

THE PRAXIS AND PARADOXES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS THE THIRD MISSION OF UNIVERSITIES. A CASE OF A SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Community Engagement (CE) is universities' third mission (TM), with teaching and learning, and research as the first and second. Although endorsed as the TM of universities and despite clear policy mandates, CE is largely neglected in several South African universities for several reasons. There is growing pressure for universities to partake in CE in order to align their various disciplinary diversity and resources to connect with the broader society and produce socially engaged and responsible graduates. The long-term benefits of CE are linked to knowledge creation, improved community practices and improved social justice. The article aimed to explore academic staff members' understanding of CE, its execution in the institution and its challenges. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, and data were analysed using thematic analysis. The study concluded that there are conceptual contradictions in academics' view of CE and there is a mismatch between what is defined as CE and the actual practice. The CE challenges include lack of institutional guidance, lack of understanding on measuring its effectiveness, neglect, the uncertainty of who should conduct it and lack of finances channelled towards it. To curb the challenges, a clear conceptual framework/policy should be generated that stipulates a clear definition of CE, how to conduct it and which staff should engage communities. Finally, considering that CE benefits students, researchers and communities, provision for its funding should be made by universities to curb financial constraints.

Keywords: community engagement, universities, communities, third mission, community service

INTRODUCTION

There has been ubiquitous critique that South African institutions of higher learning are detached from the needs of their respective communities. Thus, many universities across South

Africa have started engaging with communities with strategic stakeholders' assistance outside the institutions (Olowu 2012). The engagements often generate mutually beneficial partnerships to promote the application of knowledge. Academic staff involved in CE engage communities by using their professional knowledge and skill set of expertise to aid in solving problems and capacitating communities (Olowu 2012). Furthermore, academic staff collaborate with stakeholders possessing multi-disciplinary credentials to provide numerous skills and prospects to empower indigent communities and solve various problems. However, the "support structures and incentives" required for academics to engage communities successfully are non-existent (Bhagwan 2017, 17) as they are channelled to teaching and learning, and research with clear deliverables. In most African universities, academics are required to conduct CE for advancement/promotional purposes yet universities do not provide adequate guidance and support (Bhagwan 2017). Subsequently, the focus of these conventional university systems customarily provide incentives and commendation for research publications than for support to enrich livelihoods, social justice and sustainable development. Therefore, although CE is viewed as a TM in South African universities, it is given minimal attention compared to the first two missions: teaching and learning, and research because it is seen as a non-core activity (Johnson 2020). This article explores academic staff members' understanding of CE, its execution in the institution and its challenges. It is critical to conduct research of this nature as the findings will inform universities at large on the importance of effective and sustainable CE and inform university management of the importance of establishing policies and guidelines that guide academic staff. The study will also reveal CE challenges which will guide the university to address and eradicate the difficulties identified.

BACKGROUND TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The ushering of the South African democracy in 1994 came with the need to transform the operation of different sectors in the country. Higher education, for instance, promoted transformation by developing policies to redress past inequalities and improve access to education (Shawa 2020). South Africa faces many challenges including increased inequalities and growing social exclusions. In light of the inequality gap created by the apartheid government, universities were expected to be responsive to the community's needs in the new dawn. The government needed to set a tone for universities to engage their existing communities. CE was said to be one of the pillars capable of improving the public health system, social justice and sustainable development especially in marginalised communities and making innovative contributions that could change the structural conditions of poverty. This

explains the growing momentum for universities to pioneer an engaged scholarship to solve these predicaments. An active scholarship requires universities and community stakeholders to work together to solve community problems through innovative research (Mutero and Chimbari 2021).

In 1997, the Department of Education (DoE) published the White paper (DoE 1997), which set out an agenda for higher education transformation and positioned community service, later referred to as CE as an integral part of teaching and learning and research which, when infused to the teaching and learning and research, universities demonstrate their social commitment and their sense of social responsibility. In the light of the White Paper of 1997, CE entails departing from the common teaching and learning and research to becoming responsive to societal challenges and promoting democracy (Bidandi, Ambe, and Mukong 2021). The White Paper called on universities to “demonstrate social responsibility, and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes” (DoE 1997, 102). The White Paper subsequently influenced the Higher Education Act of 1997 which led to the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), which emphasised the importance of knowledge-based community service as part of programme accreditation and quality assurance (CHE 2004). There has since been a shift in the wording used by higher education stakeholders such as the DoE and the HEQC from community service to CE (Bender 2008). CE currently has many names/terminologies. However, a decade ago, the more dominating terminology about a decade ago was “scholarship of engagement” (HEQC 2006).

