

# DEMOCRATIZING HIGHER EDUCATION: NAVIGATING PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EQUITY, INCLUSIVITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## ABSTRACT

South Africa's transformation agenda places increasing emphasis on the democratization of higher education, particularly with regard to institutional accountability and the advancement of equity, inclusivity, and social justice. This article examines how public accountability intersects with the broader goals of democratic reform within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), presenting the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as a case study. Through an analysis of UWC's Community Engagement Strategy, most notably its Scholarship of Engagement Model and the Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact (SoE-SI) framework, the article explores how principles of social justice, inclusion and equity are operationalized in both academic and societal contexts. It further interrogates the layered dynamics of accountability in a transforming HE landscape, where transparent responsiveness to diverse stakeholders must be weighed against institutional autonomy. The article also considers the role of UWC's SoE-SI Knowledge Management System (KMS) Web Portal in measuring and evaluating the institution's contribution to societal transformation. Recommendations highlight the importance of sustained transparency,

responsiveness, and co-constructed dialogue to strengthen public accountability and embed social justice within institutional practices.

**Keywords:** Democratization, Equity, Higher Education, Inclusivity, Public Accountability, Social Justice

## INTRODUCTION

In post-apartheid South Africa, the pursuit of democratizing higher education continues to be critical in addressing the historical legacies of inequality, exclusion and the underrepresentation of marginalized groups. As higher education systems evolve, they must extend beyond serving elite interests to becoming a transformative tool for broader societal change, particularly in advancing equity, inclusivity and social justice. At the core of this transformation lies the imperative of public accountability, which demands that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remain transparent, responsive, and answerable to a diverse range of stakeholders, with particular emphasis on historically disadvantaged communities and groups. Through accountability mechanisms, HEIs are expected to democratize education, through creating equitable and participatory systems, thereby helping to redress systemic imbalances.

Across South Africa, institutions such as the University of the Western Cape (UWC) have adopted frameworks for Community Engagement (CE) and Societal Impact (SI), which aim to integrate academic work with national development goals, including those related to equity and social justice (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2008, 46). Yet, the operationalization of these frameworks presents ongoing difficulties. These include ongoing financial support limitations, historical inequities in institutional resourcing, and unequal access to educational resources among the student bodies, which collectively hinder the fulfilment of HEIs' broader societal obligations (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2016, 12; 2023, 27). Moreover, the ongoing negotiation between institutional autonomy and public accountability often introduces tensions in institutional governance, complicating efforts to realize the principles of transparency and inclusion (CHE 2008, 45).

Embedding public accountability within governance structures offers a potential pathway for resolving these tensions. In doing so, HEIs can act not only as centres of academic inquiry but also as agents of social transformation. UWC, drawing from its longstanding commitment to social justice, has sought to embed public accountability within its institutional practices through its CE and SI frameworks. These frameworks have facilitated platforms that support inclusive governance and promote open and transparent decision-making processes (University of the Western Cape (UWC) 2023, 7).

This article explores how public accountability, when approached strategically, can enhance the societal impact of HEIs by advancing inclusivity, equity, and social justice. Using UWC as a case example, the authors reflect on how the university's CE initiatives give concrete expression to these values through the implementation of its Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact (SoE-SI) framework and its associated Knowledge Management System (KMS) Web Portal. In doing so, it situates public accountability as a key lever in repositioning higher education as a driver of democratic transformation. By investigating the role of accountability in fostering inclusive educational environments, the authors provide insights into the broader implications of public accountability, for societal well-being and the transformation of South African higher education systems (UWC 2023, 18).

