

“OUR THEATRE IS SOCIETY”: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF UNIVERSITY-BASED AFRICAN CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE REGARDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In the historical higher education (HE) context of early post-independence Africa, little was done to unpack or critique the dominant notion of African universities as “developmental” and to create workable models for the future. The resultant conflictual role of African universities, caught between the demands of academic excellence, on the one hand, and local demands of development and regional and communal impact, on the other, have not yet been adequately resolved. Conceptually and organisationally, “engagement”, “transfer” and “outreach” activities serve as mechanisms to bridge the divide between the traditional academy and the needs and expectations of societal stakeholders located outside of formal HE structures. This is now often referred to as the third mission (TM) of HE, the first and second missions being teaching and research. In recent years, many of the existing DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) African Centres of Excellence (ACE) have established partnerships and networks with actors from the political, social and economic sector to increase their relevance and impact in their regions, especially relating to Sustainable Development Goals. Against this backdrop, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted to determine the experiences and perceptions of participating representatives from ten ACE, located in their different and specific regional and societal contexts, about their university-society community engagement (CE) or TM activities. This article reports on the findings of this study, which contributes to the larger aims of identifying long-term synergies and collaboration potential and the development of conceptual models that are scalable. The findings of this study can form an adaptable basis for future TM-CE projects and for possible future research projects about such activities in HE.

Keywords: higher education, third mission, community engagement, African Centres of Excellence, DAAD, German Academic Exchange Service

INTRODUCTION

The information in this article was obtained from a trans-institutional African-German collaborative research project, called UNI-CIETY (“university-society”), funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The larger purpose of the project was to investigate how existing DAAD-affiliated African Centres of Excellence (ACE) understand, experience and advance the third mission (TM) of higher education (HE), also often referred to as community engagement (CE). The first and second missions of HE are teaching and research. The DAAD ACE initiative aims, through inter- and transnational partnerships, to improve the quality of education and to enhance research capacity among participating universities in order to develop and deliver the next generation of African decision-makers who are trained to the highest international standards and will be able to make a lasting impact in their local and regional contexts. In recent years, many DAAD ACE in their specific disciplines have established partnerships and networks with stakeholders from the political, social and economic sector in order to increase their societal relevance and regional impact in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. This ranges across disciplines and sectors, including mining, logistics, law and criminal justice, development studies, and education. Conceptually and organisationally, such TM-CE activities serve as mechanisms to bridge the divide between the traditional academy and the needs and expectations of societal stakeholders outside of formal HE structures. This results in what Johnson and Cooper (2014, 97) refer to as the “quadruple helix” of HE engagement: university, industry, government and civil society.

HE engagement practitioners are most often academic and sometimes other staff members of HE institutions and have a collective wealth of knowledge, extracted from their many years of dedicated service to both their HE institutional homes and local communities and stakeholders. They are boundary workers (McMillan 2022, 51) *par excellence* who must necessarily display a broad range of skills from across the skills spectrum. They are then of necessity a specific hybrid breed of university workers (Dunleavy, Noble, and Andrews 2019, 105). As Belinda du Plooy (2022, 67) notes, “at the coalface, institutional engagement practitioners, who need to satisfy strategic as well as practical demands, are often the change agents at a grass-roots level in the spaces where the university enacts its social and stakeholder responsibilities and relationships”. Their voices therefore must be heard and must be central to the “co-creation of new kinds of responsive knowledge about HE practices” to facilitate “optimally enabling institutional cultures and systems for engagement work in HE” (Du Plooy

2022, 67). In foregrounding the experiences and voices of HE engagement practitioners, especially those who operate in African institutional and geopolitical contexts, this article contributes to both the democratising and decolonising knowledge production agenda and mandate of the transforming HE environment. Against this backdrop, the experiences and perceptions of representatives from ten participating DAAD ACE, located in their different and specific regional and societal contexts across Africa, about their TM-CE activities were investigated in this qualitative exploratory research study.

BACKGROUND

During colonialism, colonial powers viewed universities in Africa as an extension of their own university systems, with the fundamental functions of producing and recruiting social elites and reproducing dominant systems of knowledge. After independence, a strong movement supported the view that African universities should be development universities (as per the Association for African Universities' Accra Declaration of 2004) but little was done to specify the notion and create models for this in the decades to come (Cloete and Maassen 2015, 18). This "development" space has often been occupied by practices relating to TM-CE, which are gaining momentum globally (Saidi and Boti 2023, 74). However, as Andrew Furco notes, the dominant literature about HE TM engagement still originates from the United States and Canada and focus on so-called "western" or "European" contexts. Significant literature has also emerged about alternative perspectives and praxes in countries of South and Latin America and countries of the global East. However, historically and predominantly, scholarship about HE TM-CE, in especially Africa, has been "colonial-tinged versions of engagement found in other parts of the globe" (Furco 2022, xxv). Developing a scholarship and praxis of HE TM engagement that is reflective of the uniqueness and diversity of African contexts has therefore become a driving priority at many African universities. This resulted in a "fundamental epistemological shift in HE" during the early decades of the new millennium, as universities and researchers started "relating to communities in ways that honour multiple ways of knowing and diverse knowledge bases in addition to the traditionally discipline-based, academic ones" (Bringle 2014, 19). This means that increasingly today, embedded in most HE institutions' mission statements is a commitment to advance the public good. Yet, efforts to fulfil this commitment via the expansion of academically-integrated CE practices have been met with much resistance. Perhaps this is because work has been viewed primarily as fulfilling HE's service or extension mission (a.k.a. the "third" mission) rather than as a means to advance the institutions' research or teaching priorities. (Furco 2022, xxii).

