LEADING ARTICLE

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPTUALISATION AND PRACTICES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A CORE FUNCTION OF UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The world saw the "human" side of universities during the Covid-19 pandemic as universities across the globe were at the forefront of efforts to control the spread of the Coronavirus, and to explore means of making the human population acquire immunity against the virulent disease. This article contends that, although this appeared as unusual, the universities were simply fulfilling their obligation to humanity because the *raison d'être* of universities includes being of service to society. Therefore, if they are unable to prevent crises from setting in, they should at least be at the forefront of efforts to combat the crises, and mitigate their effects on people. The article seeks to set the scene for the collection of articles that follow in this special issue of the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) on the theme of community engagement as a core function for universities. It argues that universities have social responsibility, and they should therefore serve as anchors of towns and regions; as engines of development in their respective geographical areas; and as champions of social causes. It presents and discusses the concepts and practices of community engagement that are critical to understanding the arguments and counterarguments in the articles that follow. These include the relationship between community engagement, on the one hand, and transformation of higher education as well as decolonisation of knowledge and ways of knowing, on the other. The article also reflects on the state of community engagement in universities in South Africa, and explains that it is mostly regarded as a stepchild because it is not valued, funded or supported in the same way as the other two core functions of teaching and learning, and research and innovation. The article also cautions against the use of rhetoric to romanticise community engagement when the projects on the ground leave much to be desired, and with not potential to make a difference to society.

Keywords: anchor universities, community engagement, decolonisation, engaged scholarship, organic crisis, transformation

INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic universities stepped up and assumed leadership of society. They

worked tirelessly studying the virus to understand its characteristics, modelling its spread to be able to predict waves of infections, developing and testing vaccines, and consistently communicating to the public about the state of the pandemic, the dangers posed by the virus, as well as the means available to prevent infections. They did all these with the sole purpose of saving humanity from the devastating effects of the vicious virus. People saw the "human" side of universities that hitherto they were not accustomed to seeing. Suddenly universities were there working with the people and for the people. It can be argued that they were simply doing what society traditionally expects of universities. However, the question many would ask is that if the universities were simply doing what society expects of them, why is it that they are rarely seen working with and for people in the communities to address other societal challenges besides Covid-19? The collection of articles in this special issue of the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) addresses this question and provides various perspectives on the matter.

The overarching theme of this special issue of the SAJHE is community engagement as a core function of universities. Therefore, all the articles in this volume examine the linkages between universities and communities, where communities include various stakeholder groups within and outside the institutional arrangements of universities. The main thesis in the articles is that universities have obligations to society. They argue that universities should serve as anchors of towns and regions; as engines of development in their respective geographical areas; and as champions of social causes at various levels of society. Some of the articles contend that for the universities to discharge their social duties effectively and efficiently, they need to break from the past and stop serving the interests of hegemonic powers of Europe, the United States of America and its allies. They should instead be guided by African worldviews and philosophy of education. This view emphasises the decolonisation of the universities, the academics and academy more broadly. The articles examine community engagement from different perspectives and employ varying conceptual and theoretical tools, which make this collection of articles an important contribution to the discourse on community engagement as a core business of universities, in addition to teaching and learning, as well as research and innovation.

The purpose of this lead article is to set the scene for the articles that follow. It does so by reflecting on the key concepts and practices of community engagement that are presented and discussed in detail in the articles that follow. It is intended to prepare the reader to acquire the contextual understanding of the concepts and issues discussed in the articles in this special issue of the SAJHE so that the reader is empowered to engage the articles critically. Similarly, the reflection on practices is intended to assist the reader to assess the practicality and limitations of the positions posited in, and advocated by the articles.

UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIETY: OVERVIEW OF STATE OF AFFAIRS

South Africa and most countries across the globe are facing what Filippini (2017) refers to as "organic crisis", a term that connotes a multitude of crises in which systems disintegrate and lose their regularity and predictability, while new replacement systems have not started to evolve organically or to be created. The multiple dimensions of the crisis are evident from, for example, climate change and the environmental crisis, infrastructure decay (*New Frame* 2021), corruption, energy and water crises, hunger and poverty, crime, mental health crisis, gender-based violence (Chelala 2022), and transport crisis (Hlatshwayo 2022). Other crises include rising costs of living (Whiting 2022), and brain drain which has seen South Africa lose to other countries up to 53 per cent of talented graduates of all races, as well as top academics, medical doctors and nurses (Bloomberg 2022).

