REVISITING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA FROM A VANTAGE POINT OF THE NOTION OF THIRD MISSION

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ABSTRACT

Globally, there is increasing realisation that the idea of universities as ivory towers detached from the societies and environments within which they exist and operate, is untenable in the twenty-first century. Instead, there are reasonable expectations that universities should contribute to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals, promote human welfare, and generally make the world a better place. The notion of third mission provides a cogent philosophy and a pragmatic framework for universities to work towards fulfilling these expectations. The article unpacks and analyses the notion of third mission of universities. It also discusses probable reasons why, despite the notion gaining momentum and being accepted globally, it has not gained much traction in South Africa where the focus is on community engagement which is but one of the myriads of activities that falls with the gamut of the notion of third mission. It contends that universities in South Africa have not made significant impacts with their community engagement activities because of the limited scope and scale of implementation, among others. The article concludes by demonstrating that universities and the broader society in South Africa have more to gain if the universities were to consider institutionalising, planning and effectively implementing third mission programmes.

Keywords: community engagement, higher education, knowledge, third mission, universities

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the most common and well-known form of higher education institution is the "university". Not surprisingly, therefore, the term "higher education" often connotes the type of education offered by universities. The University of Bologna in Italy was the first institution to be formally known as university, although educational institutions of similar form and stature existed in India, Athens and Morocco before the establishment of the University of Bologna in 1018 (Wan, Sirat, and Abddul Razak 2015). Ideological, socio-cultural, economic, legal,

political and technological factors have tended to influence the nature and core functions of universities during any particular period in history. For example, the liberal university of medieval Europe, aptly described by Newman (1852), focused on teaching and scholarship, and it was further characterised by autonomy, academic freedom, close relationship with the church, and social distance from communities and society at large (Perkin 2007).

By and large, the production of knowledge and scholarship through teaching and research have remained the primary functions of universities over the centuries while evolving and adapting to changes in their respective environments (Alemu 2018). One of the changes that universities have gone through over the centuries is to redefine their relationship with society in general, and communities outside their campuses, in particular. As stated above, the medieval European university described by Newman (1852) adopted a position of maintaining social distance from the communities in order to safeguard academic freedom and objectivity. Since then, globally, universities have adopted four other perspectives and standpoints (Reichert 2006). The first of these is the "purist" position which is close to the position adopted by the medieval European university. It advocates universities to maintain distance from communities outside their campuses to avoid being influenced in their academic and intellectual work. According to this position, universities would not be able to optimally undertake knowledge production and scholarship through teaching and research, if they allow to be influenced by the dynamics of society outside their campuses, or if they allow to be influenced by governments or institutions such as churches, business establishments and civil society (Reichert 2006). Universities that hold on to this position exist and operate as pure ivory towers, detached from the "outer world", including from the church or other religious institutions, as well as from the broader society and the environment within which they exist (Butterfield and Soska 2004).

The second one is the "sober" position which is premised on the belief that universities should operate like institutions that engage with stakeholders on a need basis. This means selecting engagements with stakeholders that are considered to be of benefit to the institutions. According to this position, there should be symbiotic relationships between the universities and communities and other stakeholders (Holland and Ramaley 2008). The key to the relationships is the interest of the universities, and therefore universities would engage with stakeholders that benefit them. For example, universities would engage communities which provide material for research, or ideas for curriculum reform. Such engagements are purely transactional and utilitarian in nature and do not lead to strong and enduring bonds of mutual dependency between the universities and the communities, or other stakeholder groups.

The third perspective is the "creative" position which encourages universities to optimise

the intellectual potential of human beings to stimulate innovation. Doing so requires that universities seek dialogue with external stakeholders to gain insights into new perspectives while also seeking personnel and space for the research and intellectual activities of the universities (Wan et al. 2015). The universities focus on developing individuals who would be capable of becoming critical social agents. They empower students to enable them to use knowledge to understand themselves and their circumstances better, as well as to develop themselves as agents of societal change (Giroux 2017).