Furco (2022, xxiv) notes that "community-focused work continues to face an uphill battle

in finding academic legitimacy and strong institutional footing within HE systems” and that much attention has been paid to moving HE TM-CE “from the margins to the mainstream of the academy” and to addressing roadblocks encountered on the way – such as “finding its value and purpose within core academic and scholarly priorities” and “tinker[ing] with reforms ... to shape and mould educational innovations to fit within the existing ways of knowing and doing” – but that these endeavours often fail to successfully “re-imagine and transform the system”. Bernadette Johnson (2020, 87) notes that there is still “a lack of substantive conceptualisation of CE, intensified by the contradictory placing of CE within community and university structures”.

While Lorilee Sandmann (2008, 91) and Martin Hall (2010, also in Muller 2009, 2) pointed to the “definitional anarchy” and “inherent messiness” of the new arena of HE TM-CE, others have pointed out that “CE research is not an academically monopolised focus – it is not a research practice dominantly in service of one discipline, nor is it done through one faculty”, thus it lends itself particularly well to “intellectual balance and diversity”, “democratic knowledge production” and can “make a contribution to a fast-growing field of immense value in a world that requires the mutual input and support of HET [HE and training] researchers and the communities themselves in dire need of sustainable growth” (Van Eeden, Eloff and Dippenaar 2022, xvii). Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020, 1) correctly call TM “a multidisciplinary, complex, evolving phenomenon linked to the social and economic mission of Universities in a broad sense”. As Van Eeden et al. (2022, xvii) note, this opens up spaces for new kinds of creativity, mutuality and bi-directional collaboration between universities and their stakeholders. But, as Erasmus and Albertyn (2014, 17) point out, “one of the questions that remains largely unanswered pertains to whether, how and to what extent the collaborative building and exchange of knowledge, skills, expertise and constructive attitudes – that are the drivers of CE – actually lead to enablement of participants towards achieving the goals they set out to reach together”. By foregrounding the voices of experienced HE engagement practitioners, active in the arena of TM-CE work, this article contributes new knowledge that could help to address this important question about the relationship between the praxis and impact of HE engagement activities.

METHODOLOGY

The guiding research question for this study was “How do DAAD ACE understand, experience and advance the TM of HE?”. Ten out of the eleven existing ACE responded positively to the interview request. The high response rate can be attributed to the fact that the request came from colleagues within the ACE network, who conducted the research, who share DAAD’s

overall programme objectives and therefore show similarities in terms of their capacity development and postgraduate education focus. TM-CE activities are not mandatory under the funding scheme of the ACE, therefore the ACE representatives seemed comfortable about being questioned about the topic and with colleagues from the ACE community producing a report for DAAD, on which this article is based. While there are similarities in the different ACE's general objectives, they are diverse in terms of disciplines, their geographical location in Africa and the socio-political contexts in which they work. Geographical locations include countries as diverse as Nigeria, Mali, Tanzania, Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Namibia and South Africa. Disciplinary specialization within the participating ACE respondent group included education, microfinance, local governance, agriculture, criminal justice, rural transformation, development studies, logistics, mining and food systems support.

The methodology used for the study was qualitative and data were collected through ten personal interviews of 60–120 minutes with leaders of ten existing ACE who are actively engaged in HE TM-CE activities. Some interviews included two representatives from a specific ACE. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and used by the UNI-CIETY project team, including representatives of African and German partner institutions. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their participant rights (including confidentiality and anonymity) and signed informed consent forms before interviews commenced. The study was conducted electronically during the latter part of 2022 in French and English, as per the preferred language choice of the interviewees, and audio recorded with the interviewees' consent. Interviews conducted in French were translated to English for consistency of data analysis. All interviews were transcribed and transcriptions were coded and developed into themes and concepts, following the thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012). One pilot interview was conducted and analysed to verify data suitability with regard to the research question. The pilot interview was excluded from the data used for this article. The electronic qualitative data analysis programme, MAXQDA, was used to plot data from interviews to themes. Findings of the study are described here under headings that relate to how TM-CE activities are defined and interpreted, the reported challenges that participants identified and reflected on, the lessons they learnt, and the advice they give to others who are embarking on TM-CE work in African HE contexts.

DEFINITIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

A variety of terms and nomenclature was used to describe TM-CE activities, but the overarching intent is invariably “working together; not doing things alone”. The idea of “collaboration” emerged as universally important; that “one sector alone cannot yield all the

results”. Bi-directionality and reciprocity also emerged as key tenets. Participants noted that “it goes both ways, not just a giving out of the knowledge [by the university]”. Further exploration of this bidirectionality is needed in future studies, as it seems that there may be a disconnect between intent and practice, as little evidence emerged from these interviews of more than one-directional investment from the side of universities. More extensive and in-depth research, that includes respondents from stakeholder and partner groups and from communities, would be a future next step, bearing in mind and accounting for the great diversity of types of TM-CE activities and the diverse contexts of different African countries and regions, as well as different academic disciplines from within which TM-CE project operate and where they are located.

Nomenclature for TM-CE included engagement, community engagement, outreach, development, participative research, co-creation, corporate social responsibility; technology transfer, knowledge transfer, innovation, transdisciplinarity, collaboration, partnerships, exchange and extension. The terms partners and stakeholders were used interchangeably, often also interchangeably with the terms community and beneficiaries. However, there is a difference of nuance between these concepts that should receive more attention in future studies. The use of specific terminologies in specific contexts are determined by the nature of the work and the type of activities conducted. For example, in educational programmes CE and outreach are more prevalent, while technology transfer and innovation dominate in more technologically orientated programmes, like those relating to industries, for example, mining and agriculture. The most prevalent interpretation still is associated with the concepts of community and outreach, though there is little common agreement as to what exactly these terms mean. This open-endedness may well be a strength, as it allows for a wide variety of interpretations, differentiated application and continued renewal, both conceptually and in praxis.

The term TM was unfamiliar to most of the participants, with one even acknowledging that they had never heard it. CE was more familiar. Only when unpacked by the interviewers did the participants recognise TM as the activities they call by the various nomenclature noted above. It is possible that TM is restricted to more western-centred theoretical work and may be less familiar in African contexts and in broader discourses and praxes across disciplinary boundaries (like engineering, mining, agriculture). The term “mission” may also in certain contexts, be perceived as patronising or alienating, because it reflects some of the problematic ideological baggage associated with colonialism. This points to the significance of cross-cultural and socio-historical sensitivity and may account for some of the opposition that can be encountered when universities embark on TM-CE activities in Africa.

TM may also create the impression that it is of lesser importance, or that it is a lesser

priority, than the other two missions of HE, teaching and research. This is often a sensitive point within HE institutions, as the funding and resources made available for TM-CE activities were indeed historically far inferior to those apportioned to teaching and research functions. The fact that the three are inextricably integrated and interrelated is a necessary and significant shift in institutional discourse and praxis, which will contribute much to equalising the three and the way they are perceived, resourced and funded, both in the academy and by external stakeholders. One participant compared the three missions (teaching, research and engagement) with the three arms of government (legislative, executive and judiciary) and noted that, “in academia, the completeness of your research is only achieved if you take it to the people where it is needed. If you are an academic that has done amazing research, and it ends in a good library, then you haven’t completed the [third] leg of education. Education can only be completed if it is taken to where it can be consumed. And the TM, for anyone who is working in academia, is what takes you to the people to complete the research ... to assess the impact of what you have been doing.”

Examples of TM-CE activities that were mentioned by participants in the interviews span a large spectrum. On the one side, there are traditional academic activities commonly associated with research and teaching. Research-related activities mentioned include postgraduate student recruitment, scholarship provision and student support, technological innovation, and the dissemination of research findings, results and project outcomes through, for example, conferences, seminars, and academic publications. Participants said these provide essential opportunities for “peer sharing”, “networking” and communicating and promoting their work. Teaching-related activities mentioned included curriculum development and training, both for and through traditional university degree courses and for and through short learning programmes, continuing education activities and professional development (PD) initiatives. The offering of continued PD opportunities to industries and the corporate world is increasingly a major area of responsibility, and revenue, for HE institutions. One participant noted that universities in that way “become ambassadors of the training”. Another said a key requirement for this is “thorough research, so there is enough evidence for you to stay on top of the game”, in order to be a leader in a specific area of knowledge expertise. Cross-institutional staff and student exchange was also mentioned as TM activities by means of which skills and resources can be shared and expert knowledge can be transferred and optimised within the local, national and global academic community.

On the other end of the spectrum, professional consultancy services were mentioned as a “co-activity” by means of which the academy can collaborate with stakeholders, especially industry. This can be a lucrative and sustainable manner of generating income. One participant

noted that HE can function as “a service provider that facilitates the work of even the government, [but] we are also pivoting and trying to project ideas to government and other non-governmental organisations, hoping that they could mainstream them into their programmes and allocate funding for their implementation”. Another key activity mentioned was advocacy, which often aims to “decentralise social systems” (away from government) in order to “ensure that benefits of social programmes are appropriately applied”. This may mean that HE then plays a watch-dog role in relation to governments, industry and civil society. The potential for conflicts of interest, for example, if project funders from these sectors engage in project management and implementation, was not discussed in the interviews, but should be noted as an ethical concern and a challenge that should always be carefully managed. Participants specifically mentioned the rendering of public services – like disaster management support, conducting free medical clinics, and presenting short courses and guest lectures – as effective practical ways in which the university can involve itself in TM-CE work and remain relevant to society. The nature of the practices will depend on the academic disciplines and professions within which the specific activities are located. Participants also reported great value in establishing “incubators, where non-academic people can bring and develop their ideas”, particularly in sectors like industry and agriculture. One participant called such incubators “catalyser[s] between academia and the civil society sector and companies.”

