

WHOSE INTEREST DOES IT SERVE? A CONFUCIAN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

M. Khanyile

Department of Institutional Advancement

University of South Africa

Pretoria, South Africa

e-mail: khanyim@unisa.ac.za / <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1093-8436>

ABSTRACT

It is incontestable that universities assumed the so-called “third mission” which means that they include community engagement in their activities in order to be financially viable. This paradigm shift begs the question: In terms of whose interest does community engagement serve? It has been difficult to separate community engagement from traditional research as community engagement projects can emerge from new research ideas. As an emerging property, community engagement should be holistic rather than reductionist, in order to afford universities opportunities to function as sites of citizenship, as well as to contribute to the knowledge society and knowledge economy, and generate mutual benefits. However, there are no instruments used to gauge the benefits for communities, while the benefits for academics and universities are outputs, promotions and revenue. The epistemologies and methodologies used in community engagement activities are often foreign to the communities and neither appreciate nor understand their problems. Instead of universities being communities of scholars, they have become workplaces. The communities are often pawns and objects in the hidden agendas of researchers and institutions. Some of these agendas include but are not limited to, university entrepreneurialism, dispossession of indigenous knowledge of local communities, advancement of commercialisation and capitalism, and meeting academic key performance areas to be eligible for promotion. This conceptual article argues that community engagement is a complex phenomenon that requires a systemic non-linear approach.

Keywords: commercialization, community engagement; new managerialism; university entrepreneurialism, valorisation

INTRODUCTION

Universities have increasingly adopted community engagement agendas that have provided them with numerous opportunities to operate as sites of citizenship (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno 2008), and, as such, they should contribute to the societal and economic development of the country (Martinelli, Meyer and Von Tunzelmann 2008). This contribution can include build social capital, helping to find solutions to local problems, providing education that fosters democratic citizenship supports fairness and diversity (Jongbloed et al. 2008).

Through community engagement programmes universities can achieve their mission

(Holton et al. 2015). Universities have assumed community engagement as part of their “third mission” (Martinelli et al. 2008; Jongbloed 2007), and this, in turn supplements their financial viability. In South Africa, the foundations of universities comprise mainly of three pillars, that is, teaching and learning; research and innovation; and community engagement and outreach. However, the efforts of universities to develop mechanisms to provide data to track and assess the success of their community engagement initiatives in teaching and research have not yielded expected results. Questions about who the community engagement activities are supposed to serve or who is serving continues to remain elusive in academia.

This article does not attempt to deride inroads and changes brought about by community engagement activities, nor does it promote linear thinking about community engagement. In addition, activities that foster community engagement tend to be ad hoc in nature as are no uniform models that can be used to test their results (Furco and Miller 2009; Greenburg and Moore 2012). As a complex adaptive system that attempts to traverse the higher fitness landscape, a university has unique characteristics (Papadimitriou, Branković and Đorđević 2014) which tend to reflect societal, economic, cultural and practical values of a particular society (Teelken 2012). In this regard Jongbloed (2010) maintains that the value of knowledge is defined by key stakeholders of the university in terms of its quality, utility and relevance. Additionally, information obtained in institutions of higher learning needs to be based on investigations that are wide-ranging and campus-wide; they should cover the full spectrum from units to specific projects (Greenburg and Moore 2012).

This article draws from community engagement theory, complexity theory and systems theory. It covers community engagement, valorisation (to make useful, to use, to exploit) and commercialisation of research, university entrepreneurialism and new managerialism; it presents a discussion and draws conclusions in relation to the application of the principles of community engagement in South Africa.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement in the context of higher education can be defined as the integration of service, teaching and research that is applied to significant community development ventures. The emergence of a community engagement agenda provides universities with various opportunities to function as places that foster citizenship (Jongbloed et al. 2008). Since universities seem to have adopted the third mission, mentioned above, they are bound to contribute directly to society and economic development (Martinelli et al. 2008). UNESCO (2009, 6) advises higher education institutions to interact with communities and civil society to create mutually beneficial partnerships that will enable suitable knowledge to be shared. this

advice was pre-empted in the South African Higher Education Act of 1997 that accentuates the formation of a single, co-ordinated higher education system that responds to the needs of society and local communities.

Universities across South Africa have heeded the call and proceeded to manipulate their teaching and research missions to include community engagement. International policy literature consulted argues that in the African context, engagement has to accommodate partners from a broad social development spectrum and focus on building economic partnerships (Kotecha 2011).