If universities had always acted and behaved the way they did during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, probably the world would have never descended into the state of "organic crisis". However, if, against the odds, the world still descended into a state of "organic crisis", the universities would have been at the forefront of initiatives and efforts to arresting the crisis and re-establish order. The facts that South Africa and other countries are facing "organic crises", and that the situation seems to be escalating rather than abating, serve as an indictment of the universities because it means that they have not been fulfilling their social responsibilities. Universities are microcosms of society, and when society is in a state of "organic crisis", the same is likely to be replicated in universities. In South Africa, for example, reports of malfeasances in universities are common. The country has witnessed universities being placed under administration, vice-chancellors needing the protection of bodyguards, academics and institutional managers being assassinated (*Daily Dispatch* 7 April 2022), the selling of qualifications, and the rise in cases of breaches of academic integrity (Cowan 2016; Govender 2021), to mention a few. When the universities themselves are facing "organic crises" in this manner, they are likely to become oblivious of their social responsibilities to society. It is therefore incumbent upon researchers to constantly remind universities of their social responsibilities, and the collection of articles in this volume constitute a small but important contribution in this regard.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The post-apartheid higher education policies in South Africa require universities to be responsive to the needs of the towns and regions in which they are located, and ultimately to the national interests. Universities are called upon to demonstrate social responsibility and

commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community engagement programmes (Hall 2010). Therefore, universities in South Africa are expected to demonstrate that they are both fit of, and fit for purpose by meaningfully engaging their internal and external communities (Johnson and Cooper 2014). Universities have responded to this requirement by including in their mission statements declarations of intent to engage with communities. However, the terms "communities" and "engage" are increasingly proving to be elusive, and this has far-reaching implications on how seriously universities can take their social responsibilities.

Hall (2010) explains that the word "community" as used in the context of community engagement of universities, refers to academic and support staff within universities, communities of practice, civic organisations, schools, townships, private sector, public sector, and the public, more broadly. On the other hand, "engagement" in the context community engagement of universities, refers to a wide array of initiatives including "volunteerism", "service learning", "engaged scholarship", "civic engagement", "community service" or "outreach", "work-integrated learning", "commissioned contract work", and "patenting and technology transfer". One distinguishing feature of "engagement" activities is that they are undertaken to address specific wants and needs, and/or in pursuit of alternative forms of knowledge. The other distinguishing feature is that engagement involves reciprocity and bidirectionality, which underscore the fact that "engagement" activities should be undertaken within the context of partnership, collaboration, mutuality, collectivity, cooperation, and two-way flow of information (Du Plooy 2017).

The purpose of community engagement in higher education is to demonstrate the social responsibility of institutions as well as their commitment to the common good by making their expertise and infrastructure available for community service programmes (Hart 2021). Therefore, when undertaken effectively and efficiently, community engagement should lead to socially responsive practices, the development of effective solutions to practical problems, as well as the development of theories to advance scholarship. It can also lead to the dissemination and advancement of knowledge across generations, as well as the creation of environments conducive to the adoption of the principles and agenda for social responsibility, accountability and social justice (Du Plooy 2017). There are indications that universities that have made a strategic choice to focus on community engagement as one of their core functions are at the forefront of initiatives in search of solutions to social causes such as alleviating poverty, improving public health, achieving universal primary and secondary education, and enabling locally controlled economic development (Erasmus and Albertyn 2014).