OBJECTIVES OF AND PURPOSE FOR ENGAGING IN TM-CE ACTIVITIES

One participant noted that TM-CE “has become a requirement for the university ... every researcher has to make sure that they are in contact with the community”. This encapsulates the general understanding among participants of the HE TM-CE mandate as an institutional obligation to society. The consensus among the participants was that the impact and effect of TM-CE activities relate to ensuring that universities remain relevant to the communities they serve and the society within which they are located. One participant said their university “views itself as a home of ideas and being a home of ideas means that it has to generate ideas through scientific approaches. Once the idea is generated, you go out to the community to engage them with the idea that has been generated ... to get feedback or get a way of implementing the idea.” Another said, of the vision of their ACE, “it is our dream to become a framework that can serve to popularise or reinforce this [TM-CE] dynamic ... [to create] initiatives that will allow people in the university and even outside to carry out actions capable of contributing to local development. We think this path has a significant potential and we want to be key actors.”

Participants noted that engagement with societal role players is critical to keep curriculums updated and universities relevant as change-makers in society. One participant

said, “we do realise that if industry players and users of the human capacity [that universities produce] make an input in the curricula, they end up actually becoming the promoters of your Centre and recommending the staff and employees. That gives you visibility and also some competitive edge as far as getting students and clients are concerned.” Another said, “engagement is critical for curriculum development, because it is not by teaching concepts that change takes place but influencing community actions and engagement [with stakeholders] allows you to interact with the implementers [of change]”. Another participant noted that “we do not simply train people to train them ... we [the specific ACE] were set up because there was a need in the community ... we want them to be useful to society”. One participant said that they impacted significantly on the quality of students produced, as compared to students from outside their ACE, and said that their students acquired far more experience, networking skills and contacts than other students.

Participants said collaboration with partners facilitates identification of common problems across sectors and stimulates sharing of experiences at regional level, which can result in addressing complex problems like “reducing poverty and improving the situation of people, especially in Africa”. One participant noted, “once [students] get the training we give here, they also give it back to the communities where they come from”, creating an ongoing reciprocal cycle of social involvement and engagement. Another said, “when there is engagement ... the community or stakeholders feel a part [of what universities do] and appreciate whatever comes out of the university”.

Universities have often been accused of being elitist ivory towers and individual disciplines of functioning as siloes. Several participants noted that engagement was a “serious gap in their system” (either in their ACE or HE institution) which means they run the risk of being “insular” and that their work “does not reach out to the community”. One participant specifically warned, “do not lock yourself in ... alone we are isolated and limited while together we achieve bigger and faster things”. Another said, “the university cannot stand in isolation from the stakeholders and also the stakeholders cannot be without the university ... you have to engage with the people who will benefit from the results of your work”. One participant described this as a “symbiotic relationship” while another succinctly summarised stakeholder engagement by saying that “it completes the loop of interaction”.

A variety of stakeholders/partners were mentioned. NGOs and civil society represent what is commonly considered “the community” – as one participant noted, “the voices of the people who seem to be small in society”, thus the opinions of those who are often considered voiceless and marginalised in society. Funders, on the other hand, can range from government or parastatal bodies to independent bodies in industry, the corporate world and civil society.

Government and industry were specifically identified as key stakeholders, because “it is important to know what industry and government need, because you are training students to work in those sectors”. Collaboration among universities was noted as important, both to share expertise and resources and to expand influence locally, nationally and globally. Transdisciplinarity and collaboration between units in universities are especially beneficial and necessary, for example between disciplines, departments and faculties, or when different methodologies are transferred or simultaneously applied in teaching and research practices. Other important stakeholders mentioned were university alumni, local authorities and municipalities, traditional authorities, trade unions, professional regulatory bodies, international regulating bodies, civil society organisations, and the media.

CHALLENGES FACED AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES

Numerous challenges were mentioned by participants, with funding, staffing (human resources and human capacity) and time constraints most often cited. One participant noted, “very often we just manage with the means at our disposal ... the main thing is that we just want to move forward”. Participants contributed a wealth of information about the practical ways in which they implement their TM-CE activities, despite challenges.

Funding

Funding was consistently mentioned as the greatest challenge, especially in the current financial climate. One participant noted, “outreach is an expensive venture and there are always limited funds. The university funding is very low and their support for engagement keeps going down, we rely on a limited budget.” Another noted that between 80 to 90 percent of their funding was sourced externally, from outside the university. Participants noted the crucial need for long-term financing to ensure sustainable longitudinal impact and the longevity of projects. One noted, “to see the impact of the research costs a lot of money”. It is important therefore that there should continually be new applications for funding grants. This takes both time and specialised skills and often the human capacity and resources available cannot stretch far enough to optimally ensure the sourcing of grant funding as a permanent and ongoing endeavour.

