

Insights and Current Debates on Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions: Perspectives on the University of the Western Cape

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Abstract

This study investigated the insights and current debates on community engagement in higher education institutions with specific reference to the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa. The article argues that although community engagement seems to present some challenges, it has become an integral part of higher education in South Africa and beyond. The article examines community engagement in higher education institutions and evaluates its contributions based on the research question. The article evaluates community engagement from the perspective of the UWC, community, and students. Data were collected through semi-structured with key informants. In total, 12 participants participated in the interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The results of the study show that community engagement is dependent on institutions' relationships built between particular communities, which are easily lost if the people involved change. The results also show that community engagement has become a requisite for promotion and policy development. However, it reveals that issues of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) often take time affecting students and researchers. Moreover, the findings indicate that there is no standard procedure for community engagement as departments, individual lecturers, and students have unique and different interests.

Keywords

community engagement, University of the Western Cape, higher education institutions, students, community, South Africa

Introduction: Current Debates on Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

In the context of higher education (HE), community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated to the university either by geographical proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. In this study, community engagement is viewed as a vehicle to bring about behavioral and environmental change. This ultimately benefits the university as well as the learning outcomes of students, which are enhanced through curricula that are relevant to community issues and priorities—for example, staff and students who provide voluntary services such as supporting the elderly in the community or simply being part of a project that contributes to the well-being of people in the area.

We further postulate that community engagement is about social responsibility. In this regard, the university seeks to respond to the real needs of their communities through the provision of intellectual leadership in areas of community interest in ways that offer resources and facilities for community use while working with them for mutually productive outcomes.

Nonetheless, engaged universities are essential for any country's economic and social future (Jacob et al., 2015). While universities interact with their communities in a variety of ways, university community engagement specifically implies collaborative relationships, leading to productive

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partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes, such as improvements in the community, educational outcomes, and economic growth. University communities may include groups such as businesses, professional associations, industries, schools, alumni, and groups of local citizens. Activities of engagement include scholarly research capacity to address community problems and aspirations. This approach results in knowledge transfer and exchange, commercialization of intellectual property, the establishment of spin-off companies, and joint venture activities between the university and community partners (Hoy & Johnson, 2013). Hence, engaged research, teaching, and learning address community labor market needs as well as the need for students themselves to become knowledgeable and active citizens of their country, region, community, and world. In the context of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), community engagement facilitates community opportunities that enhance and promote the scholarship of engagement through equitable partnerships and citizenry to promote sustainable communities. Moreover, UWC's community engagement is reflected in the history and ethos of the institution. This study, therefore, seeks to evaluate the current debates on community engagement in HEIs, with particular attention given to UWC.

Background

Although “community engagement” in HE is gaining greater impetus in South African literature, the concept is not yet clearly understood as it is still in an emerging stage of development. For example, in recent years, the South African educational landscape, particularly HEIs (i.e., University of Pretoria, Stellenbosch University, North-West University, University of Cape Town, to name a few), has witnessed countless academic, socioeconomic, and political qualms, leading to disturbances within and around these institutions and their immediate communities. In an effort to address some of these challenges, the concept of “community engagement” in South Africa's HEIs became paramount. The idea was in response to the call of the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education [DoE], 1997) for feasibility studies and pilot programs to potentially explore community service in HE, which later culminated in the launching of a Joint Education Trust called the Higher Education—Service Partnerships initiative in 1999 (Bernardo et al., 2012; Daniels et al., 2013; Erasmus, 2014). According to Lazarus (2008), the purpose of this initiative was to assist South African HEIs to theorize and implement community engagement as a core function of academia. Based on this understanding, the concept encompasses addressing a particular need of HEIs rather than tangible issues pertaining to communities outside the university.

Furthermore, it is about the university staff building collaborative relationships based on reciprocal and mutual respect as well as sharing with the community issues such as sports facilities, involvement in projects, and other

socioeconomic challenges. An engaged university, according to Driscoll and Sandmann (2016), is one that is consciously enthusiastic to strengthening community engagement in all aspects of university life, namely, staff members, students, and the university itself.

Driscoll and Sandmann (2016, p. 8) define “community engagement” as a process by which the affiliation with the community gets prime attention. Therefore, it

... refers to the engagement processes and practices in which a wide range of people work together to achieve a shared goal guided by a commitment to a common set of values, principles and criteria.