The fourth perspective is the "social" position which holds that universities ought to play the role of counterbalancing dominant and hegemonic forces in society. These include oppressive and unjust political systems, market forces, belief systems, societal norms and values. The role of universities is therefore seen as that of protecting people from such forces, identifying other challenges confronting communities, and seeking solutions to those challenges, and championing social causes broadly (Weerts and Sandman 2008). According to this perspective, universities should exist with the sole purpose of serving society through their knowledge production, scholarship, and teaching activities. They should operate as watchdogs over society, seeking to identify their problems, and assisting them to find and implement sustainable solutions to such problems. It implies that knowledge production and dissemination activities of universities should be relevant to the societies they are meant to serve (Pinheiro, Langa, and Paustis 2015).

The social perspective as described above, has been popular among universities in developing countries as well as in developed countries with left-leaning policies (Mugabi 2014). Over time, these universities have sought to reimagine and enhance this perspective with the intention of making it integral to their core mandates. This has resulted in the emergence of "third mission" for universities, considered as equal in importance to the traditional missions of higher education (Mugabi 2014; Pinheiro et al. 2015). The article seeks to unpack the notion of third mission of universities and examine why it seems to be gathering momentum globally. It also examines the similarities and differences between the global notion of third mission of universities, and the notion of community engagement which is more popular within the higher education system in South Africa. Furthermore, the article explores probable reasons why the higher education system in South Africa seems not to be keen on advancing the notion of third mission of universities. It then discusses the possibility of remoulding community engagement activities of universities in South Africa and incorporating them into third mission programmes in line with international trends. Overall, the article revisits community engagement in higher education from the vantage point of the notion of third mission of universities.

UNPACKING THE THIRD MISSION CONCEPT

The twenty-first century world is very eventful. It has to contend with, among others, the effects of climate change, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, growing inequalities, globalisation of the national economies, fierce political contestations in some countries, and downright political upheavals in others. Universities have a social responsibility to make contributions to societies in their efforts to survive and adapt to such phenomena that pose threats to very existence. They are called upon to take this social responsibility as one of their reasons of their existence. Since this is an addition to the standing dual university core activities of creating and imparting knowledge, it is accordingly referred to as the "third mission" (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). Universities engaged in third mission programmes serve as anchors of social, economic and cultural development in their respective geographical regions (Agasisti, Barra, and Zotti 2019).

Göransson, Maharajh, and Schmoch (2009) submit that there is no universal consensus on what constitutes third mission. Institutions have different initiatives which they brand as third mission. Glaser, O'Shea and De Gery (2014), for instance, identified third mission activities to include collaborations on research work, involvement in policy development, providing essential services to local communities, explicit transfer of knowledge, tacit knowledge exchanges, development of infrastructure, and running of economic and social development initiatives within the local environments of universities. On the other hand, Markman (2005) as well as Shattock (2005) have a more restricted view third mission which they believe is about commercialisation of intellectual resources and cooperation with local industry partners in that process.

Recent research has resulted in broadening the concept of the third mission to include all social responsibility activities that universities undertake in parallel to their traditional business of knowledge generation and dissemination. It includes activities which universities undertake to engage with, and/or involve the external environment and the communities therein (Glaser et al. 2014). Through third mission initiatives, universities utilise knowledge produced through their research work to tackle challenges that affects the economic, cultural, social and political wellbeing of local communities. The objective is to bring universities closer to the communities as well as the environment, so that they operate in the service of humanity (Mugabi 2014).

At a more basic level, the third mission is simply about making universities assume the obligation of making positive difference in the lives of people and thereby contributing towards socio-economic development of communities and the regions in which they are found (Abreu et al. 2016). The said contribution comprises of an array of initiatives and

programmes of universities which include services provided by universities to the general public and other stakeholders, and projects focused on developing and strengthening the interfaces between the knowledge project of universities, on the one hand, and society and the environment, on the other (Cai and Hall 2015).

FORMS OF THIRD MISSION ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMMES

Although there are myriads of activities and programmes that can be classified as third mission of universities as indicated above, for analytical purposes they can be broadly classified into three main categories. These categories are, knowledge and technology transfer, continuing education, and social engagement. These ensuing paragraphs discussed these broad categories of third mission.