In 2006, the HEQC of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) convened a conference on CE. The conference was momentous as the CHE announced that CE would start to be an accreditation requirement to compel Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to re-think their missions, transform their curricula and review their research strategies (HEQC 2006). Two years after the White Paper of 1997, most HEIs started including CE in their mission statements. However, only a few institutions operationalised CE, as evidenced by audit reports (Bender 2008). To solidify the link between CE, teaching and research, universities need to infuse CE in their mission statements (Snyman 2014), the same way they do with teaching and learning, and research. In recent years, universities have been under pressure to shift from primarily focusing on teaching and learning, and research to giving adequate attention to CE, a multidisciplinary, budding yet complex phenomenon linked to universities’ economic and social mandates (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020).

Ever since the enactment of these policies, knowledge production dynamics are changing in South Africa and there is mounting pressure for universities to shift from focusing on

teaching and learning and research to giving adequate attention to CE. However, academics appear to be at a crossroads regarding teaching and learning, research and CE as the TM of universities (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). The current question that academics and researchers are grappling with currently, is what CE entails. This article reveals that there is no common understanding of what CE is amongst many academics.

Although CE is gaining momentum in South Africa, the concept is still a bone of contention among many universities, scholars, and academics (Bidandi et al. 2021). CE is generally defined as the solidarity between universities and communities established to engage the developmental needs of communities where universities exist. Bidandi et al. (2021) define it as the process of collaborating with groups of people affiliated with the university through geographical proximity, interest, or any form of affiliation to address issues that affect the community. Bender (2008) states that the importance of CE lies in its latency to revitalise the academic setup, redefine scholarship and include society in dialogues about the role of higher education currently and in the future. Some academics view CE in the light of mere community service, community outreaches, voluntary programmes or “just” philanthropic work conducted outside teaching and learning and research with minor to no connection to them (Snyman 2014; Bender 2008). Others reduce CE to service learning done to promote students “graduateness” as a new mandate for HEIs. In light of this, Mutero and Chimbari (2021) state that CE promotes civil and social responsibilities amongst students and enhances their sense of attachment and belonging to the community. Although academics and scholars use CE for various reasons that relate to teaching and learning, and research, they often fail to explain how it benefits the community (Bidandi et al. 2021).

Regardless of so many documents and initiatives brought forward about CE, most academics and researchers in South African universities still view CE as just an add-on and philanthropic activity, hence the reluctance to incorporate CE as a TM of universities (Bender 2008). Johnson (2020) indicates that CE is often referred to as the “stepchild” of higher education, hence not given adequate priority.

South Africa is a country in deep organic crisis, requiring interventions that can help developments and social justice challenges; and yet the higher education system prioritises research and teaching to the exclusion of CE. One may concede that teaching and learning is necessary because the universities has to have graduates. On the other hand, the critical question remains: does the obsession with accredited outputs and the ranking game advance social justice and community development? Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) state that universities prioritising CE are gradually becoming top class, contributing to the economic, social, and cultural development of communities where they operate through their transfer of knowledge

and skills. If done well, CE promotes multi-level cooperation and the sustainability of long-term projects through shared objectives (Mutero and Chimbari 2021).

MODELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As previously indicated, the concept of CE differs from one institution to another as its dynamics are dissimilar (Bidandi et al. 2021). The three models explained below articulate the different views of how other implementers conduct CE.

The silos model

This model views HEIs as having three independent mandates: teaching and learning, research and CE. In this model, CE is viewed as a separate activity, done mainly voluntarily by academics and their students as a “service” or mere social responsibility to communities. The silos model depicts the traditional view, which does not consider CE as having the potential to contribute to teaching and learning. It is just a philanthropic way of community outreach (Bender 2008). Snyman (2014) concludes that community outreach and voluntary community programmes are historical activities that universities have always done. Still, they do/did not form part of the core business of universities. They were just activities performed as not-so-important extra services that are not very much related to the core academic functions of universities. However, contrary to what the silos model postulates, some universities consider voluntary and community outreach programmes as community engagement. The reasoning is that if the sole mandate of universities is knowledge production and dissemination, then these community outreach programmes serve that purpose (Bender 2008).