In the context of this study, community engagement is defined as activities performed by the university and its broader community, primarily aimed at uplifting or supporting society and/or individuals in need of assistance or engagement.

Community engagement, as a core mission of UWC, exists to enhance and promote the scholarship of engagement through equitable partnerships and citizenry to promote sustainable communities as well as to provide the means whereby both parties can actively discover knowledge, teach, and learn from one another in a reciprocal, mutually beneficial manner (Daniels et al., 2013). It is envisaged that this would contribute toward creating an environment in which student learning and research relevance are enriched. In other words, the university's commitment to reciprocate, redress, and develop lifelong learning and transformation can be supported. Obviously, interactions where the university is contracted to do research or provide services where there is no evidence of reciprocity do not satisfy the above definition of community engagement. According to Daniels et al. (2013), community engagement should be actively linked to identifiable needs of both the university and the community; that is to say, a clear benefit for both the community and the university must have been identified.

To satisfy these norms, the learning activities where students in a particular module are required to conduct community-based research should involve activities where the students or academics in fact engage with the community by undertaking activities in conjunction with and within the very midst of the community.

Existing literature (Bender, 2013; Naidu, 2019; Preece, 2017) shows that community engagement is one of three core responsibilities of a university; the other two are research and teaching. While these scholars point to HE responsibilities, they fail to explicitly discuss its utilization. It appears, therefore, that because universities are involved in many activities structured around research, teaching, and outreach, they need to engage with a varied assemblage of communities (N. L. Hall et al., 2017). Furthermore, N. L. Hall et al. (2017) assert that from the perspective of HE, community engagement needs to be viewed as a public good

because it is located between the community, the state, and the market.

Moreover, N. L. Hall et al. (2017) opine that universities are morally answerable to humanity in general through scholarship, research, and other social responsibilities with the communities which they serve. This suggests that there are ethical accountabilities that need to take the responsibility of HE into consideration in the process of social transformation, as well as the performance of the university's accepted function of teaching and research. While this is so, it is also argued that the notion of community engagement exclusively, by impression of its role in educating the community, seems to be losing hold in the evolving international debate on the role of HE in society (Bernardo et al., 2012; Favish, 2010). The international debate on HE indicates that universities are obliged to forge partnerships, engage with broader stakeholders, and redefine partnerships and practices in ways that are more appropriate for a globalized world (Hoy & Johnson, 2013; Jacob et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, in South Africa, the Council for Higher Education has become part of an ongoing conversation in HEIs about the critical importance of community engagement. This means that there is a need for HEIs to modify their curriculum and present "discipline-based boundaries," rather than emphasizing the political, social, and economic concerns of their immediate localities (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). There is also the need for a deliberate shift from the rhetoric of HEIs in promoting community engagement to keenly inculcate into students some tenets of civic participation and engagement to curtail the mismatch between "community engagement" and what exists in reality (Green, 2011). We argue that community engagement in the context of HEIs is productive but can also sometimes be complex, difficult, challenging, and frustrating for everyone involved. Moreover, it seems an ongoing process rather than an event of influence in response to community priorities. Green (2011) avers that the process of community engagement unearths opposing views, which cannot be reconciled in some cases, for instance, when university programs are controversial or raise strong objections from local communities, or when students propose that hostels should be in the mix of social housing, or when transport infrastructure is seen to threaten the local environment.

Using UWC as a benchmark, three questions this study attempts to answer include the following: Does community engagement matter in the development trajectory of HEIs? Why does it matter? What are the problems encountered in the process of engagement?

Problem Statement

While there is a growing body of literature on community engagement in universities globally, and South Africa in particular, there is a paucity of research on how its agenda is measured. Findings from the study by Hart (2010) show that

attempts by universities to explain what the impact of engagement looks like and how it is perceived by the community itself appear complex. Scholars such as Bernardo et al. (2012) acknowledge that there is a lack of homogeneous measurement tools to evaluate community engagement. Favish (2010) contends that the notion of engagement fails to adequately incorporate social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. Further arguments have shown that (the notion of) community engagement as an integral part of HE is misunderstood and that the level of engagement too appears problematic (Bernardo et al., 2012; Butin, 2010). For Bender (2013), there is a limited understanding of what the term means and how its impact is measured generally (Bender, 2013). Studies show that some institutions understand their communities from an historical perspective while others in a conservative way (Bhagwan, 2017; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). This understanding seems to suggest that the practicality of community engagement is either generalized or not clearly understood. Moreover, the article argues that community engagement seems to differ from one institution to another because the dynamics are not similar.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study is formulated as follows:

Research Question 1: In what ways does community engagement benefit the university, students, and the community?