The transfer of knowledge and technology refers to the intentional sharing of scientific and technological knowledge and other intellectual resources among individuals and organisations (Koschatzky and Stahlecker 2010). The purpose of such sharing is to stimulate adoption of innovations which spurs production. This is not a one-sided flow of information from universities to communities, but rather a reciprocal exchange that benefit both sides. For example, by participating in research, individuals from communities transfer knowledge about uses of local plants for medicinal purposes, to the researchers from universities. Knowledge and technology flow while universities interact with different segments of society (Bozeman 2000).

The multidirectional transfer of knowledge and technology underscores the importance of co-creation of knowledge, technology and other intellectual assets. A distinction can be made between formal and informal transfer. Examples of the former include contract research or licensing agreements, while examples of the latter are informal meetings, conferences and networks (Glaser et al. 2014). Abreu and Grinevich (2013) identify four different categories of knowledge and technology transfer activities. The first category comprises problem-solving activities including contract research or consultancy. The second category covers personal activities such as conferences. The third and fourth categories comprise community-focused, and community-based initiatives such as various forms of exhibitions or school-related interventions, and commercialisation of intellectual property, respectively.

The second form of third mission activities is continuing education, also referred to as further education or extension. It comprises of short learning programmes that universities put together and offer to impart knowledge on specific subjects or topics of interest to target groups within communities. Universities design, prepare and deliver such

learning programmes in response to the felt need for further education and training because knowledge-driven work requires continuous learning, unlearning and relearning. Continuing education has special significance in the contemporary world in which the Fourth Industrial Revolution, for instance, necessitates that people continuously reskill and upskill themselves to be able to harness the full potential of technological developments at their disposal (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2020). By offering "just-in-time" continuing education or extension learning programmes outside of their regular programmes that lead to qualifications such as diplomas and degrees, universities make contribution to continuing education and training of people.

The third form of third mission activities is social engagement which refers to all social responsibility endeavours of universities, including interventions aimed at providing higher education opportunities to demographic groups that previously would have been marginalised and underrepresented. Other examples include participation in public debates and advocacy, citizen science and entrepreneurship (Benneworth, Pinheiro, and Sanchez-Barrioluengo 2016). For the purposes of social engagement, universities assume the position of benevolent collaborators of the communities and work actively to develop new partnerships with civil society organisations operating in the same spaces (Morawska-Jancelewicz 2021). In so doing, universities also enhance their levels of legitimacy within society. They become sought after by potential students seeking relevant and quality education, and top academic and researchers seeking to join a team of movers and shakers in a country or continent. They infuse into their formal learning and research programmes the practical lessons acquired through their interactions with communities. Students are afforded the chance to put into practice the theoretical perspectives and conceptual thinking learnt in their respective universities, and to identify what works and what does not work. They learn from such practical experiences which sets of knowledge are useful in addressing the challenges of society. Other advantages to students are that they improve their public communication, teamwork, and appreciation of culture and morality (Millican and Bourner 2011). Governments are also parts of society and key stakeholders of universities. The engagements between universities and governments are important to create a progressive science-policy interface which assists governments to develop and implement policies that are informed by sound research. Engagement between universities and governments also helps to nurture and entrench democracy, and enhance social cohesion among people, while also creating conducive conditions for the emergence of active civil society organisations which play critical roles in deepening democracy. In the same breadth, civil society institutions stand to benefit from their engagement with

universities mainly because universities provide them access to cutting edge knowledge and other intellectual resources that are beneficial in their work particularly on social and governance issues (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2020).

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT OF THIRD MISSION PROGRAMMES

Third mission programmes have gained much traction globally because of the increasing realisation that universities cannot be bystanders watching the world and its populations being devastated by the effects of climate change and other natural disasters; the poor populations descending into dire levels of poverty and helplessness; and marginalised communities continuing to be at the receiving end of physical torture and human rights abuses at the hands of rich aristocrats and despotic governments, to mention a few. The notion of the third mission seeks to make universities activists of society, the environment and natural resources. Through third mission programmes universities act as benefactors, protectors and defenders of the less privileged, the marginalised, the indigent and the poor (Petersen and Kruss 2021). At the same time, they become allies of business, civil society and governments to develop people and regions that they form part of. The third mission is essentially about universities playing their part in promoting sustainable development. In doing so, they justify their existence as publicly funded institutions, make themselves relevant so that they are not regarded as "white elephants", and earn and gain public legitimacy which is essential from a moral viewpoint (Raditloaneng 2013).