The intersecting model

The intersecting model suggests some level of intersection among the three missions. The conviction is that there will be some form of service learning and community based research at the point of intersection. The model acknowledges that intersection may not take place at some point, and where it does not, volunteerism and community outreach are considered as separate activities. This model views CE as an inevitable activity in the university regardless of its form. In this model, all teaching and learning and research activities at some point encompass some form of direct or indirect engagement with the community. The assumption is that HEIs are already engaged with the community in one way or the other (Bender 2008).

The infusion (crosscutting) model

The infusion model considers HEIs as having two core roles, namely teaching and learning, and

research, and sees CE as a central notion embedded in teaching and research. The three missions are interdependent and inform each other. In this model, CE is not considered as just a philanthropic activity, but a value addition and quality improvement to teaching and learning, and research (Bender 2008). Activities of CE include scholarly research capacity to address community problems (Bidandi et al. 2021). Muller (2010) concurs by indicating that CE should be integrated with teaching and learning, and research and not considered a separate mission.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological design was used to explore academic staff's understanding of CE, its execution in the institution and challenges. The phenomenological design allows participants to tell their experience as they experience it, and researchers refrain from any pre-conceived context but remain faithful to the facts presented by the participants (De Vos et al. 2011). The sample for this study consisted of sixteen academic staff members from the university under study. The study employed the stratified random sampling technique in which academics were first divided into faculties (strata) and the participants were randomly selected from these strata (faculties of science and agriculture, health, law, social sciences and humanities, management and commerce and education). Once participants agreed to participate, semi-structured interviews were conducted at a time and date convenient to each participant. An interview schedule was used, which aided researchers in addressing a topic whilst allowing the participant to answer on their terms and discuss issues that were relevant to them. The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed and the relevant themes were identified. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis whereby researchers closely examined data to identify common themes, topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly. Data was then narrowed down into parts that represented segments of raw data. The global categories retrieved from the data were then narrowed down into smaller sub-units. When units for analysis became fewer, emerging categories were continuously refined and compared against each other until saturation was reached.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical matters were discussed with participants regarding informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and management of information. Participants were assured that pseudonyms would be used when citing their responses. The researchers ensured trustworthiness by not subjecting their views and remaining neutral and objective. Thus, the researchers informed participants that the information collected would be published to the public and feedback would be given to the participants once published. Finally, an ethical clearance was obtained from the university.

RESULTS

The study focused on the understanding, practice and challenges of CE at a selected university in South Africa. The issue of CE's conceptual clarity was explored first to understand if the university's academics have a common understanding of CE. From the findings, contradictions in conceptual clarity were apparent; as a result, this impacted how individuals conduct CE. Of the three missions of the university, CE is not given adequate attention and is less funded. The results below further explore the praxis and paradoxes of CE in the institution under study.

CONTRADICTIONS WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

One of the significant barriers to CE is ambiguities in defining it by those expected to conduct it. Participants were asked about their understanding of the CE concept and different conceptual versions were deduced from their responses. Some understand it as a scholarship of engagement, service learning, community outreach/ploughing back, skills transfer to the community, service learning and sustainable community problem-solving. The contradictions seem to stem from the university's primary focus on the first two missions while CE is rarely conceptualised in meetings. The following definitions of CE came out strongly in the study.

Scholarship of engagement

Most participants defined CE as a scholarship of engagement and a mutual engagement process amongst students, community members, lecturers/researchers and praxis of theory and practice. This process does not separate the three missions; they are intertwined. Participant 11 said,

“CE is knowledge and skills transfer between the institutions and the communities. Communities have not formally documented knowledge and part of it is experience with community members. So it's more of an exchange of what the institution is bringing in research output and implementation of what is theorised in academics as well as learning from the communities in terms of knowledge and experiences that may not be formally documented. For me, it's more of a two-way process where we give to the community what we found from research and implement what is theorised. We also learn from the community from the indigenous knowledge and experiences that may not have been documented.”

Participant 1, a Senior Lecturer in Sociology said, “... I want to emphasise the principle of ‘mutual beneficiation’, and discourage what I call ‘exploitative engagements’ between the parties involved in CE”. This definition of CE aligns with the infusion (crosscutting model), where CE is embedded in teaching, learning, and research.