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to obtain the primary data. An interview guide was used to interview the UWC participants. Participants were selected based on their personal experience and viewpoints. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with academics and students from UWC, providing an opportunity to capture individual perceptions and feedback, which was fundamental to the essence of the study. The interview guide did not yield satisfactory answers because the university (UWC) does not have a specific standardized procedure to follow in terms of engagement. Here, we conducted personal communication with 11 staff members from different departments and one member of the Student Representative Council (SRC) based on their experience of community engagement activities. Both staff and SRC gave firsthand information on their thoughts and ideas about the practice of community engagement and its impact.

Initially, 18 staff members were contacted through email and invited to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used, and in total, 12 participants agreed to take part in the face-to-face interviews—four females and eight males. The female participation rate was low due to many declining to participate. Therefore, most of the participants ($n = 8$) of

this study were male. This sample reflects the realities concerning participant characteristics because participation was voluntary. Staff from various departments were interviewed, including the Departments of Sociology, Education, History, Mathematics, Statistics, Social Development, Nursing, and Community and Health Sciences (Dietetics); SRC; International Relations Office; Community Engagement Unit (CEU); and the Law Faculty (Social-Economic Rights Unit). For unanimity and ethical reasons, numbers were used: 1—Department of Sociology, 2—DoE, 3—Department of History, 4—Department of Mathematics, 5—Department of Statistics, 6—Department of Social Development, 7—Department of Nursing, 8—Department of Community and Health Sciences (Dietetics), 9—SRC, 10—International Relations Office, 11—CEU, and 12—Law Faculty (Social-Economic Rights Unit).

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Neuman, 2011). The themes were developed according to the context of the variables of the study. For anonymity and ethical reasons, participants were referred to by their departments. To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, colleagues from UWC examined the research process to ensure that the findings are consistent with reality (Neuman, 2011). Furthermore, measures were taken to maintain credibility. To this end, we made use of original information received from the participants. The data and the results only reflect the information shared by the participants.

Unraveling the Ongoing Debates

The attempt to encourage HEIs to actively participate in the life of their society brings forth the assumption that knowledge received should be applied for the benefit of society, hence the construct of “service” and engagement (N. Hall et al., 2015; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Mtawa et al., 2016; Preece, 2013). Despite the lingering uncertainties surrounding the constructs of “service” and “engagement,” (they) are key in the discourse of HEI’s and community engagement (N. Hall et al., 2015). It should be argued that while scholars use engagement for reasons related to teaching and research, they fail to explain how the engagement benefits the community. This raises questions about the claims made about the concept.

Although community engagement in HE discourse is not clearly understood, South Africa, since 1994, has made it one of its key priorities (DoE, 1997; Olowu, 2012). The ultimate purpose has been to nurture the community engagement directive delineated in the government’s White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE, 1997). In this light, it is about departing from the usual teaching, learning, and research to become more responsive and proactive to other societal challenges and to enhance the South African fledgling democratic institutions. While this is so, community engagement appears to be a directive rather than serving the actual purpose.

Evidence shows that there is great misgiving over what constitutes community engagement, besides the existing utopia surrounding the concept (Erasmus, 2014; Perold & Graham, 2017). In this light, community engagement has a pragmatic impact on students, the university, and those involved in research. Despite the criticisms, academics in South Africa’s HEIs support and actively engage with the communities (Bender, 2013). This seems to date back to the heady days of apartheid when a larger movement of students were actively involved in civic activities parallel to those of the social and political movements of the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, student organizations, such as the South African National Student Congress (SANSCO), National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), South African Students Congress (SASCO), and the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania (PASMA), have contributed immensely in terms of symposiums, panel discussions, and forum presentations at a range of community conferences. This is in an attempt to sustain the vision borne out by the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) regarding the role of HE in curbing the social inequalities in South Africa (Daniels, 2018).

A study by Bender (2013) indicates that institutions have a policy environment that supports community engagement. For example, the curriculum contains a variety of ways in which students engage with the community and the development of partnerships with communities beyond the university campus. In addition, the author points out that the Community–Higher Education–Service Partnerships (CHESP) model identifies three partners forming a triad: the service agency or provider, the community, and the HEI (Bernardo et al., 2012; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Naidu, 2019). This means that the service agency and community are continuous and have a purpose that needs to be understood. This is to say that the community within and outside the university seems to play a role in terms of research, publications, and other activities that relate to society and the country at large. This study provides practical examples based on the study’s findings.