TRANSFORMATION AND DECOLONISATION

The philosophy underlying the concept of community engagement is about seeing universities as vehicles through which support is delivered to communities. The communities need support with meeting their needs, confronting their challenges, planning and implementing socio-cultural change, and working towards realising their full potential more broadly. In order for the universities to be able to provide the required support effectively and efficiently, they ought to be responsive. In turn, responsiveness requires universities to strive to understand the issues from the viewpoints of the communities, and to desist the temptation to impose foreign worldviews on communities. The universities ought to learn to understand the needs of the communities, the challenges confronting them, and their socio-cultural aspirations. This cannot be realised if the universities do not shift from their default position of believing that, and acting as if, they are the sole source and custodians of knowledge; to a new position of recognising that communities too possess knowledge that can be transferred to the universities. As Kornelsen (2017) avers, this requires that universities learn humility and accept as well as appreciate that the communities understand their environment, lives, needs, challenges and aspirations better than anyone else; and that, therefore, universities intending to make a difference to such communities, have much to learn from those very communities. This is not a simple matter of transforming mindsets, attitudes, perceptions and values. It rather requires a more fundamental paradigm shift involving giving up the colonial knowledge and worldviews, and embracing the local knowledge systems found within the communities. At the heart of this argument is the notion of decolonising knowledge, the ways of knowing, and knowledge systems (Kornelsen 2017). It follows from the foregoing that genuine and sincere engagement and partnerships between universities and communities may result in the transformation of universities and the decolonisation of knowledge, of ways of knowing, and of knowledge systems more broadly (Akhurst et al. 2016).

Bunting (1994) observed that during the apartheid era, universities lacked democratic accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the majority of South Africans because there were no meaningful two-way and reciprocal engagement and partnerships between universities and communities. The post-apartheid policies on higher education identify institutional responsiveness to the needs of communities and, by extension, community engagement, as critical in the efforts of creating a transformed post-colonial dispensation because it empowers communities to utilise their strengths to bring about desired social change which includes the elimination of bias, prejudice, marginalisation and discrimination. In other words, university responsiveness and community engagement contribute to the transformation of both universities as well as communities, and to the creation and maintenance of new order of equity

and social justice (Hart 2021).

Seepe (2004) contends that responsive universities are those that engage effectively, and therefore responsiveness goes together with community engagement. Responsive and engaged universities do not pursue knowledge for its sake, but to also apply it to social transformation, economic development and the general improvement of the lives of people. In this way, those universities become connected and relevant to their communities. Seepe (2004) goes on to posit that responsiveness and engagement of universities ought to be from African perspectives, grounded in African experiences, so that the African experiences should be the source of knowledge and ideas. This makes community engagement of universities in the African context inextricably linked to transformation and decolonisation of higher education. Goddard (2018) corroborates this by suggesting that community engagement is a powerful transformative force and that it should be recognised as such, and it should not be marginalised within the universities.

It is worth remembering that in Africa, the history of higher education is inextricably linked to colonialism (Materu 2007), and later in South Africa, to apartheid (Metz 2015). Since securing independence from their former colonial masters, and since South Africa liberated itself from the shackles of apartheid, African countries have included in the agenda of their development and reconstruction programmes ideas about transforming and reorientating their higher education systems towards African philosophy of education. After years of doubting whether African philosophy of education exists, there is now general agreement that it indeed exists and that it is centred on communalism and humanism, also referred to as "*ubuntu*" (Chemhuru 2016; Higgs 2003; Higgs 2011; Higgs and Van Wyk 2007; Waghid 2004). Responsiveness and engagement are attributes that are integral to both communalism and humanism. It is therefore not surprising that responsiveness through community engagement is regarded as central to programmes of transforming and decolonising higher education, prompting scholars such as Mugabi (2014) and Raditloaneng (2013) to suggest that the notion of community engagement as a "third mission" of universities needs to be revisited in the context of Africa, because the orientation towards transformed and decolonised higher education systems in Africa demands that community engagement should, in effect, be accorded first priority. They suggest that it should be considered as the "first mission" of universities, followed by the missions of teaching and learning, and research and innovation.

ANCHOR UNIVERSITIES

The last couple of decades have seen growth in research on mechanisms for enhancing the impact of community engagement projects of universities on regions or similar geographical

location units. From such research has emerged the anchor universities concept (Harris and Holley 2016) which is a variant of the original "anchor institutions" concept. The latter holds that place-based institutions such as hospitals, schools, military barracks, churches, sports and cultural centres, and museums embody significant investment of infrastructure in specific locations, resulting in relative physical immobility and stability (Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos and Anderson 2001). They are dependent on the patronage and support of the communities in their vicinities, and if at any point in time the patronage and support are withdrawn, they risk turning into white elephants. In return, they typically have missions that are oriented towards community engagement and social service (Harris and Holley 2016). For instance, universities as anchor institutions make specific decisions to leverage various forms of capital, including economic, human, and intellectual, to advance the well-being of their local communities (Hodges and Dubb 2012).