Ultimately, this article contributes to the growing national and global discourse on the democratizing of higher education by foregrounding the importance of transparent governance and participatory stakeholder-responsive accountability. By navigating the challenges and opportunities inherent in public accountability, HEIs could ensure that they advance social justice, while remaining accountable to the communities they serve. It posits that, by effectively navigating both the challenges and opportunities presented by accountability demands, HEIs can fulfil their transformation obligations and reinforce their commitment to the communities they serve. One such accountability tool is the SoE-SI Knowledge Management System (KMS) Web Portal, developed under UWC's Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact (SoE-SI) framework. While this portal serves as an automated resource to monitor and evaluate societal contributions, it should also navigate the requirements of South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) (Republic of South Africa (RSA), Act 4 of 2013). This balance between ensuring data privacy and fulfilling the transparency obligations of public institutions, is discussed later in this article, where the portal's role in showcasing UWC's societal impact, is explored, in detail.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

Public accountability in higher education is a complex and multi-layered construct, as outlined in the CHE Report on Higher Education, Institutional Autonomy, and Public Accountability (CHE 2008, 40–44). In South Africa, public accountability extends beyond financial oversight, or compliance with government regulations. It includes academic, fiduciary and social accountability, each contributing to the transformation of higher education. At the University of the Western Cape (UWC), public accountability is firmly embedded in its institutional mission and closely associated with societal engagement.

Public accountability in HEIs has evolved to reflect a broader social responsibility, where universities are accountable for educational outcomes, as well as their contributions to social transformation and justice (Hart, Daniels, and September-Brown 2023, 266). HEIs are not merely sites of learning, but also critical actors in advancing equity and inclusivity within the societal fabric. As Ambe (2021, 112) argues, accountability frameworks in higher education should encompass governance, as well as the imperative to foster equity, inclusivity and social justice.

UWC operationalizes public accountability through its Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact (SoE-SI) framework (UWC 2023). This framework integrates engaged research, learning and partnerships. In addition, the framework and its KMS web portal ensure alignment with the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030 (Republic of South Africa (RSA), The Presidency, National Planning Commission (NPC) 2012), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations (UN) 2015), demonstrating how public accountability ensures that institutional outputs are responsive to societal needs, and are aligned to national and international developmental priorities. This approach is evident in UWC's Societal Impact (SI) metrics, which track the university's alignment with national and global development agendas, such as the NDP Vision 2030 and the SDGs. UWC ensures that its academic outputs are, not only impactful, but also socially relevant, fostering sustainable development through engaged scholarship (Hart et al. 2023, 274).

Multi-layered accountability in HEIs is evident in how these institutions operate across multiple dimensions of responsibility. UWC's public accountability is not confined to a singular facet; however, it spans academic accountability (ensuring quality teaching and research), fiduciary accountability (financial stewardship and resource allocation), and social accountability (engagement with societal needs and contributing to social justice) (CHE 2008, 46). Engagement is not a separate activity, but should be infused in all operations, forming a reciprocal relationship with various societal sectors (Hall 2010, 3). These layers of accountability ensure that HEIs, such as UWC, are held responsible at every level of their operation, from financial transparency, to the societal relevance of their academic outputs. UWC ensures that it meets internal governance standards and external societal expectations, by embedding accountability in these multi-layered structures. This is supported by adhering to the principles of equity, inclusivity, and social justice, guided by Paulo Freire (see Freire 1970), to facilitate socially just engagements through discourse, creating opportunities for critical engagement and transformation.

## **Equity, Inclusivity and Social Justice**

Equity, inclusivity and social justice are core principles within UWC's SoE-SI framework. As the CHE HEIAAF report highlights, HEIs are expected to contribute to national development goals and broader societal well-being (CHE 2008, 71). These principles are embedded in the SoE-SI Framework, which ensures that all types of communities, particularly marginalized and historically excluded groups, are engaged in knowledge production and dissemination. UWC has operationalized these principles by integrating its Scholarship of Engagement Model into its SoE-SI Framework, which mandates that all forms of scholarship – research, teaching, or engagement – contribute directly to societal well-being (UWC 2023). The SoE Knowledge Management System (KMS) web portal facilitates collaborative exchanges among the various community types, enabling marginalized voices to shape research and educational outputs (Al-Kurdi, El-Haddadeh, and Eldabi 2018, 227). The decentralized SoE-SI framework promotes equity and inclusivity by ensuring that diverse community voices are involved in knowledge production.