Service learning is meant to nurture students' sense of community responsibility in which the mutual relationship between university and community is encouraged (Preece 2013). However, some activities are carried out giving the impression of being community engagement, when they are actually more akin to service learning, because it focuses on assessing how university students think they learn from community and regional engagement.

This presents challenges in terms of common understanding about what community engagement is. Whether these activities are called "community engagement", "community service", "service learning", or "regional engagement", they all change how universities conduct their business. Change is the product of the era (Jackson 2003). This change has led to the re-evaluation of the mission and role of the university in society (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000) and affects their relationships with their communities (Jongbloed et al. 2008). In addition, the improved prominence of knowledge and research in economic development has introduced the third mission, mentioned above, that includes economic development as one of the roles of universities.

Ramli et al. (2013) argue that the traditional idea that universities produce new knowledge has been debunked as this role has been taken over by privately funded research institutions. The funding of community engagement activities is often conditional on outputs. This raises a question in terms of whose interest(s) should community engagement activities serve. Are the benefits it mutual and reciprocal? Does the condition of outputs suggest that the output is more important than mutual benefit? Third mission activities seem to omit traditional teaching and research, but include everything else (Jongbloed et al. 2008), and society, as well as public organisations and enterprises have become the main stakeholders of universities (Vagnoni and Cavicchi 2015).

As capital allocations increasingly influence universities to become academic enterprises their ability to be autonomous, ethical and moral forces (Hackett 2014) that are integrated into local society is affected (Jongbloed et al. 2008). Universities are coming under increasing political pressure to change their governance to accommodate efficient outputs and job creation

rather than higher learning and research (Emmeche 2015). This seems to obviate the responsibility of universities to develop citizens, transmit values, and promote national culture (Amaral and Magalhaes 2002).

When dealing with universities as complex systems, it is necessary to apply adaptive, agile systems models because they are meant to build systems to develop solutions that can be adapted to suit a variety of university environments (Anderson 1999) and link individual universities to future changes and results (Cheng, Millar and Ju Choi 2006). As the world is becoming more complex where change is inevitable, diversity also needs to be managed (Jackson 2003).

Universities seem to be facing challenges from many quarters: society's expectations their public responsibilities have increased along with the number of university stakeholders (Jongbloed et al. 2008); while economic development and funding is necessary, there are those who would prefer to see universities returning to their traditional roles of teaching and research (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000). However, "authoritarianism, corporatism, illiberalism, supernaturalism, and political correctness" (Emmeche 2015) seem to be the main factors that hinder universities' achievement of their core business.

VALORISATION AND THE COMMERCIALISATION OF RESEARCH

The relationships between universities and their stakeholders have become increasingly complex (Alves, Mainardes and Raposo 2010). Public universities seem to be embracing ideologies of new managerialism, which bring its own degree of complexity (Deem 2001) in the process of leveraging on the hegemonic academic capitalism discourse (Münch 2014). On the other hand, the debate on the future of academic research is centred on valorisation (Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010; Andriessen 2005). It entails various activities that guarantee the results of scientific investigation outside of the scientific community (Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010), and adds value to the knowledge-based economy.

Universities have contributed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and communities enjoy the product or end-result of this (Ramachandra and Mansor 2014). However, the social contract forged between the higher education system and society that enables universities to receive public funding, has been redefined to highlight universities' new responsibility towards a great variety of stakeholders (Jongbloed 2010). The need for scientific research to contribute to culture still applies, thus continuing to be a strong source of funding and economic development (Etzkowitz and Leysdesdorff 2000). Renault (2006) points out that the emerging entrepreneurial character of universities can provide opportunities for academics to commercialise their innovations. At the same time, Jongbloed (2007) considers the benefit

of universities to society as being measured by the intensity of their commitment to their stakeholders

While universities can promote innovation and might even encourage the commodification of higher education, it can be said that they are placing their own agendas above the public good (Enders and Jongbloed 2007). The neo-liberalist view defines universities as being similar to supermarkets that offer goods that are in demand at a certain time, and whose value is defined by their perceived financial standing (Boulton and Lucas 2011).