Anchor universities seek to leverage their knowledge resources to spur socio-economic development in their regions in much the same way that natural resources and resource-based industries used to act as engines of socio-economic development in particular regions. Anchor universities provide employment to local people, upskill local people and play leadership roles in businesses in their respective geographical regions. For example, they offer management consultancy and other specialised advisory services to manufacturing industries, retail businesses, banks and other financial services institutions, hospitability industry, and other service-oriented industries. They become an important fulcrum around which the economies of their respective regions revolve (O'Farrell, Hassan, and Hoole 2022). They further function as public spaces, hosting events for their communities, opening their campuses to the public, and encouraging the participation of the communities in knowledge production. In this way, the universities maintain a physical presence in their communities. At the same time, they also maintain "conceptual visibility" within the communities by serving as democratic public forums for debates and other forms of intellectual engagements, and as sites of knowledge production (Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister 2012). Allowing communities to participate in intellectual engagement and knowledge production activities leads to the co-creation or co-production of knowledge while also enhancing the visibility of universities within the regions (O'Farrell et al. 2022).

Co-production of knowledge lies at the core of the anchor universities concept. Unlike hierarchical top-down traditional knowledge production that privileges the "objective" technical knowledge of experts who are typically removed from situations on the ground, co-production confers equal value and stature to the "subjective" knowledge of communities (Negev and Teschner 2013). It also empowers ordinary people from the communities to

articulate and develop options for addressing the problems they face, and, thus, avoiding the unintentional stereotyping and stigmatising of behaviours of people in the communities. The latter is a common characteristic in top-down and master-servant relationships (Vrooman and Coenders 2020). Co-production of knowledge makes anchor universities institutions that support democratic values while facilitating epistemic justice, enabling the public to participate in knowledge creation, dissemination and application (Richardson 2014).

The advancement of community engagement through the conception of universities as anchor institutions has received some attention in some of the articles published in this volume of the SAJHE. For example, Fongwa discusses the concept of anchoring as representing a more integrated way in which universities are engaging with their communities, towards achieving social and economic transformation of their regions as well as of the universities themselves. This special issue of the SAJHE also carries two case studies of how Rhodes University is implementing projects that seek to entrench the institution as an anchor university within the Makhanda Municipality and the Eastern Cape Province (see Sibhensana and Maistry 2023; Talbot and McCan 2023).

Although the conception of universities as anchor institutions holds much promise as regards making community engagement more impactful, there are several factors that suggest that many universities are not prepared to serve as anchors of communities and regions. Vice-chancellors of most universities are obsessed with global competitiveness as measured by global ranking systems. Therefore, their focus is mainly on global trends and issues, and to a lesser extent, on national issues. Local and regional issues are not given the attention they deserve because they do not matter much in determining the global competitiveness of universities. In that regard, the vice-chancellors have less interest in exploring the potential that their universities may have as regards effectively playing the role of anchoring regions and communities. However, a counterargument is that through their ability to produce new knowledge, for the well-being of society, universities may also anchor society beyond their cities and regions. For example, Cooper (2011) showed how Stanford University, through discoveries in physics-electrical engineering after 1945, took its knowledge beyond the university to regionally based corporate industries and federal government agencies. Therefore, the vice-chancellors need to be reminded that charity begins at home, and having solid foundations of local service and impact prepares institutions for effective internationalisation and global impact.

Another factor that suggests that many universities are not prepared to serve as anchors of communities and regions is that, in South Africa for example, universities hardly recruit all employees from their locales or regions. This is because there are national employment policies