Ambe's (2021, 112) analysis reinforces the argument that equity and inclusivity could only be achieved when institutions are held accountable, through transparent and inclusive public engagement practices. This commitment is evidenced in UWC's alignment with NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the SDGs (UN 2015), where equity and inclusivity are tracked through defined SI metrics. Public accountability mechanisms ensure that HEIs include marginalized groups, and actively promote social justice through their educational and research initiatives.

## **The Role of Public Accountability in Governance**

The role of public accountability in governance is critical to ensure that HEIs operate transparently and responsibly. As a governance mechanism, public accountability promotes inclusive decision-making and helps guarantee that all stakeholders, including students, academic staff, and community stakeholders, are meaningfully involved in institutional matters (CHE 2008, 55). At UWC, this form of accountability is implemented through the SoE-SI Framework, which integrates feedback from communities and broader societal concerns into its governance structures. Consequently, UWC's governance arrangements are structured to be transparent, enabling regular reporting and review of how institutional resources are distributed while also ensuring alignment between decisions, academic priorities, and societal expectations.

## **UWC's APPROACH TO SOCIETAL IMPACT**

Adapted from Boyer's (1996) seminal work on the scholarship of engagement, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) conceptualizes societal impact (SI) through its Scholarship of Engagement (SoE) model. Cherrington et al. (2018) argue that Boyer's (1996) framework provides guidance for HEIs to translate their mandate for social transformation into scholarly practice. This model broadens the conventional understanding of scholarship by including all forms of knowledge generation and dissemination, namely the Scholarship of Research (SoR), Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoL&T), Scholarship of Integration (SoI), and Scholarship of Application (SoA). These components collectively underpin UWC's holistic strategy for societal engagement and transformation, ensuring that the university's core functions contribute meaningfully to both academic scholarship advancement of societal well-being. This integrated view challenges approaches that treat engagement with communities as an isolated or peripheral mandate within HEIs. The UWC SoE-SI Framework further aligns the model with both national and international development agendas, including the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015), thereby extending the university's impact beyond academic outputs to the broader task of addressing socio-economic challenges, both within South Africa and globally.

### **The Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact Framework (SoE-SI)**

UWC's SoE-SI Framework highlights the critical role that HEIs are expected to play in advancing societal transformation. This framework encompasses all forms of scholarship, including learning and teaching, research and service/engagement (UWC 2023). By aligning its strategic orientation with both national and global development agendas, such as the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the SDGs (UN 2015), UWC seeks to contribute meaningfully to addressing the socio-economic challenges confronting South Africa.

At UWC, societal impact (SI) refers to the university's integrated and values-driven approach to realise social transformation through engaged scholarship. This involves not only research, but also the integration, application and teaching components of scholarship (UWC 2023). In this approach, societal impact is regarded as the collective outcome of engaged scholarship, contributing to the well-being and advancement of all community types, including scholarly, student, civil society and public/private sectors. UWC operationalizes societal impact by ensuring that all forms of scholarship (SoR, SoL&T, SoI, SoA) are integrated equally into its broader social transformation agenda.

## **SI Metrics and Tools**

The UWC SoE-SI Knowledge Management System (KMS) fulfils the pivotal role of tracking and presenting UWC's societal contributions. This decentralized tool is designed to capture, assess and present data on the university's societal impact. The KMS contributes to public accountability by enabling UWC to demonstrate that its engagement activities are responsive to societal well-being, which is increasingly recognised as a key indicator of institutional success (Hart et al. 2023, 274). The KMS also captures data related to research, teaching and community engagement outputs, allowing for a holistic representation of UWC's societal footprint. In addition, the system supports the integration of performance indicators that reflect UWC's strategic alignment with the developmental priorities of the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015). These indicators provide a means of advancing the well-being dimensions embedded in UWC's SI model and offer a structured approach to evaluating the university's role in contributing to both national and international development goals (UWC 2023, 19).