In terms of funding management, one participant noted collaboration, both within academic institutions and among them, is essential to “jointly advocate for projects and to look for synergies”. It is also essential that projects should be scalable, so they can continue in line with the funding that is received but need not be completely halted when funding diminishes or grant periods end. One participant noted “always have a plan B, so you can downscale if

necessary”, while another said, “have a risk mitigation plan in place”. One participant noted that the drivers of TM-CE activities must ensure that their activities “are embedded in the university documents in such a way that they may become part of the university budget directly and [are then] funded by the university after the external funding window closes”. Specific fund-management related frustrations include uncertain budgets and “last minute changes to plans and budgets” by funders (including universities) and the potential impact this may have on commitments made to and relationships with stakeholders and partners, and delays in the transferring of funds from external funders and to beneficiaries. One participant noted that because of this dynamic, they “had to borrow money from individuals” in order to cover operational costs and meet commitments.

Funding challenges also impact attracting and retaining students and staff for TM-CE work. Too few well-skilled staff members can be very problematic for a project, especially when TM-CE work is structurally and systemically relegated to a hierarchically “third” position, with teaching and research regarded as higher priorities. One participant said, “university staff often get stretched beyond their limits, beyond the call of duty”, which can lead to family, physical and mental health problems. Extended sick leave, early retirements or resignations can result and mean lost staff capacity, which may result in the inability to meet project outcomes and goals, while high turnover may mean that funding that could have been applied elsewhere must be earmarked for the continual training of new staff. Trust is often linked to people, rather than organisations, and if people leave projects, the trust relationship with partners can be compromised and may take considerable time to rebuild or may be irrecoverable. There could also be reputational harm if projects are inconsistent about the staff involved and are subsequently perceived as unreliable. The lack of succession planning is a significant problem in most universities, but impacts TM-CE activities specifically, because of the complexity of the interpersonal trust relationships that are always at the core of such projects. One participant noted that “sometimes there are projects or programs that revolve around one individual ... and therefore, if the person walks away, that’s the end of the project”.

Staffing

Other factors impacting on human resources and human capacity were also mentioned, like the difficulty in obtaining permits for foreign nationals to study and work in certain countries, and the tendency among newly qualified students or trained staff to leave their home country to seek better employment opportunities in other countries, or in sectors that pay better than HE, like industry and government. One participant noted that quality mentorship between staff and students and junior and senior staff is a key aspect of success. Another noted the importance of

long-term reputational credibility as a recruitment strategy, saying that “[delivering] quality education will ensure employability [of students] and that will advertise for the next round of recruits”.

One participant noted that the perpetual institutional restructuring in HE institutions, though common, can be problematic as it creates inconsistencies in terms of commitments made to partners or stakeholders. It may also constrain human resources, if contracts are cancelled or not renewed, if people are moved around in the institution, workloads and job descriptions are changed, and if vacant posts are not filled after retirements or resignations. In the latter case, the workload of and burden on remaining staff become untenable. While these factors affect all mandates of HE institutions, TM/CE activities suffer more in structures that prioritise teaching and research.

Time

A variety of challenges that are related to time, timing and time management were mentioned. One participant mentioned the difficulty of “synchroniz[ing] other university activities [i.e. teaching and research] with outreach”. The commitment to academic duties impacts on availability for TM-CE work, especially if that involves extensive field work and traveling. This confirms comments about workload models and the overwork of university staff members. Participants noted that partners often have their own time constraints, specific to their sector or industry, which must be accommodated and can affect project scheduling. For example, schoolteachers are usually unavailable during term times.

One participant noted that time delays result when expertise, especially technical expertise, must be brought in from outside of the university, project partner group or country, or if availability of experts are dependent on their involvement or commitment elsewhere. Negotiations can also be very lengthy and time-consuming, which can delay project goals and achievements, while administrative and bureaucratic hurdles are a constant frustration, most notably around the negotiation and signing of contracts, recruitment and appointment processes, and budget allocations and management. A multiplicity of challenges are created when transfers are delayed, there are long response rates and unmet deadlines, often resulting in incomplete assignments. One participant mentioned that “dealing with government especially takes a long time”, while another said that getting memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between partners signed often “feels like it was wasted time, while activities or implementation could have taken place”. This may be exacerbated when there is cross-national collaboration, as different countries may have different legal or policy frameworks.

Relationships

A fourth major area of challenge is the building and maintenance of relationships. Participants noted that, firstly, “rigorous stakeholder mapping” is essential, “to ensure that we don’t leave anyone behind”. Secondly, it is important to sustain contact and a strong working relationship with stakeholders and partners, for which mutual trust is essential. They noted that effective use of networking opportunities and a variety of media platforms contribute to both building trust and ensuring visibility.