that prohibit exclusion of job applicants purely on the basis that they originate from other regions and provinces. Furthermore, universities believe that restricting their recruitment to specific regions or provinces would encourage "inbreeding" within the institutions with the consequence of turning them into inward looking institutions that would be less exposed to novel ideas and knowledge emanating from other regions and provinces. Similarly, rural provinces in South Africa continue to experience significant brain drain to the more urbane provinces. If rural universities were to insist on employing academic and professional staff from their areas only, most of them would battle to fill many critical academic and professional support posts because of relatively small pools of candidates with suitable qualifications and/or experience. It is because of this reality that most rural universities have sought to fill critical academic and professional staff positions with expatriates, mostly from other African countries (Sehoole et al. 2019). It is the same with procurement of supplies. Whereas anchor universities are expected to prefer procuring their supplies within their regions to support local industries and businesses (Harris and Holley 2016) doing so exclusively could contradict supply chain policies that require that suppliers nation-wide should be allowed to compete for opportunities to supply, and also that the universities should select suppliers who offer cost effective supplies that are value for money irrespective of where in the country they are based. All these suggest that universities which intend to play the role of anchor institutions need to carefully consider all factors so that they do not end up solving one problem while creating multiple other problems that could adversely affect their functioning as anchor institutions. For example, they would need to balance the expectation to recruit most of their employees from their local and district municipalities, on the one hand, and the necessity to avoid "inbreeding" and to still be able to employ highly qualified, competent and experienced experts from outside their regions, on the other.

Webber and Karlstrom (2009) draw attention to the increasing educational innovations which are enabling universities to offer learning programmes online without having students to spend time on physical campuses. Expansion of online programmes in universities is likely to have an inverse relationship with the universities' ability to continue providing anchoring services to their towns and regions. The experience of residential universities at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic when universities closed their campuses because of the nation-wide "hard lockdown" supports this hypothesis because, for example, the closure of universities of Venda, Fort Hare and Rhodes, as well as the Vaal University of Technology during the "hard lockdown" period reduced the respective towns of Thohoyandou, Alice, Makhanda and Vanderbijlpark to "ghost towns". Therefore, with many universities planning to institutionalise online and/or blended teaching and learning, those that are anchor universities or potentially

anchor universities are likely to have their ability to play the role of anchor institutions in their regions seriously attenuated.

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Boyer (1996) is credited to have coined the term "engaged scholarship" to describe research that connects universities to the pressing issues within their environs. The term is now increasingly used to refer to the planned and intentional efforts to connect knowledge generated through the work of researchers in universities, directly to the public in ways that collaboratively address social issues and community needs and concerns. It involves the creation, dissemination and application of new knowledge to address social issues through collaborative relationships and shared activities between researchers in universities on the one hand, and communities and other external stakeholders, on the other. It aims for the advancement and utilisation of knowledge with societally relevant outcomes and impact beyond scholarly publications and patents (Townson 2009). Engaged scholarship is increasingly being employed to bridge the theory–practice gap in profession-oriented disciplines by developing research that contributes both to practical problem solving and to providing new theoretical insights (Mathiassen 2017).

Engaged scholarship involves six related phases of activities that are connected in a cyclic manner. The first phase entails discovering knowledge, and it involves communities and scholars from universities working together in collaborative research aimed at discovering knowledge and answering important questions of mutual interest. Common research methodologies employed in such collaborative research may include participatory action research, participant observation, empowerment evaluation, focus group discussions, Delphi research techniques, or other joint inquiry processes (Loring 2007). The second phase entails developing knowledge and it involves communities and scholars from the universities working together on previously discovered knowledge to expand it, refine it, validate it or test it, often in new contexts. This type of engaged scholarship often builds on the depth or scope of the original knowledge and may highlight new research processes (Loring 2007). For example, it may involve the localisation in Africa of knowledge discovered outside of the continent. The third phase entails dissemination of discovered and/or developed knowledge through scholarly publications, conference presentations, public debate platforms, and public information campaigns. The aim of dissemination is to create general awareness of the discovered and/or developed knowledge, as well as to provide opportunity for interrogation and critique (Franz 2009). The fourth phase entails preparing the discovered and/or developed knowledge for adoption and use by either communities, or scholars in universities, or both. It determines

whether the parties involved in engaged scholarship learn something fundamental from the discovered and/or developed knowledge. Outcomes of this work may include changes in awareness, knowledge, skills, attitudes, opinions, aspirations, and motivations (Franz 2009). The fifth phase entails change in behaviour following the adoption and use of the discovered and/or developed knowledge. The sixth and final phase entails assessing and monitoring the impact of the entire engaged scholarship work on conditions in the communities as well as in the universities. The goal is to establish if the engaged scholarship work causes lasting change in economic, environmental, social, and/or civic conditions in families, communities, businesses, or organisations (Franz 2009).

