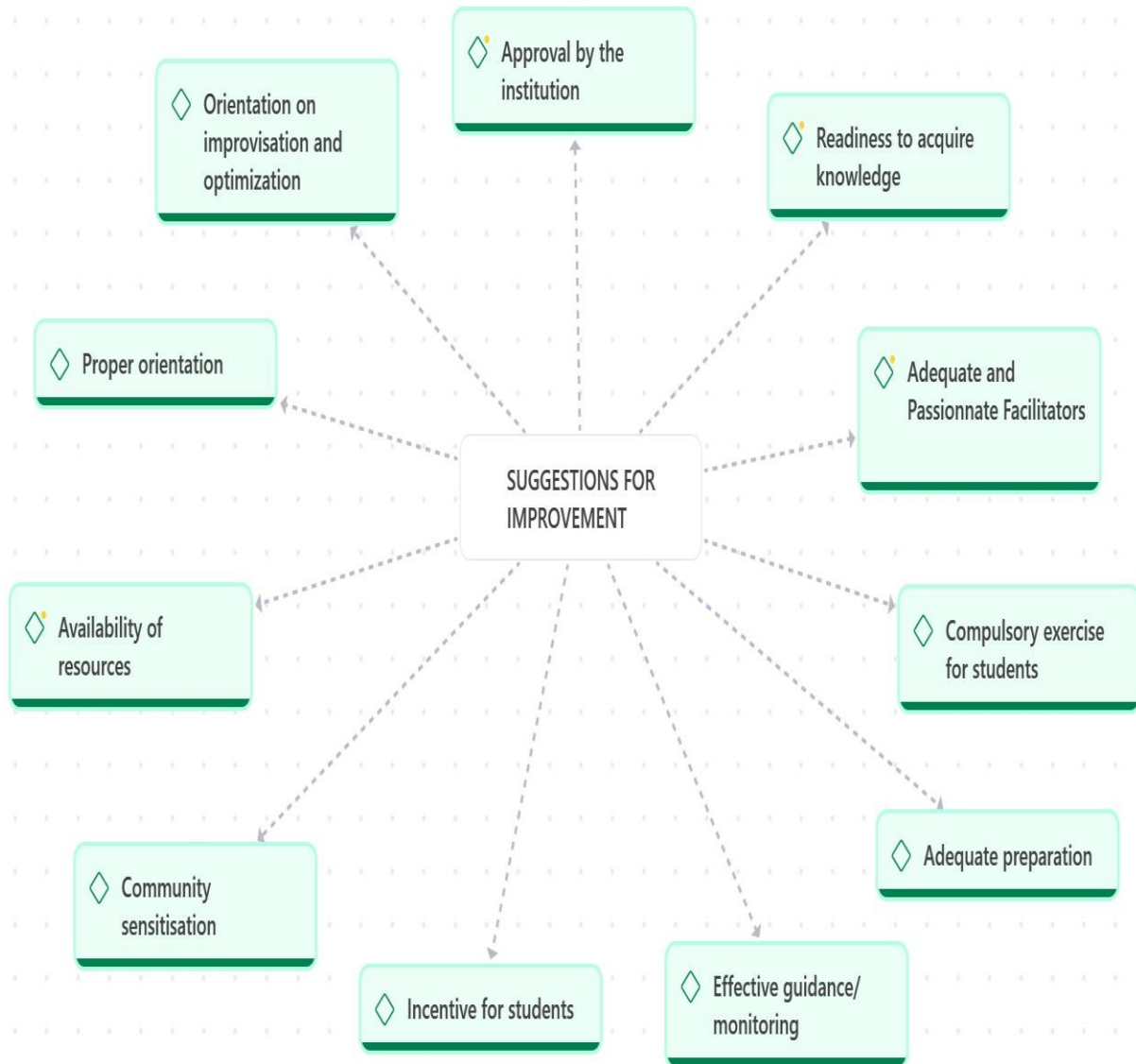
**Table 3 :** Solutions and best practices for integrating service learning into teaching practice to enhance its effectiveness