Participants are acutely aware of the expectations that exist for them, both from the university and from external partners. One participant noted that TM-CE activities “really reach a very small part of the community and there is a very high demand”. Another said, “the community looks at us from a different angle, they expect a lot from us”, while another noted that “stakeholders often want more than you are able to give”. Some of the expectations mentioned are the funding and reimbursement of transport, meals, accommodation and data, which “makes it very expensive”, and which are items that funders often are reticent to fund as there is no clear return on investment for such budget line items. Effective expectation management is therefore an essential aspect in TM-CE work.

One participant cautioned for remembering that “stakeholders are also in business [for themselves], so they only share up to an extent and then they don’t reveal information”. Transparency and trust is therefore not necessarily mutual and both must be managed with finesse and nuance in order to ensure all partners obtain the benefit they require from the collaboration, while boundaries are respected. A comment was also made about the ideological relationship that is prevalent in exchanges between collaborators from Africa and other geopolitical regions. One participant noted, “in Africa, you know, we have ideas. But then, the next thing you know, this idea will be coming from Europe, because they have more resources”. Engagement with government agencies is also often fraught with ideological problems and burdened with political agendas. One participant noted that often “government drives the agenda and policy” and that “the value of research is lost on politicians”.

Institutional

Participants noted the practical implementation of institutional HE policies and discourse is often challenging because of two major factors: the availability of funding, and the amount of time that it takes to bring about change and impact. One participant noted that every time a new framework is introduced in the university, it requires realignment and reorientation, which may mean that “you might have lost everything that you have created” over a long period of time, both in terms of project planning, but also in terms of stakeholder and partner trust and

relationship quality. On the other hand, participants noted that “you need to be moving with the times, so that 28 years from now [in 2050], what you have started is still sustainable”.

Most participants noted that TM-CE activities in their universities fall in the portfolios of the Deputy Vice-Chancellors responsible for either teaching or research and are therefore still institutionally subsumed under the two other HE missions. It is rare for TM-CE activities to be institutionally recognised as equal and equivalent to teaching and research, with offices, staff contingents and institutional structures specifically dedicated to the support of TM-CE. One participant noted that they are “trying to encourage [their] university to come up with a directorate of engagement, not just having it as an appendage of research ... it is essential to have a directorate of engagement in an institution, where there are people who are qualified and take it seriously”.

In the final instance, problems with technology was mentioned as a challenge, not only during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, but also more generally in TM-EC activities, especially for those working in rural, poor or marginalised sectors of society. Participants specifically reported frustrations because of connectivity difficulties (no electricity), a lack of Wi-Fi access and unstable internet connections, the cost of connectivity and data, and insufficient computer literacy among communities, partners and stakeholders.

LESSON LEARNT AND ADVICE

When asked about the most important lessons they learnt about HE TM-CE work, and what advice they would give novices entering this space, the participants again contributed a wealth of knowledge based on their experience. Overarching themes were “create[ing] synergies so that together you can work for a common goal” and “harmonis[ing] activities with stakeholders”; to “share resources and expertise” (like vehicles, fuel, or access to digital platforms), both internally in your own university, but also across institutions, and with partners; and to always remain versatile, in order to “adapt and evolve as circumstances change”.

Constant vigilance about and identification of new opportunities for funding and collaboration emerged as the backbone strategy for the longevity and sustainability of TM-CE activities. But because this is time-consuming work, often requiring specialised skills, dedicated persons are needed to identify and follow up on opportunities, respond to published calls, write project and funding proposals, and actively work to network, lobby and build new relationships with prospective partners. Participants also advised that it serves project expedience to “aim to become autonomous and independent from the university regarding accounting and other systems” to eliminate time delays and bureaucratic frustrations.

It was noted that staff may often be able to contribute visionary insights or suggestions, provided they feel safe enough to raise them and act on them. One participant noted it is essential to be “very innovative with your staff, ensuring that all the skills needed are within your staff”. Participants noted that mentoring among staff members were essential to ensure building optimal human capacity and succession. One participant advised against “outsourcing aspects of the work that you do not think you have capacity for” but to rather train and retain existing staff. Another participant said, “create conducive working environments because if a Centre or an organisation has got high turnover, has got changes in management from time to time, these are pitfalls ... have people who have mastered the art of doing things for long in the organisation. But even if they want to move on, let them still remain part of the family; they have that institutional memory, and they can come back as consultants and advisors”. Participants also noted that succession plans must be drafted early on, because TM work is often long-term legacy work and “whoever takes over will be guided by this”.

One participant noted that “transdisciplinary collaboration is fundamental” and must begin in one’s own institution, from where it can expand to external partners. If you can work effectively in your most immediate and localised space, the academy, it is likely that it can then be scaffolded and scaled to include other sectors.

Participants advised that effective project planning and execution depend on extensive stakeholder involvement, and high-quality monitoring and evaluation processes; also that one should be able to adapt, learn and scale as projects develop. One participant said, “this is a critical component of outreach that if you ignore, then most of your ideas will just die at the inception”. Participants advised that all agreements must be negotiated sensitively and must be clear about each partner’s roles and responsibilities. One participant noted that “institutional cooperation is not limited to people, but also institutions and for that clear, adequate and appropriate tools must be formalised”.