## **Role of the SoE-SI KMS Web Portal**

The SoE-SI KMS Web Portal enables UWC to document its broader engagement with a range of community types, including traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups. Serving as a centralized, participatory platform to both access information and contribute evidence related to engagement efforts, the system supports the transparent tracking of UWC's SI. The KMS promotes collaboration among faculties, departments and community partners, functioning as a decentralized tool for real-time feedback, documentation and shared monitoring of projects (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 227). Through this platform, UWC ensures that its SI reporting aligns with both institutional strategic priorities and external development agendas, such as the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the SDGs (UN 2015), strengthen the coherence between institutional efforts and broader developmental socio-economic goals (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 226; UWC 2023, 22).

## **Alignment with Faculty StratPlans, IOP Goals, NDP Vision 2030 and SDGs**

The integration of UWC's SoE-SI Framework with its Faculty Strategic Plans and Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) (UWC 2016) reflects the institution's commitment to aligning academic engagement with broader national and global development priorities. Through the KMS Web Portal, UWC ensures that all societal impact metrics are embedded into faculty-level strategic planning processes. This integration enables seamless linkages between institutional strategies

and external development agendas such as the NDP Vision 2030 and the SDGs, ensuring coherence across planning, implementation and reporting activities. This alignment is further supported by the systematic use of SMART indicators, ensuring that each faculty and department's societal impact contributions are measurable, time-bound and aligned with the NDP Vision 2030 and the SDGs (UWC 2023, 24).

Ambe (2021, 89) asserts that localized accountability systems are essential to maintain the responsiveness of HEIs to societal needs. UWC's KMS exemplifies this approach, by ensuring that real-time data collection reflects immediate community outcomes and long-term societal goals. Ultimately, this continuous feedback loop ensures that the university's societal impact remains aligned with its academic and societal missions.

## **OPERATIONALIZING ACCOUNTABILITY AT UWC**

Public accountability within HEIs and community engagement in South Africa, is vital to the transformation of the post-apartheid educational landscape. Therefore, these HEIs are responsible for meaningful engagement with their communities, ensuring that their operations are transparent, responsive and beneficial. Consequently, this requires that HEIs implement activities to cultivate partnerships between universities and communities, addressing urgent social concerns inclusively (Bhagwan 2020, 39; Bidandi, Ambe, and Mukong 2021, 2).

A fundamental element of public accountability in higher education is the integration of community engagement into the core mission of institutions. HEIs need to demonstrate the societal impact of their CE initiatives, which includes evaluating the outcomes of these engagements and ensuring that community members' voices are included (Bhagwan 2020, 46–47). At the UWC, SOE for Societal Impact (SI) has been institutionalised and focused on the benefit of all types of communities, by leveraging teaching, research, as well as creative efforts, for mutual knowledge generation and application (UWC 2023). The following section illustrates service learning as one aspect of the practical application of public accountability, CE principles, and SI activities, within the SoE-SI Framework.

The SoE-SI Framework has also identified targeted support programmes that incorporate the integrated principle of CE and student involvement in the community. The UWC SoE-SI Framework underscores the significance of the integrated principle of CE throughout teaching, research and service-learning, prioritising the equitable participation of diverse communities, and encompassing both internal and external stakeholders. An essential element is the engagement with marginalised communities, demonstrating the institution's commitment to rectifying historical disparities (UWC 2023, 4). This is apparent, especially in UWC's historical engagement with marginalised communities throughout the Apartheid era. Secondly, the SoE



framework underscores the significance of structured engagement through professional degrees and volunteer programmes, demonstrating how students actively engage in service learning that connects their academic experiences to societal issues (UWC 2023, 7).