Berghaeuser and Hoelscher (2020) submit that the importance of the third mission for universities is marked by the fact that it is not only considered as a responsibility of higher education institutions, but it is also recognised as a key performance area in the job descriptions of academics and managers in higher education institutions. Academics at all levels are required to engage in third mission activities besides their traditional functions of generating and imparting knowledge. The range of third mission activities for academics include incorporating local issues in the curricula; conducting research on local (or indigenous) knowledge systems; participating in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of regional economic development programmes; disseminating information about new technologies to spur industrial development; creating academic spin-offs that could also be patented; and being involved in social engagement and entrepreneurial education (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). It also includes providing continuing education or extension to people who are not registered for programmes leading to formal qualifications; as well as participating in public debates and cultural activities (Lawton-Smith 2007). This form of liaison and engagement between academics and citizens at large

seeks to promote positive social, cultural and economic changes in society (Backs, Gunther, and Stummer 2019).

A further significance of the third mission programmes is that they give students chances to apply the theoretical perspectives to practical life situations, and to use the power of reflection to identify knowledge that is beneficial. Some spin-offs include development of interpersonal skills such as communication, increased levels of moral and social responsibility, increased awareness of the world, enhanced social self-efficacy, teamwork and increased capacity for reflective thinking and reflective learning (Bednarz et al. 2008).

One clear impact of third mission programmes of universities is their offering of social services to communities in need without seeking any gain in return. The social services can take the form of transfer of knowledge and skills to communities, volunteer activities, expertise and educational outreach to communities, social networking and contributions to public policy. Universities also run summer schools for various target groups in communities, promote culture from hosting cultural festivals and arts exhibitions, to mention a few (Padfield 2004).

Third mission programmes also have an entrepreneurial impact. Through consultancy work for industry, registration of patents, commercialisation of intellectual property, contract research, and contract advisory work, hosting of conferences, and running of continuing education courses, universities are able to supplement their traditional sources of revenue and acquire additional funds for themselves (Montesinos et al. 2008). This has led to the notion of an "entrepreneur university". At the heart of this notion is the quest to establish inextricable linkages between academia and industry through technology transfer, incubators, and university-based science parks that are set up to facilitate commercialisation of intellectual resources (Gunther and Wagner 2008).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

In South Africa, the term "third mission" is not in popular use. The closest term which is in popular use is "third stream income", which refers to revenue obtained from activities that in other countries would be considered as part of the third mission. The reason why the term "third mission" is not popular in South Africa is largely because it does not appear in policy documents. The report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996), for example, uses the term "responsiveness of higher education", as a principle for promoting a symbiotic relationship and interaction between universities and society, and for promoting development and enhancing accountability. The *Education White Paper 3* (DoE 1997) uses the term "advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship" to describe the responsibility

of universities to address the diverse local, national, regional and Africa-wide problems and sustainability. It also uses the term "social responsibility and commitment" to describe the mandate of higher education institutions to promote public good by providing human resources and other types of resources required for social responsibility programmes. It furthermore employs the term "community service" to refer to the responsibility of universities to actively design, develop and implement projects that seek to address challenges that communities face. The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (DHET 2013) takes a leaf from the NCHE report (DoE NCHE 1996) and uses the term "responsiveness" as a rallying principle to explain the desired form of relationship between universities and the external environment, including the interface communities. It describes being "responsive" to entail conducting research geared towards finding ways and means of stimulating economic and social development, and to nurturing cogeneration partnerships with public and private enterprises. It articulates its expectation that universities should be responsive to the social, economic and cultural challenges of society. The *National Plan for the Post-School Education and Training System* (DHET 2021) uses the term "community engagement" which it describes as the third pillar of the core responsibilities of universities. It enjoins universities to develop and enhance their focus on continuous engagement with communities, and commits to supporting them to this end.