Participants emphasised following up with partners on an ongoing basis, “to ensure that the contacts remain fresh and rich”; also to mitigate against the movement and changing of people over which you do not have control. They advised being proactive in taking the lead as partners often wait for one another to do so (“partners are often not equally proactive”) and valuable time can be lost or the relationship can be compromised because of misunderstandings. The same person noted that a lack of participation could result from partners not being funded for their participation, which may result in them being less motivated to take initiative and to be actively involved, or prioritising their involvement in the project as lower than other “paying” responsibilities.

Despite extensive frustrations about funding, one participant noted that “we have also

learned that not everything requires money. Some things only require mobilization. With good mobilization, you can accomplish expensive projects at very low costs”. The same person also said, “you will be amazed that when you put it out there, there are many people who are willing to sacrifice to have it done. There are many people who are willing to put in money to have it done, and therefore it is good to always engage without really focussing so much on the budget.” For this, strong stakeholder and partner relationships are needed. This and the need for mutuality and reciprocity consistently came through very strongly in the interviews. A participant said, “we are not existing in isolation, because the moment you interact with the community, you realise that there is a lot they need from us and also there is a lot that we learn from them”; another said, “we cannot work alone – openness to others helps us know the real problems and real issues of society”.

One participant said, “engaging stakeholders gives you a very new perspective, it gives you a way to structure your innovations”. Another advised about the dangers of not engaging with stakeholders and recalled that “many times, what would happen is that we carry out the projects and then forget the beneficiaries, and then you go back and you realize that, if you had talked to your beneficiaries, you may have changed the way you asked your questions, or you may have even changed the design of the research. So, the lesson that we’ve learned is engaging with all stakeholders.” One participant said, “stakeholders are not merely consumers ... work with them from inception otherwise you could develop products only to realise that they cannot go beyond the lab”. Participants noted that the ability to listen to, accept and incorporate feedback is important and that one should recognise and value the knowledge available among stakeholders. They said, “we are not pushing them and telling them ‘this is what you should do’”, and, “through engagement we learnt that certain things do not take a strict scientific path, the social dimension is even more important ... science is good, but it is not enough. It requires a human dimension to complement it and with that dimension you can go far”. One participant advised that “stakeholders are not just willing to receive ideas, they are also willing to give ideas, and you will be amazed how the stakeholders can support some of these activities when they believe in them. So, they are not just recipients, they are givers of ideas. They are supporters of processes. And they can do some of the critical activities that you can be struggling to fund”.

One participant said, “especially in Africa there must be both state and civic buy-in”, as government often recommends or adopts programmes developed as part of HE TM-CE activities and this can encourage and facilitate participation from other sectors and the broad public. Another commented on the potential for a variety of practical problems if effective stakeholder engagement does not take place, noting, “you have to sell your idea to stakeholders

first, let them buy the idea, let them be part and parcel of the process that drives that idea ... otherwise stakeholders can be very rebellious”. But stakeholder engagement and the building of trust take time. As one participant noted, “you need to work with the stakeholders for some time before you win them out. You need to walk with them.” Another said that high levels of integrity is essential in relationship building (“honesty and diligence is the only solution to success – let that be the trademark of your institution”), while another noted that HE TM-CE should not be approached as avenues to personal advancement (“don’t use shortcuts, to get promoted ... don’t use the utilitarian approach to communities and stakeholders”).

Participants mentioned patience and endurance as essential traits in TM-CE work, along with having a long-term vision for the project. As one participant said, “we may have started it, but we may not be the people who will see the faults and the results of it”. Participants advised that “every project is unique, there is no one-fits-all approach”. Other skills that were specifically mentioned were effective networking and negotiation skills (“good contacts”) and intercultural skills. One participant said, “culture sometimes means that you don’t see things the same way. Culture is a richness and in an intercultural way, we can learn from each other despite our differences”. Several participants mentioned bravery or courage as an essential trait when working in TM-CE spaces. One participant said, “do not be afraid to take initiative and to continue to [] achieve objectives on the ground, which will bring value to the community”.

CONCLUSION

The overarching conclusion of this study confirmed that those who operate and are actively involved in HE TM-CE activities recognise and strongly advocate for the centrality of HE institutions in society and for the need for universities to be open to societal influences. One participant noted, “you cannot exist without society and society cannot exist without you”. The general consensus was that TM-CE activities and practices keep a university relevant and ensure that both the research being conducted and the curricula being taught are responsive to the needs of society. One participant succinctly summarised this by saying, “our theatre is society ... we are solving problems in the society”.

