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Designing global partnerships that work for communities and business schools

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A decade of student volunteering in Namibia shows how international placements build leadership - but also how dependency and power can undermine impact without stronger partnership design.

What if your most popular international placement is also your biggest partnership risk?

Over a ten-year period, Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) students volunteered in Namibia through UK Sport's IDEALS programme, working alongside local organisations to deliver sport-for-development activity. The reflections they recorded read less like a travelogue and more like a case study in partnership design - what happens, that is, when learning, delivery, funding and local ownership collide?

A live “business school” learning environment

IDEALS put students into real delivery conditions with five partner NGOs. They had to plan sessions, coordinate with local staff, communicate across cultural expectations, and make decisions under pressure. Volunteers consistently reported growth in confidence, adaptability and problem-solving – the kinds of employability outcomes business schools promise, but often struggle to evidence.

One volunteer captured the operational challenge clearly: delivering a session without any equipment required rapid redesign, creativity and maintaining participant engagement. That is not simply ‘sport coaching’; it’s frontline service management with constraints. For business schools, this is a reminder that experiential learning works best when it is authentic, structured, and properly supported through reflective practice, including journals, group discussions, and mentor feedback.

Context is not a backdrop - it's the operating model

Students also wrote about Namibia's wider social and historical context, including the enduring effects of colonialism and apartheid-era inequalities. Their observations of sharp contrasts between affluent areas and communities such as Katutura shaped how they understood 'impact'. In practice, this challenges a common business school assumption: that a model, toolkit, or intervention transfers smoothly across settings.

These reflections also show cultural competence as a governance issue, not an optional extra. Volunteers moved from initial impressions (warmth, hospitality, community spirit) to more complex dilemmas about inclusion, accessibility, and local norms. One account describes adapting a session so a child using a wheelchair could participate, challenging assumptions about who sport is 'for'. That kind of judgement is central to responsible leadership – and directly linked to safeguarding, reputation, and duty of care.

The sustainability question: who benefits, and who depends?

Alongside benefits, the research identifies familiar risks: reliance on external funding, short-term volunteer cycles, and power dynamics in decision-making. SfD initiatives can unintentionally become dependent on visiting cohorts, while volunteers accumulate 'CV capital.' For business schools, the uncomfortable question is whether placements create shared value, or mainly extract learning opportunities.

This is where partnership strategy matters. Without co-designed goals and accountability, programmes can reproduce neo-colonial dynamics with external actors positioned as 'experts' and local partners forced into delivery roles.

What this means for business school

Treat placements as partnerships, not trips: agree governance, roles, safeguarding expectations, and success measures with local stakeholders.

Design for continuation: invest in peer-led training and local leadership, so activity does not hinge on a visiting cohort.

Evaluate both learning and impact: combine reflective practice with indicators of community value (not just student satisfaction).

A call to action

International experiential learning can be transformative, but only if it is managed with the same seriousness as any high-stakes collaboration. Business schools should review partnership governance, diversify funding assumptions, strengthen ethical and cultural preparation, and co-create evaluation with host organisations. If we want global placements to be credible, we must be as accountable for impact as we are ambitious for student development.