Skills transfer to the community

Some participants view CE as transferring skills or knowledge to the community. Participant 4 said, “CE is done to address a gap in a certain community that will either equip the community with skills or reap some financial reward”. This conceptual definition aligns with the intersection model of CE where there is some level of intersection amongst CE, teaching and learning and research. The model acknowledges that intersections may not always take place amongst the three missions, they may take place between two tasks. The model views CE as an inevitable university activity.

Service learning

As given by some participants, the definition of CE aligns with service learning, which is usually done as part of the requirements for students to graduate. It promotes students’ “graduateness”. Participant 8 said,

“Currently I am the chair of the committee for CE in my department. We have taken a different approach to CE. We try to incorporate CE into some graduate attributes of our students. We do external activities and internal activities engaging in discipline-related matters.”

There are qualifications such as nursing science where service learning is mandatory for students to graduate. It is therefore apparent that different academics will define CE differently in relation to their fields of specialisation and what is generally expected of them in their professions. Service learning should therefore be strengthened so that universities become more integrated into communities. The State should be increasing financial support to universities that are taking community service/service learning seriously because such universities are helping the State in meeting its social justice obligation.

Community outreach/plough back/philanthropic work

CE is often used interchangeably with community outreach or engagement in philanthropic work. Participant 16 said, “CE means that we have to perform certain activities to give back to the community”. Participant 3 stated, “CE means services rendered to the community without expecting any incentive, with the hope of assisting that particular community”. Another participant indicated, “It is a payback to your community, you do it voluntarily and you do not receive any payment. Rendering services to the community for free.” This conceptual definition of CE aligns with the silos model where CE is seen as having an independent mandate from teaching and learning and research. Here, CE is viewed as somewhat philanthropic work done mainly voluntarily or as a social responsibility to communities.

Sustainable community problem solving

Some participants indicated that CE relates to sustainable community problem-solving. One participant said, “It is the engagement of the community by the university for long-term and sustainable outcomes”. Participant 12 reiterated, “CE is a process of working hand in glove with communities to solve problems out there in order to bring sustainable solutions to the problems while engaging communities simultaneously”. Participants were further asked if the CE projects they were/had been involved in, were sustainable. A sizeable number agreed yet others honestly indicated they were not sustainable. One participant said, “They were not sustainable, but only ‘fleeting associations’ owing to financial constraints and heavy teaching loads”.

Although the White Paper of 1997 (DoE 1997) sets an agenda for the transformations of Higher Education from an inequitable and segregated apartheid system to an inclusive one (Hall 2010) and further gives directives about CE, Johnson (2020) states that there is still a lack of substantive conceptualisation of CE in South Africa. A study conducted by Johnson (2020) on the barriers to CE indicates a lack of a shared understanding of CE amongst those expected to conduct it. This is characterised by using different words associated with CE and the lack of a common language. Even when the exact words are used, other interpretations are evident from the data. Thus, the lack of progress in implementing CE is to a greater extent caused by the lack of conceptual clarity (Hall 2010). University academics are in most cases unsure of what is expected of them in terms of CE. Hall (2010) argues that CE ambiguities have rendered it an “orphan” in HEIs. Therefore, there is a severe need for a better-theorised understanding of CE.

On the other hand, the definitional contradictions of CE should not be problematic as different role players see CE differently. The diversity in university disciplines makes it inevitable for CE to have a single conceptual definition. Hall (2010) states that CE includes activities such as service learning, problem-based teaching and research that address the different needs of community stakeholders. However, other participants view CE as a two-way process. Still, looking at CE from the lens of a computer science department, such an engagement is likely to be one way, more of a knowledge transfer from the university to the community. CE from a development studies department would entail a two-way process between communities and the university and this speaks to the infusion model that sees CE as central to teaching and learning, and research. In developmental studies perspective, CE is considered as value addition to teaching and learning, and research.

Participants were further asked about the CE activities that they were involved in. It is crucial to note that there was essentially a mismatch of what they defined CE as vis-à-vis what

they do in practice. Most projects done lack sustainability; most were more of community outreach than engagement. From their conceptual definition of CE, most participants indicated a fusion of teaching and learning, research and CE; however, the research aspect was missing in practice. When asked if they have publications related to CE, thirteen participants had not infused research with CE, while only three did. This raises questions because they define CE as research related, yet they do not do CE research in practice.