Each of the phases in the engaged scholarship cycle encourages critical reflection, enhanced action, and production of scholarship between scholars and community members. Engaged scholarship can take place independently during each phase, or it may occur at sequential points, moving from discovering new knowledge to developing that knowledge, to knowledge dissemination, to change in learning and behaviour that finally leads to change in a particular condition or set of conditions. However, the linkages may not always be sequential in practice owing to the complex realities of the engaged scholarship environment (Van de Ven 2007).

Several articles in this special issue of the SAJHE cover various aspects of engaged scholarship. It is an area that is attracting fair amount of research. However, it is often criticised because universities regard engaged scholarship as inferior to conventional research. Consequently, engaged scholarship is not well funded and supported (Van Schalkwyk 2014). Similarly, the theories and concepts of engaged scholarship are not well developed at this stage. Furthermore, like other community engagement activities, engaged scholarship projects take inordinately long periods to reach conclusion, and to start having impact. In a country that demonstrates propensity for quick fixes, engaged scholarship is less likely to be attractive to, and popular with most academics and researchers in universities.

RHETORIC AND DESIRED GOALS

There has been much rhetoric about community engagement, sometimes bordering on romanticisation. It is therefore important to be aware that not all activities that are planned and implemented under the banner of community engagement meet the requirements of community engagement, nor do they lead to the desired goals. When community engagement projects are not properly planned, structured and organised; when they are not adequately resourced; and when they are not carefully implemented and monitored, they often result in outcomes that are inimical to the noble goals that are communicated in the rhetoric about community engagement.

For example, if the planning does not involve the target communities, the community engagement activities would, as a result, risk becoming one-sided, with resources and information flowing in one direction from the universities to the communities, and with the people from the universities acting as benevolent masters. When community engagement initiatives are one-sided as in this way, the people from the universities would likely ignore the knowledge and value systems of the communities they are supposed to collaborate with. Instead, they would likely push to impose their Eurocentric knowledge and value systems on the communities (De Sousa Santos 2014). This then creates conditions for elitism, pedanticism, exploitation, paternalism and reactionism to creep in. These represent unequal power relations that marginalise communities further (Muller 2009). In order to achieve the desired goals of community engagement, universities should rethink and reshape relations with communities. The relations should be reciprocal and more of partnerships of equals.

Another example in which the rhetoric of community engagement is not helpful to the cause, is that in the contemporary age universities regard themselves as "brands". In this regard, community engagement programmes are sometimes designed with the goals of increasing the visibility of the university brand, increasing the university brand equity, enhancing the public profile and reputation of the university brand, and extending the footprint of the university brand. Effectively, therefore, the motive for community engagement becomes that of brand management, and when that is the case, community engagement becomes merely a showcase vehicle for what is often called corporate social responsibility (CSR) or media profile creation in branding and marketing parlance. Chouliaraki (2012) describes this type of community engagement practice as the "theatricality of humanitarianism", which means that it is humanitarianism reduced to a spectacle of ulterior motives. It is therefore important that universities desist from the practice of packaging community engagement as a brand marketing exercise aimed at increasing visibility of their "brands". The goal of community engagement should be to contribute towards making communities self-sustaining.

A further example of misleading rhetoric of community engagement relates to the graduate community service programmes run by faculties or schools of health sciences and/or medicine. These faculties or schools send new graduates to work in communities, often the less privileged communities, for specified periods before they are allowed to register to practice as health professionals. The morality of this established practice is questionable because it is tantamount to letting the novice and yet to be registered health workers use the less privileged communities as Guinea pigs on which they experiment in relation to diagnosing and treating patients. Once they are successful in their experimental work, they are then registered as fully qualified professionals who are subsequently often deployed to serve communities in more

privileged areas. Therefore, there is the ethical concern that novices are used in community engagement work while the full experts are not available for such engagement (Muller 2009). It reflects that community engagement is not accorded the same level of value as professional practice, and that less privileged communities are not deserving of being assisted by fully qualified professionals, and this is morally reprehensible. Surprisingly, this does not only happen in faculties or schools of health sciences and/or medicine. In faculties or schools of education, for example, student teachers are often sent for their teaching practice to under resourced schools with the majority of learners being from less privileged backgrounds. When they qualify as professional teachers, very few of them return to those schools. The majority are deployed to better resourced schools with learners from middle to upper class families.