The paradigm shift that is implied from universities existing for the public good to private good has led to a debate on the future of the university as an institution (Cornuel and Hommel 2015; Boulton and Lucas 2011; Meek 2003). On the one hand education is considered to be a service and a public good, while on the other hand if education is considered to be a market commodity morality and ethics of knowledge creation might be compromised (Grace 1995; Bray 1996). Blaug (in Ntshoe 2004a) suggests that education could be called a “quasi-public good”, because there is an overlap of the economic benefits of, investment in and consumption of education. For instance, researchers who consider commercialisation of research to be important or beneficial might possibly want to collaborate with industry or business, conduct applied research and patent the results, while researchers who do prefer the traditional idea of research would probably conduct basic research only (Renault 2006). The traditional academic ethos, as outlined by Merton (1973), consists of four elements, namely disinterestedness, universalism, organised scepticism and communism of intellectual property. This Mertonian ethos provides a sharp contrast to the concept of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

According to Renault (2006), the best researchers are extremely keen to commercialise their research results because funds from patents that might have been absorbed by industries are not lost to the institution and the researcher (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000). The outputs of studies from community engagement activities are often commercialised to the benefit of both the universities and champions of the engagement, while depriving communities who shared their information and knowledge. They are then left outside of the acknowledgements or denied access to outputs of the research.

UNIVERSITY ENTREPRENEURIALISM AND NEW MANAGERIALISM

Academic capitalism is described as the situation where a university and a member of the public sector employ university employees concurrently. Slaughter and Leslie (1997, 11) state that academic capitalism refers to a situation

“where university employees are employed simultaneously by the public sector and are increasingly autonomous from it. They are academics that act as capitalists from within the public sector but are state-subsidised entrepreneurs”.

The notions of academic capitalism and entrepreneurial universities has gained much attention in the past decade (Park 2011). According to Cornuel and Hommel (2015) entrepreneurialism and university rankings clearly explain why not-for-profit universities are managed in a “tacit for-profit mode”. Renault (2006) indicates that the entrepreneurial behaviour of universities is evident in professors’ views of the role of the universities in the dissemination of knowledge. According to Martinelli et al. (2008), there are two types of innovation agents, namely entrepreneurial academics and academic entrepreneurs – the former resembles the innovative university member, while the latter is similar to a typical start-up entrepreneur. Given that the newer trajectory of academic capitalism is embraced by universities, researchers who believe in the commercialisation of research tend to conduct applied research and seek ways in which to make their innovations or research patentable (Renault 2006).

However, higher education worldwide is facing budget cuts and declining investments due to neoliberal policies (Geiger 2015). In their quest to uphold “public accountability”, some legislators even question whether governments should provide research grants to universities (Mok 1999). Thus, university entrepreneurialism may be motivated by a lack of or reduction in government funding (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000). The ebbing of state support for universities (Hackett 2014) gives entrepreneurialism and the marketisation of the academy more influence (Cornuel and Hommel 2015), and forces universities to rethink their role (Barnett 2012). This has resulted in universities seeking industrial funding (Renault 2006). However, marketisation in South Africa has increased inequalities and has done little to keep South Africa globally competitive while creating an economy based on innovation (Gultig 2000). According to Ntshoe (2004a), the influence of markets and globalisation have encouraged universities to seek entrepreneurial sources of revenue by adopting policies that are “market-like” so that they will be more likely to obtain additional funding. Orr (1997) suggests that globalisation in South Africa is underpinned by neo-liberalism. Universities seem to be moving beyond the traditional model (Cornuel and Hommel 2015), and criticism of this move resonates well with the on-going debate on managerialism (Peters 2013; Teelken 2012).

According to Jongbloed et al. (2008), community engagement cannot easily be separated from traditional research. Jongbloed (2010) adds that the value of knowledge is defined by key stakeholders of the university in terms of quality, utility and relevance. Universities seek to increase their sources of external funding by establishing closer links to industries, and therefore demonstrate entrepreneurship (Jongbloed et al. 2008). They are in the middle of a complicated

network of relationships with non-academic partners, and the development of these networks is indicative of entrepreneurialism (Martinelli et al. 2008).

Therefore, in order for them to succeed, universities and communities should develop sustainable relationships (Ramachandra and Mansor 2014). The interconnections and interdependencies of universities, society and the economy, in effect all stakeholders, (Jongbloed et al. 2008), means that the creation of value for all stakeholders, should ensure long-term sustainability and prosperity for all (Murphy et al. 2005).