While students are integral in CE as per most definitions given by participants in this study, 4 participants indicated that their CE activities did not involve students. The involvement of students in CE is, to some extent, dependent on the nature of the engagement and the department concerned. A participant from Nursing Science said,

“Our CE projects include students because in our profession, a health-related one, we try and assist students in understanding their roles. As future nurses, students are supposed to understand the health challenges, the socio-cultural issues or the financial issues that influence the health challenges. They have to link communities to the different departments that can solve the problems, such as the social services department, police, or engage community leaders. It assists them in understanding the possible reactions they can get from the communities because then, some will role-play to be the community members. Others will play to be the actual health care professionals. So this teaches them to look at the whole angle of the problem and then come up with possible solutions.”

It is therefore clear that the nature of the profession largely determine students’ involvement. In the case of the nursing science profession, it is apparent that their involvement contributes to their “graduateness” hence its inevitability. The CE projects that do not include students usually relate to a staff member’s research agenda with no link with students or their curriculum.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS MANDATORY

Participants were asked if the nature of their fields of study calls for CE to be mandatory. It is interesting to see the diversity of responses which takes us back to the contradictions in the conceptual clarity of CE. Participants from social work, nursing science, public administration, business management, development studies, and computer science indicated that CE should be mandatory for their fields as they focus on human interaction, service delivery and changing the lives of community members. Participant 2, a Social Work Lecturer, said, “In child protection, it’s a non-negotiable issue. Social workers need to be involved.” Participant 8, a Public Administration Lecturer, said, “Yes, 100%, our students end up serving communities after graduating, so they need to have some attributes that will assist them in working with communities and societies”. Participant 9, an Associate Professor in business management, said,

“It should be mandatory for us because it allows academics to practice what they teach and gives students a chance to practice what they are taught in class. Remember that most qualifications that we offer in our department do not have those internships, that time where students have to go and practice in the industry, so CE can be used to bridge that gap.”

Participant 9’ submission is very sound in that CE gives both the lecturer and the student a chance to interpret theory into practice. In this case, theory is not detached from practice and learning is achieved holistically when concepts learnt or taught in class can be applied to real life community circumstances. Participant 12 said,

“There is no question when it comes to our field, development studies, development is all about the people, the quality of the lives of people. We would not have had an impact if we had left the community behind. So my view is that CE should be mandatory, it is where the pulse is, it’s where the people are.”

Participant 14, a computer science lecturer, said, “Yea. Considering that we are a computer science department, and with the 4IR, technology will be affecting communities. So communities will benefit more from the engagements.”

However, a few participants from “strictly scientific fields” felt that CE was unimportant in their departments. One said, “No, it should not be mandatory because when people are forced to do something, they do not put in much effort.” Another said, “It should be mandatory although we do not take it seriously. We only take it seriously when we want to be promoted.”

Participant 15 said, “In science, you have those purely academic research areas that have nothing to do with the community”. The differences in perspectives are primarily aligned with departments that participants are affiliated with.

CE CHALLENGES IN THE UNIVERSITY

Financial challenges

One of the challenges of CE in the university is the lack of budget assigned for CE purposes compared to other missions such as teaching and learning, and research. Participants were asked if they had departmental budgets reserved for CE. Participant 1 said, “No, CE initiatives in my department are usually self-funded”. Participant 3 said, “No, I have been at the university for 17 years and never heard of a budget”. Participant 5 said, “Not really, sometimes they provide university cars to take us to the community, so that is the only support we get”. This shows the university’s lack of commitment in CE. The only participant who indicated that they have a departmental budget for CE is a Nursing Science Lecturer, as CE is a requirement for all their

students. She said, “Yes, we do. As I’m saying, our students do a needs assessment, and come up with solutions. So this process always culminates in an event, so the department will be involved in funding that event.”

As a result of funding matters, some projects are driven by external funders who ask the university departments to participate. When the initiative is external and driven by funding, it may not be taken seriously as when it is an internal decision. Participants were asked why they chose the particular CE projects, most were driven by the need in the community and those were related to their fields of study. However, some participants were approached by funders or community members to do particular projects. One participant said, “The local community approached me because of my expertise and academic knowledge. I agreed because I felt like I had something to contribute,” Another said,

“The direction or trajectory of the projects were dictated by the kind of funding we had as a department. You would find out that a particular sponsor would require you to carry out a particular project, and they fund it in that direction. So the funders direct where the focus of the engagement is supposed to be.”