Thirdly, the framework recognises the diversity of faculty and leadership, emphasising inclusivity within scholarly communities and community-university partnerships. It underscores the necessity for diverse engagement in knowledge generation, facilitated through interdisciplinary collaboration. The scholarship of integration, consequently, fosters a combination of epistemological and pedagogical aspects, to establish multi-level partnerships (UWC 2023, 16), and ensure that diverse voices are reflected in governance and academic output. Finally, the framework highlights participatory governance, while incorporating a model in which students, faculty, and external communities engage in decision-making processes, via collaborative structures, such as student councils and community partnerships (UWC 2023, 7). In addition, the UWC's Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) portal facilitates societal impact assessment, which ensures stakeholder engagement in the evaluation and monitoring of the institution's advancements in social transformation (UWC 2023, 22).

### **Balancing Privacy and Public Accountability**

The SoE-SI KMS Web Portal, developed under the Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact (SoE-SI) framework, is a critical tool for HEIs, to monitor and evaluate their societal contributions, as they seek to measure and account for their contributions to society in a structured manner. As a framework, it provides not only conceptual direction but also practical tools that are tailored to the institutional context, aligned with national imperatives and informed by international benchmarks. However, implementing the KMS Web Portal at UWC must be carried out with close attention to the provisions of South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) (RSA, 2013), which requires the safeguarding of individuals' personal data. The POPIA thus introduces essential privacy obligations, which may create tension for HEIs striving to maintain transparency in the reporting of their societal contributions as part of their public accountability commitments.

To reconcile these concerns, the SoE-SI KMS Web Portal has been designed to ensure that sensitive personal information is handled in compliance with POPIA, while still fulfilling the institution's obligation to share data publicly. The portal achieves this by presenting data in aggregated and anonymized formats and by incorporating processes to obtain informed consent from the respective stakeholders. In doing so, it adheres to the POPIA's privacy provisions, without compromising the need for transparency in HEI societal impact reporting.

Public accountability in the context of higher education and community engagement in South Africa, remains a multifaceted issue, requiring sustained institutional commitment to redress historical inequalities and to build on meaningful, long-term partnerships with local communities. (Bhagwan 2020, 50). Responding to these challenges is essential if higher education is to continue playing a transformative role within society.

The Societal Impact (SI) footprint refers to the measurable and recorded outcomes of engagement between HEIs their diverse community-type partners, namely, students, scholars, industry, public, private and NGO/CBO sectors. In UWC's case, this footprint presents the university's contribution to improved societal well-being, advancing social justice, and supporting broader socio-economic development priorities, such as those articulated the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the SDGs (UN 2015).

At UWC, the SI footprint is measured primarily through the SoE-SI KMS web portal, which ensures that data collection is aligned with key institutional and national development frameworks. These include internal priorities such as Faculty Strategic Plans (Stratplans) and the UWC Institutional Operational Plan (UWC 2016) as well as broader national and global development drivers, including the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the SDGs (UN 2015). The system tracks a range of indicators, including stakeholder feedback, the strength and impact of partnerships addressing socio-economic challenges and the outcomes of engagement initiatives across various sectors (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 228; Bhagwan 2020, 48–49; Hart et al. 2023, 268).

The UWC SoE-SI KMS, therefore, captures data through learning and teaching, research and community engagement projects carried out by academics, researchers and students. This approach enables a comprehensive representation of UWC's societal contributions are presented comprehensively, thereby strengthening the institution's public accountability for advancing societal well-being. Importantly, the system incorporates both quantitative indicators and qualitative insights, allowing for a more holistic assessment of the university's impact.