Flowing from the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the policy documents use terms such as "responsiveness", "advancement of knowledge and scholarship", and "community engagement" to describe the responsibilities of universities to promote change, development and sustainability among the communities in their catchment areas. All these terms are part of the lexicon of the third mission of universities as discussed earlier. The reasons why the policy documents do not make use of the term "third mission" are not clear. However, it is probable that they have to do with the fact that the discourse on the third mission gathered momentum in the late 1980s, and it is therefore still a relatively new notion, which is also not without its fierce critics (Etzkowitz 2003). One criticism of the notion of third mission is that it reduces the purpose of universities to a utilitarian one, whereby its core functions and activities, are designed and implemented first and foremost to be of benefit to humanity. This is contrary to the initial purpose of universities, which was to create fountains of knowledge to be passed on from one generation to the next (Wan et al. 2015). According to this view, universities by their nature should be fascinated with knowledge and innovations, for their own sake, and not only for the purpose of serving a utilitarian value. As De le Rey (2015) argued, universities should not be reduced to utilitarian instruments because their *raison d'être* is to produce, assess, validate, apply and disseminate knowledge through research, scholarship and teaching,

irrespective of whether that knowledge can assist people to solve their changes or not.

Another probable reason why the policy documents shy away from using the term "third mission" is that this notion has given rise to the so called "entrepreneurial university" which operates on business principles. It is therefore perceived as a notion that has been instrumental in promoting the adoption of the unpopular managerialism in, and corporatisation of universities (Tomaselli 2021). It would therefore be a challenge to obtain buy-in from universities if the ideas of "responsiveness", "advancement of knowledge and scholarship", and "community engagement" were to be couched in the lexicon of third mission that promotes entrepreneurial university.

By using different terms to describe the responsibilities of universities to promote change, development and sustainability among the communities in their catchment areas, the higher education policy documents in South Africa might have unwittingly created a precedent for each university to express these responsibilities differently. A study of the mission statements of the universities in South Africa revealed that terms such as "community engagement", "engaged scholarship", "scholarship of engagement", "community outreach", "community service" and "service learning" are used. Mission statements of twenty-five out of the twenty-six universities in South Africa include these terms or their variants (Van Schalkwyk 2022) which suggests that in terms of aspirations, almost all universities aspire to be active with programmes that seek to promote change, development and sustainability among the communities in their catchment areas. However, the critical question is whether or not these statements are translated into implementable programmes within the respective universities.

The lack of a common terminology in the policy documents has created a fertile ground for individual institutions to interpret the engagement mandate differently. This is compounded by the fact that, unlike the two traditional missions of universities, the service and engagement functions of universities are not included in the three government funding streams: block funding, earmarked funding and institutional factors funding. This means they serve as an unfunded mandate. Goddard and Vallance (2011) contend that because community engagement programmes are not adequately funded, their sustainability is always in doubt, and this raises questions about their status as core function activities of universities. Similarly, Badat (2013) observes that since funding for community engagement programmes is often *ad hoc* and inadequate, it makes community engagement an idealistic mandate, which many institutions cannot afford because they have other pressing priorities. Another factor that has negatively affected implementation of community engagement programmes is that there are no guidelines on designing, planning, measuring and monitoring the community engagement activities of universities. All these factors have connived to render community engagement activities less

on par with knowledge generation through research, and knowledge dissemination through teaching. Therefore, most universities regard these as philanthropic activities that have no bearing on their obligations Mitchell 2008). Furthermore, there is some resistance among academics against accepting community engagement as core functions of universities (Bender 2008). There is nothing motivating or incentivising academics to allocate substantial proportions of their time to community engagement programmes. Furthermore, most institutions have no performance indicators and targets for those programmes. In the final analysis, community engagement activities remain largely voluntary, and academics have nothing to fear as a consequence of not inventing their energy and efforts into them (Butin 2007).

Although the policy documents and universities use different terminologies to describe the universities social responsibility activities, the term that is more commonly used across the higher education system in South Africa is "community engagement". The CHE, for instance, consistently uses the term in its quality assurance and promotion regulatory frameworks (CHE 2010). Similarly, the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) consistently uses this term in its publications and professional engagement forums such as conferences and workshops. Community engagement is also the term that is used throughout the latest policy document, the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (NPPSET) (DHET 2021).