In South African HEIs, there is generally no funding for CE as State subsidy is mainly channelled to teaching and learning, and research (Snyman 2014; Johnson 2020). To further expand on the lack of funding for CE, Badat (2013) states that CE is viewed as a luxury that is taking resources away from teaching and learning, and research. Even if funding were available, the higher education system is traditionally geared towards individual competitiveness since subsidies are allocated for separate activities and not collaborations. Academics involved in CE are left to fundraise for its cause on their own as there is no budget allocation for it from higher education and ultimately the universities. It is also noteworthy that established and talented academics usually focus on incentives and targets, which may distract them from working with external stakeholders for CE which generally has no incentives. The channelling of funds to other missions and the lack of budget towards CE hinders progress in redressing past inequalities that CE meant to curb in communities. CE was thought of as capable of improving the public health system, social justice and sustainable development especially in marginalised communities and making innovative contributions that could change the structural conditions of poverty.

CE as largely an individual’s decision

Participants were also asked who decides on their departments’ CE projects. One participant said, “No one has ever told me in what areas I need to do CE in. It was based purely on my

areas of interest and field of teaching.” Another participant said,

“It’s an individual decision; there are no meetings or motivations for people to go do CE. There will be mention of doing CE to get a promotion but it is not mentioned all the time. Most people do it to get promoted, not because they want to be involved in CE.” One participant said, “I decided on my own. It tends to be individual, although the intention of the department is to have departmental initiatives.”

Although a few participants indicated that in their departments CE is a collective decision, most participants highlighted that they choose what to do individually. CE projects by their nature should be a collective effort on both the university and the community side for continuity reasons since they are usually long term. If only one academic member does solo CE with communities, and should they not be able to continue with the project due to unforeseen circumstances such as health issues, relocation or death, the project collapses midway with no continuity. Therefore, universities and departments should emphasise on collective CE.

Uncertainty regarding who should do CE

The study purposely focused on academic lecturers of different fields from different faculties. The assumption was that every lecturer is expected to be involved in teaching and learning, research and CE. When participants were asked if CE was a part of their responsibilities, the majority agreed, while two participants seemed uncertain. One of the two participants is a new employee; her uncertainty means that CE was never mentioned on her contract as a university lecturer. The other uncertain participant is a Chemistry Lecturer who believes chemistry is too scientific for CE and may not apply to immediate communities. Therefore, one of the most significant barriers to CE is that the need for CE has not entirely convinced everyone who should be engaged in it.

Professor Habib, a former Vice Chancellor at the University of Witwatersrand, stated that he is not convinced of the need for CE, which is why during his term, the university did not have a CE office (Habib 2019). He stated that, through research such as HIV/AIDS, for instance, academics are already engaging in CE. By universities bringing diverse students into their spaces, they are doing CE. When these students graduate and get jobs, they return to communities and address issues of inequality and poverty. Contrary to Professor Habib’s sentiments, research alone and the return of students to their communities after graduation is not enough to address the inequality disparities that exist in communities. CE is linked to universities’ economic and social mandates (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). Mutero and Chimbari (2021) state that CE promotes civil and social responsibilities amongst students and

enhances their sense of attachment and belonging to the community. CE is necessary in poverty reduction, closing the inequality gap and ensuring that communities are self-sustaining. Unemployment for instance is South Africa's biggest challenge, students graduating from universities have no guarantee of finding jobs, and therefore, CE may, to a certain extent help communities to create jobs without over-relying on the government to do so.

CE deemed as less important and neglected

Participants were asked about their perceptions of CE in the university, and most concurred that CE is not as valued as the other university missions. Participant 1 said,

“Ideally, all of them are equally important. However, for me, teaching is the cardinal pillar from which the other two pillars of the academic enterprise spring. Let me also hasten to add that CE has been treated, especially in some universities such as ours, a ‘LITTLE COUSIN’ of the other two pillars.”

Participant 7 said,

“There is no specific department or unit allocated for community CE here. No direction on CE governance. No clear guidelines on the stand of the university. There is no clear regulation on how to conduct it, there is no capacity building in terms of workshops.”

Another participant said, “CE is neglected. There are Deputy Vice Chancellors that focus on teaching and learning, and research and innovation but no one occupying a portfolio for CE.”

Participant 13 said,

“There is no clear understanding of CE. Some committees and structures support teaching and learning and research. If there are committees and structures that support and manage CE, they are not visible; they are not on the agenda of most meetings.”

Another participant said,

“The other challenge with such activities is performance evaluation. As I said, little attention is given to them. So, you may devote your time to them, but CE is not ranked as important in performance appraisal. It seems that people just do it as a tick-box exercise. It's not prioritised in terms of performance appraisal.”