### **Impact on Community Engagement and Equity**

The Societal Impact (SI) footprint has significant implications for the various community-type partners, namely, the government, policymakers and the private sector. For the civil society 'community' partners, it represents a tangible measure of how collaboration with UWC has contributed to shared goals, such as addressing socio-economic challenges, improving infrastructure, and enhancing educational opportunities (Hart et al. 2023, 274). Additionally, the SI footprint provides evidence of UWC's alignment with the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The

Presidency (NPC) 2012) goals, which is critical for the purpose of contributing to the country's development goals, or securing support and funding from policymakers and public institutions. The private sector, therefore, benefits from partnerships that contribute to corporate social responsibility objectives, while fostering sustainable development outcomes.

For UWC itself, the SI footprint also offers a key measure of institutional success in fulfilling its social transformation and justice mission. The data collected through the SoE-SI KMS informs decision-making at the institutional level, ensuring that resources are directed towards initiatives, which generate the most significant societal benefit (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 228). By engaging with all sectors, as well as various community types, UWC reinforces its commitment to public accountability and ensures that its academic and societal outputs are aligned with broader development objectives (Hart et al. 2023, 274).

### **Lessons from UWC's process**

The key lesson from UWC's implementation of the SoE-SI framework is that measuring societal impact requires robust tools, which transcend traditional academic metrics. The SoE-SI KMS at UWC has demonstrated that public accountability could be integrated effectively with academic outputs, ensuring that the university's contributions to social justice and transformation are visible to all stakeholders. By operationalizing accountability in this manner, UWC has set a standard for HEIs, in terms of integrating societal impact into their core functions of teaching, research and service/engagement (Hart et al. 2023, 268). The alignment of UWC's initiatives with national and international goals has also highlighted the importance of using localized accountability mechanisms, to track short-term and long-term societal outcomes (Ambe 2020, 89). However, SI measurement depends on up-to-date data recording by the end users of the KMS, namely, UWC staff, students, and partners.

### **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Reconciling institutional autonomy with public responsibility in South African HEIs is complex, especially in terms of transparency, responsiveness and stakeholder engagement. The historical context of Apartheid has also created enduring injustices, which persist in shaping the HE environment, requiring meticulous management of institutional autonomy, while equally maintaining accountability to the public and various stakeholders.

Transparency remains a cornerstone of public accountability in higher education, enabling stakeholders to scrutinize institutional actions and decision-making processes. However, its impact is closely tied to the way in which transparency is framed, communicated and sustained.

When poorly structured or inconsistently applied, transparency efforts may inadvertently undermine the very trust and credibility they are intended to reinforce.

Attending to stakeholder concerns is central to building and maintaining institutional trust. Research shows that meaningful engagement with diverse community types strengthens perceptions of reliability and deepens relational trust between HEIs and the public. However, a key challenge lies in ensuring that responsiveness to stakeholder needs does not come at the expense of institutional autonomy. While transparency remains a critical mechanism for sustaining stakeholder confidence, it must be carefully balanced with the level of autonomy necessary for effective and contextually responsive governance (Zulkifli et al. 2022, 4).

One of the persistent challenges faced by HEIs is the presence of entrenched institutional culture that can resist change, particularly in relation to improving stakeholder engagement. Kumalo (2020, 181) argues that the ideals of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability, are mutually exclusive and should be pursued in a manner that is sensitive to the unique context of each institution. Institutions must carefully manage the tension between preserving their autonomy and meeting their responsibilities to the broader community. Striking this balance is essential to cultivate public trust and institutional legitimacy, both of which are vital to the effective operation of democratic systems. As South African HEIs continue to strengthen their public accountability, they encounter a range of interrelated challenges and opportunities. These include the development of effective accountability mechanisms, the protection of institutional autonomy and the ongoing imperative to advance equity and inclusivity in governance processes.

### **Challenges in implementing Accountability Frameworks**

South African HEIs face several challenges in implementing effective and multidimensional accountability frameworks. These challenges include limited financial and human resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies and external political influences, which can hinder institutions from fully meeting their accountability commitments (CHE 2008, 44). Moreover, prevailing definitions of accountability often remain narrowly framed around financial oversight, neglecting the broader societal impacts that HEIs contribute, such as, social justice, promoting equity and fostering meaningful community engagement (Bidandi et al. 2021, 145).