The term "community engagement" as commonly used in higher education in South Africa refers to initiatives and processes through which academics, other professional and students in the universities apply their knowledge to contribute towards addressing day-to-day challenges facing communities (Maistry 2012). It is one of the three founding principles of reforming the post-apartheid higher education (CHE 2010). Community engagement is undertaken to promote community-university partnerships to develop knowledge for improving the wellbeing of people; encourage human-based research; and work with civil society organisations in planning and execution of social responsibility projects. It emphasises a two-way approach in which university and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge to address societal needs (Bednarz et al. 2010).

Community engagement is guided by the principle that knowledge created and applied by universities should be socially accountable, responsive, reflexive, transdisciplinary and problem oriented. In South Africa, community engagement is considered an important dimension of the agenda for transformation of higher education. Universities are aware that that community engagement is key to transforming the values of higher education in relation to being of service to humanity, and to producing graduates with a sense of social responsibility

(Bender 2008).

COMMUNITY ENGAGMENT *VERSUS* THIRD MISSION

A close analysis of community engagement in the higher education system in South African, and the third mission of universities globally, confirm that the two have more in common. Both have the same goal of making universities active role players in addressing challenges of communities in their regions. Both are also regarded as third pillars of the academic business of universities, supposedly on par traditional for functions of universities. As discussed earlier, the third mission activities can be broadly classified into three categories: knowledge and technology transfer, continuing education and extension, and social engagement. Most of the activities that South African universities undertake as part of community engagement are effectively social engagement activities. Furthermore, universities in South Africa run continuing and extension learning programmes, which are commonly referred to as "short courses" and "skills development courses". These bring in considerable amounts of "third stream income" to universities in the country (CHE 2016). Therefore, community engagement in South African higher education covers two main components of the notion of third mission.

There are two key differences between community engagement as practiced in South African higher education, on the one hand, and the notion of third mission, on the other. Firstly, community engagement has not emphasised knowledge and technology transfer as well as the adoption of the "entrepreneurial university" model, which are at the heart of the notion of third mission. In fact, as alluded to earlier in this article, in South Africa, a significant proportion of role players in higher education hold a view that this component of the notion of third mission is essentially a neo-liberal project because it is essentially about commercialising and commodifying knowledge and innovations. It is further contended that it runs counter to the age-long understanding that universities exist "for public good". Ironically, and as discussed in the next section, it is this very component of the notion of third mission that has made some universities in the United States of America and Europe to significantly increase their impact in terms of making contributions to socio-economic development. Furthermore, the same universities are consistently ranked highly in most global university ranking systems, suggesting that adopting the "entrepreneur university" model has helped them to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning, research and innovations (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020).

Another key difference is that in community engagement as practiced in higher education in South Africa, the social engagement and continuing education or extension components are not properly funded, planned and implemented. Hall (2010) observes that the social

engagement and continuing education activities in South African universities remain *ad hoc* in nature, small in size and not well designed, planned and executed. Not surprisingly, their impact is almost insignificant (Hall 2010). On the other hand, the social engagement and continuing education activities undertaken globally as part of third mission of universities are properly funded; well designed, planned and implemented; are monitored and evaluated regularly; and include measures and indicators of success and/or failures. They are also integral part of the strategic and annual performance plans of the institutions (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020).

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the third mission of universities is an important philosophy which has made universities to contribute significantly to issues of socio-economic development and environmental sustainability. Although community engagement in South Africa is closely related to the notion of the third mission, it has not been as impactful as the notion of third mission. This article therefore submits that there are merits for South African universities to adopt and institutionalise the notion of third mission to address the shortcomings of community engagement, as discussed above. The next section examines the key considerations in the process towards the institutionalisation of third mission in South African universities.