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Remark
1.	Incorporating service learning into faculty development programs	31	27	1	1	3.47	.62	Agreed
2.	Establishing a supportive institutional culture that values service learning.	33	25	2	-	3.52	.57	Agreed
3.	Providing ongoing feedback and evaluation mechanisms	30	28	2	-	3.47	.566	Agreed
4.	Allocating dedicated time within the curriculum specifically for service-learning activities	32	26	2	-	3.50	.567	Agreed
5.	Offering mentorship programmes support students throughout their service learning	32	25	3	-	3.48	.596	Agreed
6.	Providing opportunities for students to engage in reflection sessions such as seminars, journal writing	27	31	2	-	3.42	.561	Agreed
7.	Integrating service learning into faculty evaluation criteria and recognizing students who successfully participate in service learning during teaching practice.	26	29	5	-	3.35	.633	Agreed
8.	Engaging in community partnerships that offer ongoing support, feedback, and collaboration opportunities	28	31	1	-	3.45	.534	Agreed
9.	Incorporating reflective writing assignments or journals	27	29	3	1	3.37	.663	Agreed
10.	Facilitating opportunities for students to share their service learning experiences with peers, both within and outside the classroom	30	29	1	-	3.48	.537	Agreed
<b>Aggregate Mean</b>						<b>3.45</b>		<b>Agreed</b>

As presented in Table 3, the aggregate mean of 3.45 implies that respondents agreed that the proposed solutions and best practices for integrating service learning into teaching practice are relevant. Since the average mean score is above the benchmark of 2.50. Specifically, 96.7% agreed that service learning should be incorporated into faculty development programmes to help students effectively integrates it into their teaching practice. Also, establishment of a supportive institutional culture was that values and recognizes the importance of service learning promotes its successful integration into teaching practice.

To complement the quantitative data, findings from the qualitative data generated, also supported the outlined suggestions identified from the quantitative data as displayed in figure 2.





**Figure 2:** Suggested solutions

As respondents during the interview sessions suggested that for best practice, there should be Community sensitization of the programme, service learning should be compulsory exercise for students, effective guidance/monitoring, Proper orientation for students before commencement of the programme. For instance,

#### **Availability of Resources**

Availability of resources such as financial aids, personnel, transportation are enumerated. For instance, a respondent said that

*“There should be adequate funding to support the students. Also, “The university and likewise, the TP school can also participate in supporting the students service learning in terms of financial aid”.*

### **Community Sensitisation**

One of the global best practices for effective implementation of service learning is community engagement. This is corroborated by a respondent that

*“Community members should also be sensitized about the project work that will be carried out in their community to gain an understanding of the benefits of such a project or exercise”.*

### **Adequate Preparation and Orientation**

On the suggestions on how to effectively integrate service learning, for instance a respondent said that

*“There should be enough preparation on the part of the students participating before carrying out the service learning”.* Another participant also reported that *“a proper orientation about service learning should be included during the teaching practice orientation and orientation should be handled by service training experts”.* Moreso, another respondent, *“I think there should be proper orientation on how service learning activities should be done or carried out”.*

### **Proper Guidance**

In another vein, a respondent said that *“there should be proper guidance from the university to the students and school of teaching practice. Students should also be taught improvisation and optimization of available resources”.*

### **Adequate and Passionate Facilitators**

Passionate and adequate facilitators are needed for effective implementation of service learning. For instance, a respondent said that

*“Adequate personnel is very important in terms of the facilitators”.* Another respondent also, said that *“the lecturers should be well trained to execute service learning and be passionate in training the students”.*

### **Approval by the Institution**

Moreover, some respondents suggested that “*the university should ensure the approval of the strategy and ensure it is used by all staff and students*”.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The study findings unveiled a variety of obstacles encountered by pre-service teachers while engaging in service learning during their teaching practicum. It ascertained using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, offer valuable insights into the obstacles that impede the successful execution of service learning in teacher education programmes in Nigeria. The finding of this study reveals that the challenging of integrating service learning to teaching practice are:

***Inadequate Knowledge of Service Learning:*** A substantial proportion of the participants emphasised the problem of insufficient understanding of service learning. This discovery is consistent with previous research, indicating that prospective teachers frequently lack a coherent comprehension of the concept and its goals, resulting in perplexity and inadequate engagement (Olagoke-Oladokun, Mokhtar, Gbadamosi, & Dugguh, 2020; Heffernan, 2022).

***Time Constraints:*** Pre-service educators frequently face the challenge of balancing several obligations, such as academic studies, teaching experience, and personal engagements. Research in the field confirms this discovery, suggesting that time management is a prevalent challenge in service learning (Dugguh, Ugochukwu, Yina, Dugguh 2023; Baecher, & Chung, 2020). The demand to meet academic deadlines while meeting service learning obligations can result in stress and burnout, diminishing the efficacy of the learning process.

***Insufficient resources:*** Successfully implementing and maintaining service learning initiatives frequently necessitate sufficient financial, material, and human resources. Lack of these resources can restrict the range and efficacy of service learning initiatives, a difficulty that is reflected in the research (Jacoby, 1996; Vernon & Ward, 1999).