The institutional neglect of CE is a cause for concern as it does not motivate academic staff to participate in it. Johnson (2020) states that there is no nationally agreed upon framework to guide the implementation of CE in the country, hence implementing it at university level is also

difficult.

Lack of institutional guidance

Participants were asked if they were aware of the university policy guiding CE. The existence of the policy seems like hearsay; none of the participants had seen or read the policy. Most participants were not aware that it existed. One participant said, “I have never heard of any CE policy” and another said, “We don’t know about the policy, we know policies are always there, but at a departmental level, we are so ignorant about any CE policy”. Participant 12 said, “I think this one is my sheer negligence. I know that there is a university policy, but I won’t lie, I haven’t taken time to go through it. At a departmental level, unfortunately, there isn’t.” Regarding policies and implementation issues, Johnson (2020) states that there is often a huge gap between the strategic and operational levels of the university as top management makes decisions, and the implementation is not often followed up lower down the university to employees who should be conducting CE. Implementers of CE, primarily researchers and academics, are usually not trained regarding forming partnerships with communities, working with them and doing CE at large. Therefore, much may be known about the importance of partnerships, but very little is known about how collaborations operate and how to navigate partnerships (Mutero and Chimbari 2021).

When asked if there is a clear guideline of how CE should be conducted, all participants indicated that there is none. One participant said, “We have never had a discussion about CE in the department; you only hear about it in passing”. Participant 13 said, “No, I don’t think there is a clear understanding of what it is and how it should be done as a part of the academic enterprise”. Johnson (2020) states that there is no nationally agreed-upon framework to guide the actual and practical implementation of CE in universities. This means that universities can also not guide their employees in that regard. Therefore, academics and researchers usually figure out how to manoeuvre CE, which results in conceptual misunderstanding of what CE entails.

Lack of understanding of how to measure its effectiveness

Participants were asked if the CE projects that had been involved in were successful. Some thought they were successful, some were honest enough to indicate that they were not, yet some were not sure. One participant stated that it is difficult to determine whether a project was a success or not as there is no given matrix to measure the success of CE in the university. The participant said, “The only issue is, what matrix do we use to measure the success?” Therefore, compared to teaching and learning, and research, there is also a lack of understanding of how

CE's impact is measured, how to monitor its progress and evaluate its effectiveness (Bidandi et al. 2021; Snyman 2014). Johnson (2020) purports that there should be ways of fairly evaluating CE just like teaching and learning, and research.

DISCUSSION

The CE concept should be framed by an institutional-based theoretical framework or policy (Burger 2017). In the institution under study, CE is not universally defined for stakeholders to have a standard definition. Ordinarily, CE is based on multiple theoretical frameworks such as “modernisation; dependency disassociation and social movements; Freirean dialogue pedagogy; UNESCO’s media system approach (that foregrounds access, participation and self-management); and participatory communication for development and social change” (Burger 2017, 21). Although the frameworks above exist, not all academic staff are familiar with them, and resultantly, they remain confused about the exact definition of CE and its guiding legislation. Of note, although the university is expected to have a standard and guiding definition of CE, it is a heterogeneous institution with different role players and departments that are bound to view CE in light of their specific and unique deliverables and diversity in roles. However, although most of the participants’ definitions of CE infused research, it is crucial to note that very few conduct research related to their CE projects. Therefore, participants’ definitions of CE mostly view it in light of both the intersecting and infusion models, yet in reality they practice the silos model which considers the three missions as independent of each other. This raises questions about the incompatibility of theory and practice. It is also apparent that although the definition of CE seemed to involve students, in practice some projects were done by staff members in solitude with no involvement of students. This brings us to some participants’ submissions that academic staff members mostly do CE for promotion purposes.

Bidandi et al. (2021) indicate that although CE is productive in the context of HEIs, it is very complex, challenging and frustrating to stakeholders involved. The challenges of CE in the institution under study include financial constraints, lack of institutional guidance, neglect, and lack of understanding of who should conduct it and how its effectiveness is measured. Regarding economic conditions, it is without a doubt that government funding is channelled mainly towards the first two pillars of higher education. The only tactic for academic staff to access subsidies/funding is to explicitly demonstrate how CE will be integrated into teaching and learning or result in research publications. Badat (2013) affirms that lack of funding makes CE poignant because it is treated as optional, and no acknowledgement is given to staff passionate about CE. Still, recognition is given to staff who perform well in teaching and

learning, and research. The concept of funding CE is only infused when CE forms a part of the vision and mission statement of the university. However, most HEIs do not have CE as part of their mission statement and battle to obtain funding for sustainable projects (Mtawa, Fongwa, and Wangenge-Ouma 2016).