TOWARDS INSTITUTIONALISING THIRD MISSION IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

As discussed earlier, the institutionalisation of third mission programmes in universities generates benefits to institutions, students, communities, industry, civil society and the environment. For institutions, these benefits include gaining legitimacy as public agencies, enhancing their relevance to society, spurring regional socio-economic and cultural development, and increasing "third stream" income which contributes towards financial sustainability. For instance, in the United States of America and Europe, the universities that appear to be doing well financially, contribute to socio-economic and cultural development of their regions, have high rates of public approval, and occupy top positions in most global ranking systems, are those that have well designed, planned and executed third mission programmes (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). Similarly, on the African continent, universities which have attached much significance to pursuing third mission programmes are proving to be doing well in all areas of their core mandates. They are also well supported by governments, communities, industry, civil society and the general public. Their legitimacy is never in doubt (Pinheiro 2012). Therefore, there are merits in moving towards adopting and institutionalising the notion of third mission across universities in South Africa. Besides, institutionalising third mission programmes would be one way of improving the performance

of institutions in the areas of "community engagement", "engaged scholarship", "scholarship of engagement", "community impact", "community outreach", "social impact", and "social responsiveness" which the institutions have identified as core areas of responsibility in their mission statements (Van Schalkwyk 2022).

One of the first considerations towards institutionalising the third mission programmes in universities in South Africa would be to engage with the terminology, with the view towards some form of standardisation. The teaching and learning, and research and scholarship mandates of higher education institutions are clearly defined, the terms used are standardised, and there is common understanding of those terms. As long as third mission remains a nebulous term, then it is highly unlikely that it would attain the same level of significance attached to teaching and learning, as well as research (Nongxa 2010). It is therefore critical that national platforms such as conferences and workshops should be organised to engage with the issue of terminology and arrive at some form of working consensus. This would not be entirely a new initiative in South Africa as the Council on Higher Education (CHE) convened a research colloquium in 2009 to start this type of engagement focusing on community engagement. The key discussion areas were later written up and published as *Kagisano* No. 6 (CHE 2010). Unfortunately, there has not been much movement since the colloquium and the publication of *Kagisano* No. 6. Granted that the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) has been established and it holds conferences, workshops and seminars. However, these have not had the impacts desired because they are for members of the SAHECEF as a professional association. They are not open to the wider community of academics and researchers. Their focus is also on community engagement, which is a small component of third mission activities of universities. On the other hand, the conference organised by Universities of South Africa (USAf) in 2021 had a wider reach but it focused on examining the practical aspects of an "engaged university". There was no session dedicated to clearing up the conceptual and terminology issues related to the broad notion of third mission of universities.

It is anticipated that a national debate and engagement on the conceptual and terminology fundamentals of the third mission would not only help in formulating common terminology and definitions, but it would also clear some misconceptions about the notion of third mission. As alluded to earlier, one such misconception is that the third mission movement is a neo-liberal project that advocates that universities should be run as businesses, and aim at turning universities into entrepreneur institutions. It is therefore perceived to be responsible for the increasing adoption of managerialism in, and corporatisation of higher education institutions. It could be argued that the negative sentiments about the "entrepreneur university" are, to a

larger extent, a result of not fully understanding and appreciating its innovative aspects. Based on success stories of entrepreneur universities captured in literature (see for example Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020) the challenges of funding, low throughput and success rates, and low research and innovation outputs, that most universities are grappling with in South Africa, could be addressed if the institutions adopted the organising principles of the "entrepreneur university". These principles include close partnership with industry, harnessing and leveraging innovations, and patenting and commercialising intellectual property at significant scales, to mention a few.

It can also be argued that the notion of third mission has embedded mechanisms of checks and balances because while on the one hand it advocates entrepreneurship and the commercialisation of intellectual properly, on the other hand, its equal emphasis on universities playing the role of activists to champion social causes, means that the focus would not be on creation and accumulation of capital *per se* in the mode of white monopoly capital. The capital created through entrepreneurial programmes of the universities is meant to be reinvested into programmes that enhance teaching and learning, and research; as well as in programmes that are designed and implemented to address the challenges facing ordinary people in communities. Similarly, the third mission focus area of continuing education and lifelong learning helps to empower individuals and communities to move with time, adopt innovations and adapt to other changes in the macroeconomic environment. The notion of third mission is therefore more ideologically and pragmatically balanced, and one which when planned and executed effectively, is unlikely to disadvantage communities or other stakeholders.