Community engagement initiatives may also sometimes pass as academic networking with no firm goals and objectives, implemented in bits and pieces, and in an *ad hoc* manner (Langa 2011). As a networking exercise, community engagement becomes a means to an unknown or undefined end. Therefore, when packaged and pursued as a networking exercise, community engagement has limited scope to grow in stature in comparison with teaching, research and innovation. Most importantly, community engagement as academic networking does not lead to outcomes of value to communities themselves. The impact on communities is also negligible.

THE "STEPCHILD" SYNDROME

Although almost all universities in South Africa have declared in their mission statements that community service, community engagement or scholarship of engagement constitute their third core function area, Johnson (2020) argues that, by and large, most universities are doing very little, if any, to engage with and support communities. Johnson further observes that, in fact, community engagement is treated as a "stepchild" among the core function areas of universities. For example, institutions have policies and regulations that clearly articulate the criteria for promotion with respect to teaching and learning, as well as research and publications. However, there are no equivalent policies for community engagement. A further challenge is that conventional research and scholarly publication continue to be highly respected relative to the scholarship of engagement (Van Schalkwyk 2014). All these factors make academics less inclined to investing much time and effort into community engagement initiatives since they do not contribute much to their career progression, professional recognition and rewards.

As confirmed by two articles in this volume (see Netshandama 2023; Nkonki-Mandleni 2023), monitoring and evaluation of community engagement initiative of universities remain an underdeveloped area which has not received much research attention. Development of

quantitative measures of impacts of community development projects is still in its infancy, and there are limitations to the use of the quantitative indicators in measuring impacts of community engagement projects. Such limitations include disciplinary situatedness, project duration and the attendant comparative and methodological challenges (Van Schalkwyk 2014). Measuring the qualitative aspects of impact of community engagement is even more complex and problematic as there is much contestation about the validity of the qualitative indicators. Therefore, unlike teaching and learning, or research and innovation, which have well established and clearly defined measures of performance and outputs, community engagement lags behind in this regard. This makes community engagement less attractive to academics and researchers relative to teaching and conventional research (Van Schalkwyk 2014, 1; Kruss et al. 2012). All these factors contribute to stepchild status of community engagement in universities in South Africa.

Another important factor that makes community engagement a stepchild in universities is that it is not funded directly in the same manner that teaching and learning, and research and innovation are funded (Johnson 2020). In most universities, community engagement activities are funded from the teaching and research budgets, especially when it is anticipated that those activities could produce spin-off effects of value to teaching and learning, or to research and innovation. This means community engagement activities are rarely planned in their own rights because of their dependency on teaching and learning, and research and innovation, for funding. Without funding that is intentionally earmarked for community engagement, then community engagement projects become “nice to have” luxuries that can easily be foregone without consequences to the academics and to the universities themselves (Badat 2013).

Johnson (2020) makes an observation that the top leadership of most universities in South Africa are more preoccupied with global ranking systems and are investing significant amounts of funds for their institutions to be ranked. Unfortunately, community engagement work of universities does not feature much in the assessments that are undertaken for most ranking systems. This leads to further marginalisation of community engagement work in terms of priorities of universities. Johnson (2020) cites a former vice-chancellor of a big previously white university who unequivocally expressed his personal conviction that community engagement cannot be pursued as a standalone strategic goal and programme of the university that he led at the time. He argued strongly that community engagement is about how to handle and manage the outputs of, and spin-offs from, conventional academic research to ensure that they have impact on society. This view is yet another confirmation of the stepchild syndrome, which relegates community engagement to a downstream and not mainstream function.