***Lack of Interest and Communication:*** Significant obstacles were observed to include pre-service teachers' lack of engagement and inadequate communication between students and facilitators. The findings indicate that motivation and engagement play a vital role in the effectiveness of service learning programmes. According to the literature, if students lack intrinsic motivation or if facilitators fail to provide clear information and guidance, service learning can become a disengaging experience (Heffernan, 2022).

***Ill-Matching of Skills with Community Needs:*** Furthermore, the issue of aligning students' abilities with the requirements of the community was emphasised. In order for service learning to be effective, it is necessary for the students' ability to be in line with the needs of the community. This ensures that the service performed is both relevant and has a significant impact (Heffernan, 2022). If there is a discrepancy, both the students and the community may not derive maximum advantage from the service learning experience.

***Inadequate Supervision by Facilitators:*** Inadequate supervision by facilitators was identified as a major obstacle to the achievement of service learning goals. Efficient facilitation and monitoring are crucial for directing students, delivering feedback, and ensuring the achievement of learning objectives (Holland, & Gelmon, 2018; Felten, & Clayton, 2019). The absence of consistent supervision can lead to the omission of valuable learning opportunities and a reduced quality of education.

The qualitative data uncovered some obstacles not captured in the quantitative data, including opposition from the community and limitations in financial resources. Community opposition may arise due to a deficiency in comprehension or confidence between the community and the educational institution, impeding their ability to collaborate effectively (Olagoke-Oladokun, Mokhtar, Gbadamosi, & Dugguh, 2020).

Moreover, the study found out that the suggested solutions for effective integration of service learning to the teaching practice are:

***Incorporation of Service Learning into Faculty Development Programmes:*** Integrating service learning into faculty development programmes ensures that educators possess the necessary expertise and understanding to facilitate service learning experiences. Professional development opportunities targeting service learning pedagogy can enhance educators' ability to create, execute, and evaluate service learning projects (Mergler, Carrington, Boman, Kimber, & Bland, 2017; Heffernan, 2022).

***Establishment of a Supportive Institutional Culture:*** A nurturing organizational environment fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, which is crucial for the long-term viability of service-learning activities.

***Provision of continuous Feedback and Evaluation Mechanisms:*** Continuous feedback and evaluation systems are essential for enhancing students' learning and aligning service-learning experiences with academic goals. Literature suggests that regular feedback allows students to reflect on their experiences, identify areas for improvement, and implement appropriate modifications to their service-learning activities (Bandy, 2019; Ishokare & Gbadamosi, 2020).

***Mentorship Programmes and Reflective Opportunities:*** Implementing mentorship programs and facilitating opportunities for students to participate in reflection sessions or seminars can enhance service-learning integration.

***Community engagement and partnerships:*** Community engagement and partnerships are also essential for the long-term viability and achievement of service-learning projects. Establishing robust and mutually beneficial relationships with community partners is crucial for the long-term success of service-learning initiatives.

Qualitative findings highlight the importance of having competent and enthusiastic facilitators, thorough preparation for service-learning activities, and institutional support through the inclusion of these activities in the curriculum. Raising awareness within the community and ensuring students are prepared and motivated to participate in service learning are also essential for successful integration.

## **Conclusion**

Service learning has the potential to improve the academic and professional development of pre-service teachers in Nigeria, but it faces challenges like inadequate institutional support, time constraints, and curriculum integration. To overcome these, strategies enhanced faculty training, stronger community partnerships, and improved resource allocation can be implemented, benefiting both students and the communities they serve.

## **Recommendations**

1. From the findings, the following are recommended to effectively integrate service learning into teaching practice for transformative teacher education in Nigeria : Universities should

integrate service learning into their strategic plans, providing financial support, resources, and incentives for faculty members and students.

2. Thorough orientation sessions should be offered to students and faculty to understand the goals, benefits, and challenges of service learning.
3. University should strengthen partnerships with local communities to ensure relevance, mutual benefits, and sustainability of service-learning projects. University should introduce awards and recognition programmes for students and faculty excelling in service learning projects.
4. University should provide flexibility in academic schedules to accommodate time for service learning for effective participation of students.
5. Regular communication should be fostered between students, faculty, and community partners for proper monitoring and evaluation to enhance learning and promote collaboration between the University and industry.
6. Encourage research on the impact of service learning in Nigerian contexts to promote the adoption of service learning for transformative teacher education.

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