When considering HE’s TM-CE mandate from a global perspective, some of the findings presented in this article may seem specific and distinct to African contexts, while others appear to be variations of more general phenomena found in contemporary HE globally. The high relevance that the research participants accord TM-CE activities can be partly attributed to their own work within the ACE context, which necessarily includes aspects of development work and therefore orientates them towards making a positive impact on their society. This can be contrasted with existing notions of “careerist” highly mobile, globally active academics who

constantly move between institutions, aiming to climb the proverbial career ladder, who are perceived to be interested only in the best working conditions for themselves and are therefore quite detached from the societies they work in. The perspective that the ACE research participants offer, displays an image of the academic as being necessarily entrenched in the societal contexts in which they work. However, this often results in a feeling of being torn between the demands of local communities and the expectations of academia.

Further qualitative research is needed to follow up on the personal lived experiences of university TM-CE workers and the internal dilemmas they face in balancing these dual demands in the hybrid TM-CE space. The overextension of university staff, buckling under workload pressures, and consequences for personal well-being and institutional attrition were topics consistently mentioned in the interviews. There is a dearth of knowledge about the impact on university TM-CE practitioners of the expectation to actively and visibly bridge the proverbial gulf between the academy and society, despite the many challenges they face. The challenges mentioned by ACE respondents that hinder the effective implementation of TM-CE activities express the strained situation of under-resourced African institutions in terms of funding and human resources, including precarious staff contracts that disrupt continuous relationships with external stakeholders. Even though lacking resources for TM-CE activities are not distinct to African institutions, the structural disadvantages in terms of the ability to recruit and keep skilled staff members and the dependency on funding that is conditioned by donors' and political agendas seem to make TM-CE activities in African contexts particularly vulnerable.

The distinctive focus on mutuality and an understanding of TM-CE as mutually beneficial relationships seem to contrast with notions globally of universities being the producers of knowledge that needs to be "transferred" to society in a one-way direction. The question of differences and commonalities of TM-CE perceptions and practices in global perspectives could not, however, be covered in this study. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the question of mutuality and further research into the conditions and structures that foster mutual beneficial relationships in TM-CE activities would be useful. At the same time it must be acknowledged that TM-CE in African universities constitute a very wide variety of activities, which are dependent on and influenced by specific local, national and also global contexts and events. The discursive appeal of a monolithic and mythical "African" experience must always be resisted, especially when considering the vast variety of dynamics that determine the contexts within which TM-CE happens in African university spaces. Specific regional dynamics, socio-political and geo-political events (for example, state foreign policies, social unrest like rebellions, coups, wars and climate events, like droughts, floods, wildfires) impact different regions at different times and in different ways. Social responsiveness is therefore,

also in universities, always a balancing act between a focus on the immediate and local perspective and the larger, global, enduring and long-term.

What can, however, be concluded across the diverse contexts of the study participants is that it is effective relationships with external partners like funders, stakeholders from politics, business and the civil society, that enable successful university-based TM-CE activities. But to enable this, dedicated people and resources as well as institutional support are crucial. Institutional support, including the integration of TM-CE in the frameworks of the higher education institutions is essential to generate the targeted sustainable impacts. On the one hand, this must include the recruiting and retaining of appropriate human resources and the securing and maintain of financial resources, and measures to secure these must from part of long-term visionary institutional planning strategies. On the other hand, individual TM-CE projects and initiatives will vary in terms of their scope and context, which will impact the recruitment and securing of human and financial resources. There is no one-fits-all recipe that can be applied to all contexts equally. This means that much more detailed and nuanced research is required into the recruitment, retention and funding strategies used by African HE TM-CE practitioners. This did not fall within the scope of the broad focus of this exploratory study, but the findings of this study can serve as a springboard and departure point for further research about strategies to recruit staff and to secure funding for TM-CE work in African universities. For example, more research about the active involvement of alumni in TM-CE activities are needed. This can lead to the identification of synergies, exchange of skills, construction of collaborative networks and development of scalable models for implementation to facilitate optimally effective TM-CE activities and the highest level of impact. Future studies can also focus on more critical reflections about colonial continuities in specific countries and can advance approaches and practices that are rooted and effective in different African contexts. As a point of departure, this small research study provides valuable initial insights into the relationship of universities with society, especially in Africa and can form the basis for further research in a more systemic and conceptual way about the HE TM-CE agenda and mandate, particularly in African countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to recognise and thank the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for funding this UNICIETY research project. Recognition and thanks also go to the following persons from the East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA) who contributed to the design and execution of the project: Prof John Chang'ach and Dr Susan Kurgat (Moi University, Kenya), Prof Paul Webb (Nelson Mandela University, South Africa), Prof Proscovia Namubiru

and Dr David Ssekamate (Uganda Management Institute), Dr Eugenia Kafanabo (University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), Ms Sonja Ebbing, Prof Karsten Speck, Prof Bernd Siebenhüner (Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Germany); and from the West African German Centre for Local Governance in Africa (CEGLA) and the Digital Initiative for the Centres of African Excellence (DIGI-Face): Dr. Clemens Schweizer, Prof Andreas Pattar and Ms Elisa Adams (Hochschule Kehl, Germany), as well as Mr Nelson Mandela and Mr Aristide Fongang for helping with interviews and transcriptions.

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