If vice-chancellors are not sure about the position of community engagement in their

respective universities, then it is not surprising that this is not a priority thrust in the strategic and annual performance plans of universities. As indicated above, vice-chancellors would rather invest huge sums of funds to participate in global institutional ranking systems than to invest in community engagement programmes. This tendency probably has to do with the tenure of vice-chancellors and their desire to leave good legacies at their universities at the end of their tenures. Most vice-chancellors serve for two five-year terms. Quite often than not, the first term is focused on low hanging fruits because the work on those and the results thereof are easily visible to the men and women who serve in university councils. The goal of vice-chancellors during their first term is therefore to be seen that they are working and producing results, because these are what matter when it is time for their university councils to make decisions regarding renewal of their employment contracts. What places community engagement projects at a disadvantage is that most of these projects have long gestation periods. Therefore, vice-chancellors who might wish to prioritise community engagement projects may find that at the end of their first five-year terms they would have not made significant impacts on both the universities and the communities. This would make them not to stand a chance of being re-appointed for their second five-year terms.

In all universities, business areas that are regarded to be of strategic importance have well developed relevant structures in place, and are headed by senior executive managers. For the core functions, the senior executive managers are often at the level of deputy vice-chancellor, vice principal or vice rector. With one or two exceptions, most universities have deputy vice-chancellors, vice principals or vice rectors for teaching and learning, as well as deputy vice-chancellors, vice principals or vice rectors for research and innovation. Deputy vice-chancellors, vice principals or vice rectors for teaching and learning are supported by structural units such as the Offices of Deans of Faculties, Centres of Teaching and Learning, and Centres for Academic Development, to name the most common ones. Similarly, deputy vice-chancellors, vice principals or vice rectors for research and innovation are supported by Directorates for Research Administration, Research Finance and Project Management, Research Ethics, Technology Transfer, and Evaluation and Assessment of Research Outputs, and Research Capacity Development, to name the most common ones. However, in relation to community engagement, it is only the Nelson Mandela University that has a deputy vice-chancellor whose portfolio is focused on engagement and transformation. It is important to indicate that even within the Nelson Mandela University, this is a new portfolio of less than three years old. In a few other universities, mainly in universities of technology, community engagement is a small component of the portfolios of deputy vice-chancellors responsible for research and innovation, or deputy vice-chancellors responsible for institutional support.

Another critical point to note is that, by and large, engagement units in universities are small in size, both in terms of capacity and funding. In the final analysis, it is clear that unlike teaching and learning, as well as research and innovation, the capacity engagement portfolios in universities do not have the necessary structures and dedicated executive level leadership to run meaningful programmes.

As a result of not having dedicated executive level leaders and adequately resourced structures for community engagement, most universities have not developed appropriate policies to guide and govern the implementation of community engagement activities (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). For community engagement to move from being a stepchild to a core function of equal value and stature as teaching and learning, and research and innovation, it needs clear policies on developing capacity and expertise; career pathing and promotion; monitoring and evaluation; measuring output and impacts; and rewarding achievements in community engagement. All such policies should be regularly updated.

CONCLUSION

Universities in developing countries, including in Africa, are expected to work with and for the people as catalysts for cultural and socio-economic development. They are therefore required to be responsible, responsive and engaged. Community engagement is a concept that seeks to formalise the engagement role of universities into a core function of universities, with the same level of value as the other two core functions of teaching and learning, as well as research and innovation. Some scholars believe that community engagement is critical for the transformation of the academy, and the decolonisation of knowledge, the way of knowing and knowledge systems themselves. Therefore, there are suggestions that for universities in Africa, community engagement should assume the pole position of being the “first mission”, and not the “third mission”.

Various conceptualisations of community engagement have sought to improve the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of community engagement activities. Some of the concepts in this regard, which are discussed in this article, include “anchor universities”, and “engaged scholarship”. The significance of the concepts has been discussed with examples. At the same time, their conceptual fault lines and weaknesses in terms of their practicality on the ground have been identified and discussed.

While almost all universities in South Africa include community engagement and/or engaged scholarship as part of their mission statements, the state of community engagement work within the universities is not encouraging. Community engagement is the least developed and least prioritised of the three core function areas, prompting some scholars to refer to it as

the stepchild among the core university functions. The factors responsible for the stepchild syndrome have been discussed. The article cautions against the increasing use of rhetoric about community engagement by university leaders and academics. The projects that are guided by this rhetoric pay lip service to the ideals of community engagement, and they do not contribute towards self-sustaining communities. It is high time that university leaders and academics toned down the rhetoric and focus on the basics of community engagement.

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