The new trend of universities to apply techniques from the private sector may go even further back than the actual term “managerialism”, which has different meanings for different authors, and is therefore difficult to define (Teelken 2012). According to Wu (2011, 221), sustainability is defined as “the ability to ensure economic development is accompanied by progress towards social inclusion and does not take place at the expense of the natural environment”. In order to be sustainable, organisations have to respond quickly and effectively to constant shifts in the environment (Jackson 2003). With regard to entrepreneurialism in the context of universities, Barnett (in Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010, 572) states that

“the clients of the entrepreneurial university have to be able to afford its services: the entrepreneurial university is not inclined to put its capabilities at the service of just any client. A local community group might wish to take advantage, one evening, of the university’s heated but underused rooms, but will have to be to afford the going rate.”

While there is an increasing level of competition in higher education institutions, resources are limited. Faced with financial and resource constraints these institutions also have to deal with the growing demands and changing expectations from all their stakeholders, including the community (Mok 1999).

New managerialism refers to global trends in which private sector ideas, practices and values continue to permeate the world of universities (Ntshoe 2004b). Central to managerialism are the concepts of *economic rationalism* and *private management*. Much weight is attributed to strategic management, which subjects employees to performance control, continuous evaluation and economic rationality (Pusey 1991). In this regard Mok (1999) points out that universities are driven to apply managerial principles borrowed from the private sector so that they can enhance their efficiency of educational service delivery. Vagnoni and Cavicchi (2015) maintain that financial concerns have led universities to adopt sustainable business principles. As a result of all these factors and concerns stakeholder relationships are multifaceted and characterised by “a complex interplay of shifting, ambiguous and contested interactions between interested parties and within diverse organisations” (Crane and Livesey 2003, 8). In

order to enable universities to respond to stakeholders' competing needs, a "strong management" and a paradigm shift to "economic rationalism" is needed for them to educational services (Mok 1999).

It is plausible that these tendencies and demands should generate new approaches to governance and accountability, a high level of professional management, and a rethinking of the university business model (Jongbloed et al. 2008; Arbo and Benneworth 2007; Benneworth and Arbo 2006). Ntshoe (2004a, 137) argues that "the increasing of marketisation and quasi-marketisation in higher education and training could be attributed to the influence of neo-liberalism and new managerialism", and adds that "changes in higher education provision, policy and practice in South Africa need to be understood in terms of marketisation and quasi-marketisation rather than in terms of privatisation". Whitty and Power (2000) suggest that state-funded institutions are inclined to practise quasi-marketisation. The commodification of teaching and research has led to universities placing an emphasis on measurable outputs and the marketisation of university products to enable them to meet the new performance criteria (Olssen and Peters 2005).

Universities cannot be compared with traditional organisations, because they are different, and some issues do not apply to them (Baldrige 1971). Privatisation, marketisation and new managerialism should be differentiated for analytical purposes, as they are usually conflated (Ntshoe 2004a). The stakeholder capitalism approach implies that an organisation should seek to satisfy its stakeholders, who are crucial to the long-term success of the university business (McVea and Freeman 2005). Thus, communities as stakeholders of universities can play a pivotal role in facilitating sustainable practices (Vagnoni and Cavicchi 2015).

DISCUSSION

The term *university* can be traced to legal Latin word "universitas" which means *community*. The word can be traced further back to classical Latin "universus" which means *totality*. According to Boulton and Lucas (2011, 2506) "it is the totality of the university enterprise that is important, as the only place where that totality of ourselves and our world is brought together, and which makes it the strongest provider of the rational explanation and meaning that societies need". The university can be described as a system with recursive level to the community in which it is part of. However, nowadays, universities have changed from being communities of scholars to workplaces (Teelken 2012), enterprises that have to generate revenues in order to survive. Community engagement, as one of the pillars of universities, is used to advance survival of the institution and make money for both the university and academics. The extant literature suggests that differentiating community engagement from traditional research is

convoluted. Scholars embark on either applied or basis research in search for solution(s) to community problems, but confusion arises when the initiator of the research is needed: who approaches who? Scholars or universities often identify a community in which they want to conduct community engagement activities. In terms of the doctrine of egalitarianism of complex adaptive systems, there is no agent that can understand a system from outside, unless it is part of the system. However, academics who want to generate solutions to community problems are often not from the same community nor do they understand the root cause of the problems. There is a need for such academics to employ the feedback loops of a systems approach in order to understand causes and effects before embarking on their community engagement activities. However, the maxim “cause and effects are not closely related in terms of time and space” apply in such cases (Hilbrand and Bodhanya 2013; Jackson 2003). Champions for community engagements are often not aware of what has caused the problem(s) that they intend to solve, as these might have emerged from the previous problem(s) that have not yet been resolved.