To address these challenges, HEIs should adopt more comprehensive and forward-looking reporting practices that extend beyond basic regulatory compliance. This includes strengthening stakeholder engagement processes, developing reporting formats that are both transparent and easily accessible and improving the depth and quality of non-financial disclosures. Additionally,

the integration of international governance and accountability benchmarks can support the refinement of institutional practices and promote greater financial transparency (Bidandi et al. 2021, 195; Njiraine 2019, 82).

### **Navigating Accountability and Autonomy**

Balancing institutional autonomy and public accountability remains a central challenge for South African HEIs. While autonomy enables universities to self-govern and retain independence, particularly in relation to academic freedom and financial decision-making, public accountability demands transparency, responsiveness and responsibility to a range of external stakeholders, including government, civil society and the broader public.

UWC's SoE-SI Framework offers a practical example of how tensions between accountability and autonomy can be navigated. The framework embeds accountability measures that promote transparency in key institutional domains, such as resource distribution, student achievement and societal engagement, while safeguarding the institution's autonomy (UWC 2023). Nonetheless, maintaining this balance remains complex, especially in the face of external political demands and persistent resource constraints.

### **Equity and Inclusivity challenges**

Equity and inclusivity continue to pose significant challenges for South African HEIs, particularly given the enduring influence of entrenched power dynamics and socio-economic disparities. These structural barriers can undermine the effectiveness of institutional and limit the participation of diverse voices in decision-making processes. Establishing equitable partnerships with 'communities'/stakeholders is therefore essential, not only because they are intended beneficiaries of engagements, but also because they play a critical role as co-creators of knowledge and collaborative solutions. From a social justice perspective, such partnerships should prioritise empowerment and inclusivity, ensuring that affected communities have an equal voice in shaping policies and initiatives that impact their lives.

UWC has taken concrete steps to address these challenges through the implementation of its SoE-SI KMS web portal, which is specifically designed to create spaces for the inclusion of marginalized voices within institutional governance structures (Bhagwan 2020, 38–39). However, challenges, such as resource constraints and inequitable power dynamics, continue to pose obstacles (Bidandi et al. 2021, 195). By utilizing the tools of its SoE-SI KMS, UWC could track the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of its engaged scholarships partnerships, demonstrating how its activities align with the principles of social justice and contribute to

societal well-being, specifically SI (Hart et al. 2023, 268). However, achieving full diversity and equity in governance structures remains an ongoing challenge.

## **OPERATIONALIZING ACCOUNTABILITY**

In higher education institutions (HEIs), such as UWC, operationalizing accountability involves establishing measurable and transparent processes for resource allocation, public reporting and stakeholder engagement (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 227; Njiraine 2019, 82). These processes ensure that institutional efforts align with societal impact goals and that outcomes are clearly communicated to all stakeholders. This section outlines the key aspects of UWC's accountability framework, focusing on resource allocation indicators, verification tools for public reporting, and stakeholder engagement strategies, integrated into its SoE-SI KMS web portal.

### **Indicators for Resource Allocation**

Effective operationalization of accountability within HEIs, such as UWC, requires the establishment of clear and measurable indicators, to track resource allocation. The SoE-SI KMS plays a pivotal role in guiding the allocation of institutional resources effectively, towards scholarly engaged SI initiatives (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 228). To ensure effective resource management, the SoE-SI KMS uses Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) indicators, to monitor how financial, human, and infrastructural resources are allocated (Ambe 2021, 145; UWC 2023). This allows UWC to track the success of projects and ensure that they align with the NDP Vision 2030 and the SDGs (see Hart et al. 2023, 274). For example, UWC's resource allocation to engaged scholarship projects is monitored against the extent of their SI, ensuring that resources are directed toward projects that yield the most significant transformation in the respective community types (UWC SoE-SI Framework, 2024; Ambe 2020, p. 112).