The institutionalisation of third mission programmes could also provide the necessary balance to counter the view that additions to the core functions of teaching and learning, and research and scholarship, tend to overburden universities and make their students and staff over-stretched with the resultant compromise on the quality of higher education. Ardent proponents of this view argue that connecting the universities to local and regional development activities weakens the academic core of teaching and learning, as well as research and scholarship. The snowball effect of such weakening of the academic core would be that the universities would end up with less new relevant knowledge to apply to community engagement or service. The end result would be that universities would run programmes in teaching and learning, research and community engagement that are compromised in terms of quality and impact (Cloete et al. 2011). On the other hand, it has already been demonstrated earlier that those universities in the United States of America and Europe that have institutionalised the third mission programmes are among those that are consistently ranked high in all global ranking systems (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). Similarly, on the African continent, universities that have adopted the

third mission in their strategies are performing better on all indicators than those that have not (Mugabi 2014; Pinheiro 2012). The view that implementing third mission programmes including community engagement compromises quality of higher education is therefore not supported by evidence. However, it is important to indicate that where the notion of third mission is adopted for the purposes of window dressing, and thus implemented without proper resourcing and planning, then challenges like those articulated by Cloete at al. (2011) would be expected.

If the issue of terminology is addressed as discussed earlier in this section, then another important requirement for the effective institutionalisation of the notion of the third mission is for the policy documents to set the tone by making use of consistent terminology and providing coherent policy guidelines on monitoring and reporting requirements. The National Plan for the Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2021) is the first higher education policy document that seems to be going into this direction. It consistently uses the term "community engagement" and commits to requesting the CHE to advise on policy guidelines and reporting requirements, as well as on mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating community engagement programmes. It also recommends that, as part of community engagement, universities should engage with and support other PSET institutions such as the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and community education and training (CET) colleges). It is important that national policies should be reinforced by institutional policies seeking to promote or encourage staff to support and become actively involved in third mission programmes. Enabling institutional policies include staff promotions and funding policies which should make provision for seed funding for third mission projects. Similarly, policies should make provision for rewards and incentives for staff involved in third mission programmes (Weerts and Sandmann 2008).

Another key requirement for the effective institutionalisation of third mission programmes in universities is that top management and leadership of universities need to demonstrate commitment to third mission programmes. They should not simply have one or two words about third mission activities in the mission statements of their respective institutions. They should translate them into institutional strategic and annual performance plans, and allocate budget to them. Similarly, while senior leadership commitment is important, having middle level leadership to ensure implementation of third mission programmes is equally essential. Middle level leaders are often critical in the strategic implementation of third mission programmes (Huy 2001) and so too are some enabling structures such as reporting structures, and third mission planning and steering committees which, if not already available, should then be developed (Mugabi 2014).

CONCLUSION

The main contention of this article is that universities cannot afford to be bystanders in the twenty-first century world facing many societal problems including abject poverty, famine, human rights abuses, and adverse events associated with climate change and the depletion of non-renewable natural resource. They have the responsibility to contribute towards finding sustainable solutions to these challenges, assisting communities to protect their livelihoods, and speaking out against human rights abuses and other unjust hegemonic tendencies. It argues that the notion of third mission provides a cogent philosophy and a pragmatic framework for universities to plan and effectively discharge this inimitable responsibility. Whilst there are myriads of activities and actions that universities undertake as part of their third mission programmes, these could be subsumed under three broad categories namely, knowledge and technology transfer and the entrepreneur university model, continuing education or extension, and social engagement. Globally, universities that have strategically institutionalised the third mission programmes have enjoyed increasing good public reputation; gained and entrenched public legitimacy; improved quality of teaching and learning; grown their research and innovation programmes; and occupied pole positions in global university ranking systems.

The article has also observed that the notion of third mission of universities has not gained much traction in South Africa. Probable reasons for this state of affairs have been advanced, while making an observation that community engagement is one of the three founding principles of the post-apartheid reconstruction of South Africa along with teaching and learning, and research. Post-1994 higher education policies call upon universities to be responsive to the needs of the country and identifies community engagement programmes as important in this regard.

After a comparative analysis, the article concludes that community engagement and the notion of third mission have more in common. However, it has found that the notion of third mission is more comprehensive, and that when planned and implemented properly, third mission programmes produce the desired impacts at national, regional and international scales. Therefore, the article recommends that the higher education system in South Africa should consider institutionalising third mission programmes with community engagement subsumed under such programmes.

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