Community engagement is engulfed with reductionism. According to Jackson (2003, 3) reductionism “sees the parts as paramount and seeks to identify parts, understand parts and work up from an understanding of the parts to an understanding of the whole”. The community is a system, but champions seem to be selling discipline-based solutions which cannot cope with complex and problematic situations. There is a need for multi, inter, and trans-disciplinary approaches to community problems as they are messy and require multi-viewpoints and multi-techniques. Even though change is seen as the product of our era and complexity stems from the nature of our problems (Jackson 2003), communities are often not prepared for adroit changes, complexity, uncertainties and diversity that they are faced with. The champions of community engagement need to develop a rich picture of communities that might need to help in order to devise systemic approaches for their projects.

The literature consulted posits that the change of the mission of universities has had a negative effect on the relationships between universities and their local communities. The spurt of emerging models and new roles that universities are embracing in order to be sustainable include university entrepreneurialism, new managerialism, academic capitalism, the knowledge economy, valorisation, as well as many other approaches that contribute to how universities identify and manage their stakeholders. Benneworth and Sanderson (2009) question how far universities can go to respond to the demands of external stakeholders, given their core funding sources and research undertakings. Universities seem to have assumed the third mission, mentioned above (Martinelli et al. 2008; Jongbloed 2007), which embraces community engagement in order to be financially viable.

Thus, while community engagement can be beneficial to universities, it is not without pitfalls. Community engagement is defined by various scholars as

“the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of partnership and reciprocity. It can involve partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems and serve as catalysts for initiating and/or changing policies, programs, and practices.”

In the South African context, this is not the case. Many institutions of higher learning in South Africa require outputs for each community engagement activity, otherwise the project is discontinued. This behaviour dismisses the aforementioned definition. The concern seems to be more on the output than on the mutual benefit, because the output will provide income for the university. Champions of community engagement activities are able to identify prospective projects where they can produce income generating output(s). In addition, in many cases members of each community engagement project benefit by earning points towards promotion, and additional income for their contribution. Thus, for academics or researchers there are double-benefits, but it is unclear what the benefits are for the communities in which the research has taken place. Thus, the interests served by community engagement become clear. Community engagement encourages academic entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial academics to commercialise academic knowledge. The behaviour of universities and community engagement champions is a total antithesis of the definition of community engagement.

CONCLUSION

It must be remembered that community engagement is a complex phenomenon that requires a systemic, non-linear or flexible approach. While community engagement is a scholarly activity, the communities that are engaged are often indigent and uneducated. Those who conduct the activities have scholarly backgrounds and use scholarly language that might lead to a breakdown in communication. Members of communities can be used as pawns and objects of the hidden agendas of the academic who approach them. Entrepreneurialism, dispossession, capitalism, promotion and commercialisation are all ulterior motives that can sour the greater good that community engagement should entail.

The complexity of the phenomenon raises academic and ethical questions. If community engagement were to have mutual benefits, what instruments are used by academics or champions to gauge whether the community has really benefitted? Who must develop that instrument? If the community engagement activity results in numerous outputs, how can community benefits be measured?

Furthermore, community engagement activities usually take the form of research and employs western research methodologies to gather the data or knowledge. Are these epistemologies, oxiologies and ontologies suitable for the local community? This article argues that the methodologies used are not African or local enough to elicit valid and reliable information for researchers to understand local problems and complexities. Academically suggested solutions are often too simple and foreign to answer messy and problems faced by communities.

Community engagement is one of the strategic pillars of higher education in South Africa, therefore it should be foregrounded on communities with whom common understandings can be established. Universities need to establish asymmetrical communication and develop tools to measure the benefits of their engagement with communities. The funding methods for community engagement activities need to be reviewed and should not be linked to only outputs, but to change experienced by communities. However, it is important to note that while the above discussion points out pitfalls, there are community engagement activities that are leaning towards the direction of holism and have made inroads into bringing beneficial changes to communities.

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