### **Tools of verification for Public Reporting**

Transparency in public reporting is the key factor that ensures accountability. UWC's KMS Web Portal facilitates this, by collecting and presenting data on SI, and resource allocation, in an accessible manner (Hart et al. 2023, 268). The tools of verification employed by the university include, annual public reports, stakeholder feedback surveys, as well as internal and external audit reports, all of which are made available via the KMS portal (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 227; Hart et al. 2023, 274; Njiraine 2019).

The KMS also allows for capturing qualitative and quantitative data on SI, which provides a comprehensive picture of how UWC's activities contribute to societal well-being, social transformation and justice goals. This ensures that all resource allocations and public reporting activities are transparent and aligned with the university's strategic objectives (Al-Kurdi et al. 2018, 227–228; Hart et al. 2023, 270; Njiraine 2019, 82).

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Transparency**

Stakeholder engagement is a critical aspect of UWC's accountability framework. The institution has adopted various strategies to enhance transparency, and ensure that stakeholders, namely, students, faculty, public, private and NGO/CBO sectors, as well as civil society, are actively involved in decision-making processes (Hart et al. 2023, 268). Through its SoE-SI Framework and KMS web portal, UWC has created formal mechanisms for stakeholder feedback and participation, which are integrated into the institution's governance structures.

One key mechanism is the establishment of engaged scholarship committees at faculty levels that provide regular input on engagement projects and research activities (Hart et al. 2023, 274). These committees include representatives from multiple stakeholder groups and serve as platforms for generating timely feedback on the impact and effectiveness of UWC's societal engagement initiatives. This ongoing engagement not only strengthens transparency but also helps to ensure that the university remains responsive to the evolving needs and priorities of its communities (Hart et al. 2023, 268).

### **CONCLUSION**

Public accountability in HEIs such as UWC plays a critical role in advancing equity, inclusivity, and social justice. Through its SoE-SI Framework and Scholarship of Engagement (SoE) model, UWC has shown that accountability mechanisms can be meaningfully integrated into both academic practice and societal engagement. By leveraging tools like the SoE-SI KMS web portal, the university has been able to capture and assess its contributions to social transformation and societal impact, thereby ensuring that its engagement across various community types is transparent, responsive and aligned with strategic national and global development frameworks, including the NDP Vision 2030 (RSA, The Presidency (NPC) 2012) and the SDGs (UN 2015). Together, these instruments demonstrate that public accountability can be an effective vehicle for advancing the democratization of higher education, particularly, when applied in ways that challenge inequality and promote a more just society.

The policy and institutional implications of these findings are both widespread and significant. South African HEIs are encouraged to continue enhancing their public accountability mechanisms in ways that support transparency, responsiveness and inclusivity. This includes adopting refined approaches to assessing societal impact and ensuring that all forms of are aligned with broader societal goals. UWC's method of operationalizing accountability, through context-sensitive metrics and stakeholder engagement, offers a model that could be adapted by other HEIs across the country and internationally. In addition, reinforcing transparency practices through public reporting and formal stakeholder feedback processes will be essential for maintaining the trust and confidence of both internal and external stakeholders (Njiraine 2019, 82).

Looking ahead, several areas require further development to strengthen the impact of accountability practices in higher education. This includes ongoing refinement of societal impact metrics to capture more nuanced data on UWCs' contributions to social well-being. Efforts should also focus on improving the integration of qualitative and quantitative verification tools with the KMS, and on broadening engagement strategies to ensure the active participation of marginalized communities in decision-making processes. Equally important is the need to address the enduring challenge of balancing institutional autonomy with external accountability demands, particularly in the context of constrained resources and political pressures. By advancing these initiatives, UWC and other HEIs could further strengthen their role in advancing social justice, equity and inclusivity, both within academic and societal spheres.

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