The Intersecting Theory of Community Engagement

The theory emphasizes that the three main functions of HE—teaching and learning, research, and community engagement—are collaborative to some extent. It also acknowledges that there is some intersection between the three functions. The theory argues that service learning, as well as other forms of community-based study, should be at the center of the three functions of HEI. Bender (2013) opines that without interaction between the three roles, other components, such as community outreach and volunteerism, would exist as an isolated activity. The theory seeks to suggest that HEIs have since been a part of and continue to participate in activities that have great bearing on the communities (Larsen, 2015).

The theory further postulates that HEIs involved in community engagement is not a new phenomenon, as teaching, learning, and research have always concentrated on the community. HEIs already incorporated their various functions in community engagement. While other scholars call for alteration in the theory of engagement, this theory assumed that there is very little to change in the approaches used by HEIs in pursuing their core functions (Bender, 2013; Smith-Tolken, 2010). The theory further argues that the three functions of HEIs inherently have some social and interactive components that seek to confirm community engagement as a key priority area. The core functions do not depart strictly from the other functions, such as service learning, community-based research, and volunteerism. The above narrative justifies the relevance of this theory for the study.

Community Engagement Conceptualized

HEIs in South Africa have incorporated community engagement in their teaching, learning, and research. Bhagwan (2017) argues that the forms of community engagement in South African HEs are still establishing their roots, and empirical studies on what the engagement discourse truly entails are still evolving, while others have indicated that engagement universities should focus their attention on social development and what engagement should focus on (Muller, 2010). It should be understood that communities are unique and each challenge faced will be different; thus, a “one-size-fits-all” approach does not apply to community engagement. If an institution does well, community engagement can bring a wide range of benefits to those involved in a particular program, which includes local people. It can increase trust in and improve the reputation of a university, and deliver improvements to services. Although it is prudent to follow good practice and draw upon the best possible experience, it is similarly important to adopt an approach that takes into account local difference (M. Hall, 2010). As M. Hall (2010) articulates, there is no set pattern for community engagement. Moderately, there is a set of choices from which an institution can choose, depending on what is to be achieved and suitable to local situations.

Favish (2010) clarifies that community engagement is inadequate and fails to incorporate social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. Meanwhile, the Higher Education Quality Committee South Africa (2004; Johnson et al., 2018) notes that community engagement should be evaluated alongside teaching and research. This seems to indicate that community engagement goes beyond our understanding of the political, cultural, and economic dimensions. Netshandama (2010) elucidates that the community should be understood through activities such as service learning, quality considerations for institutional engagement with the local and broader community, and should as well be formalized within a university’s quality management policies. This

signifies that engagements are linked to teaching, learning, and research, as well as the allocation of sufficient resources and institutional recognition.

According to M. Hall (2010), the South African Government recognizes that community engagement, as one of the pillars of education, should be blended with teaching and research. However, to achieve these milestones, universities need to demonstrate social responsibility and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programs. The main purpose for the above narrative, according to M. Hall (2010), is to promote social responsibility and awareness among students regarding the role of HE in social and economic development, which is realized through community programs.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps important to note that knowledge exists in both the university and the community. Observing UWC’s approach, we argue that community engagement is about a combination of university knowledge and community experience to address social shortcomings and exclusion, and to promote the idea of a just society and equal society.

A number of scholars (Driscoll, 2009; Lazarus, 2008; Naidu, 2019; Preece, 2013) have asserted that a university’s services should be aligned to business activities by focusing on all those areas of society’s everyday lives that are of substantial significance and are typically seen as non-economically productive, for example, community well-being, voluntary activities, and the development of citizenship. These are all important aspects of our well-being. In other words, a university that realizes the significance of community engagement can add great significance to their teaching and research programs, which will then produce tangible benefits to their local communities and beyond.

Debates about community engagement within IHE indicate that it will take some time before the concept reaches its full potential. However, the literature shows that engaged universities are increasingly concerned with captivating immediate social issues, such as alleviating poverty, improving public health, achieving universal primary and secondary education, and enabling locally controlled economic development (Erasmus, 2014).