As indicated above, one of the challenges of CE is that most of its projects are not sustainable and there is a lack of understanding of how to measure its effectiveness in the university. The study proved that CE conceptualisation bears different implications for different people. As an outreach, one implication for CE is that academic staff render services to the community as a recipient and do not engage the community as a form of constructive interchange between university staff and the community participants. Although CE is important as a third pillar in HEIs, serving as a benefactor for communities in attaining knowledge and skills, in most instances, the knowledge and skills provided are not critical in bringing about social justice and economic empowerment. Thus, most CE initiatives are not sustainable because the communities are not involved in the planning process but required to implement CE that may be insignificant to individual participants and the community. Communities should see the need for CE for them to participate fully. In some cases universities impose CE to communities who in turn get reluctant in committing to those projects. Van Schalkwyk (2015) corroborates the findings in this study that CE has limited benefit for teaching and learning, and research, and the community because engagements make short-term contributions to the development and are not sustainable long-term. CE evaluation or measure of its effectiveness also proved to be unclear to participants.

HEIs signalled that they aspire to support the government's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) through their three pillars. The best way to accomplish most of the SDGs set out by the national government is through CE (De Lange 2012). The alignment of SDGs and HEIs yielded the need for benchmarking CE. However, the lack of proper frameworks guiding CE makes benchmarking challenging in many South African HEIs. In most instances, the development of structural or conceptual frameworks for CE, which would lead to measuring the effectiveness and sustainability of CE projects are left to staff who are experts in the field of CE of which many HEIs like the one under study have no expert staff employed. Thus, the lack of conceptual frameworks for CE is the reason why CE project are not monitored and evaluated.

Conversations about CE in South Africa started upon a realisation that South African HEIs are detached from the needs of their respective communities. At independence in 1994, CE was considered a crucial mission to promote transformation and redress the past inequalities created by the apartheid government in communities. Although the government set a tone for CE

through its White Paper (DoE 1997) which called on universities to demonstrate social responsibility by working closely with communities, and the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), which emphasised the importance of knowledge-based community service, not much progress has been made by some institutions such as the one under study. CE as the TM is largely neglected and academic staff are not properly oriented on how to conduct CE and its benefits are not properly articulated hence there is no common understanding of what CE is, and who should do it. One of the biggest challenges of CE is lack of funding compared to other two missions, teaching and learning, and research (Snyman 2014; Johnson 2020). Without funding, it is difficult for CE to be prioritised by academics and as a result, its intended purpose of bridging the inequality gap in communities and promoting transformation remains unfulfilled.

CONCLUSION

Given the severe disparities in South African communities, there is a serious need for CE to be prioritised and placed on the same level with teaching and learning, and research in HEIs. Prioritising CE as a university's core function allows communities to use the universities' intellectual capital. At the same time, academic staff, researchers and students are exposed to community needs and assist in meeting them (Snyman 2014). In this way, knowledge generation and problem-solving is a multi-stakeholder activity. This study revealed that there are contradictions regarding CE conceptual clarity in the university. Different academics view CE as a scholarship of engagement, as a skills transfer to the community, service learning, philanthropic work and sustainable community problem solving. Conceptual contradictions obviously affect how CE is conducted. The question of whether CE should be mandatory or not is a bone of contention among academics. Those in health sciences, social sciences and commerce see CE as mandatory yet those in pure scientific fields see most of their fields of studies as detached from communities hence, they do not see CE's need. The challenges of CE highlighted in this article are lack of finances channelled towards CE, uncertainty regarding who should do CE, neglect, lack of institutional guidance and lack of understanding of how to measure its effectiveness. The findings of this study indicate that CE requires urgent attention and intervention in terms of contextualisation, the establishment of guiding policy and the provision of funding. This study calls for HEIs to take seriously the heed for CE as it is one of the pillars capable of improving the public health system, social justice and sustainable development especially in marginalised communities and making innovative contributions that could change the structural conditions of poverty. The long-term benefits of CE are linked to knowledge creation, improved community practices and improved social justice.

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