Pursuant to existing literature, IHEs do not seem to engage with broader communities. For example, given the number of faculties in some universities, it is difficult to measure which department or faculty engages with the community. As M. Hall (2010) asserts, you can have good policies, but the university leadership can end up playing a mere engagement game without necessarily contributing to the development of the university and the country at large. Finally, studies show (Erasmus, 2014; M. Hall, 2010) that community engagement is complex and problematic. However, the current study’s findings provide some interesting cues that could be vital in other universities as illustrated below.

Findings and Contextual Analysis of Community Engagement From UWC Perspective

The data of this study were thematically analyzed according to the themes of the research question, namely, UWC, students, and the community. We describe how the themes came up and what they mean, including examples from literature and data as evidence. Moreover, the literature was analyzed alongside the study's title and themes. According to Clarke et al. (2015), thematic analysis is about finding out something that relates to the participants' views, opinions, knowledge, and everyday experiences, for example, interview transcripts. We used this to closely examine the data to identify common themes/topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly came up (Braun et al., 2019). Finally, our conclusion shows how the analysis answered our research question.

UWC and Community Engagement

UWC has a reflective history of community engagement, which resonates with the establishment or inception of the institution in 1959. The apartheid state deliberately designed UWC for people classified as "Coloured" (Julie & Adejumo, 2014). Holliman and Daniels (2018) explains that UWC in the early years offered to students' limited training for lower and middle-level positions in schools, civil service, and other institutions designed to serve what was at the time—colored communities. Lalu and Murray (2012, p. 4) elucidate, "UWC was created as an institution that would be rendered aesthetically sterile by the apartheid planners." Arguably, it is these limitations and adversities that underlie UWC's well-established culture of community engagement. This is based on the framework of linking teaching with community service, the students, and lecturers, applying their knowledge and skills in a particular community to improve the lives of people's numerous engagement prospects.

Thomas (2010, p. 18) explains that following the 1976 Soweto uprising, the students of UWC adopted the following motion: "We reject the University of the Western Cape and all its manifestations." He stated, "[T]he only reason why we would remain at this place is to ensure that we find ways and means to get our communities to function better, and also to ensure that UWC becomes an open university" (Thomas, 2010, p. 12). The only reason why we would remain at this place . . ." The above statement is justification of UWC's dedication and mission to community engagement. In an interview with the International Relations Office:

It was stated that that when it comes to UWC, as part of its mission, community engagement is a priority and we are rooted in our community whatsoever we do, and on this basis we uplift our community in terms of identifying and solving problems of inequality and poverty among other issues. (Participant 10, personal communication, April 17, 2018)

As Larsen (2015) points out, HEIs should not only focus on teaching but should also concentrate on community well-being. In addition, a participant from the sociology department indicated,

I live in the poor and vulnerable community where unemployment and crime rate are very high. As an intervention, I work with the church and the local community-based organisation to empower young people through skills training, cleaning services, car wash, carpentry, and entrepreneurship. We also do psychosocial interventions for substance abuse and violence against women and children. (Participant 1, personal communication, April 20, 2018)

Consequently, the mid-1970s saw students at the university engaging with the community in projects such as a legal aid clinic in Hanover Park by law students, Social Science Society, and the Build a Better Society (BABS) project in Kewtown where students provided extra lessons in the community (Participant 3, personal conversation, February 11, 2019). The South African government after 1994 embarked on its policy of transformation and community engagement, becoming a fundamental agent toward achieving that goal. As Olowu (2012) mentioned earlier, the importance of all HEIs is to be proactive and responsive toward the reconstruction of the country by addressing the socioeconomic disparities prior to independence through community engagement programs (DoE, 1997). Heeding this call, UWC takes the concept as a matter of principle for running programs with the community through the established CEU (Daniels et al., 2013) on campus, which acts as the nerve of activities between the community and the institution. Through the CEU, UWC has established and maintained sustainable community development projects and programs as indicated earlier. A participant from UWC's CEU describes the purpose and functions of the CEU as follows:

Its work is connected to the policies of the country and transformation to imply that the community is UWC's priority since it used not only for research but also to assist disadvantaged communities. (Participant 11, personal communication, March 4, 2019)

In stressing the importance of this unit, UWC has risen from humble beginnings to boast a vibrant environment of seven faculties, several schools, and units, emphasizing that "each of these entities responds to the institution's vision and mission of carrying out projects which facilitate community development in one form or another" (Julie & Adejumo, 2014, p. 8).

Prominent within the community are the activities of the Law Faculty, which has been in existence since the early years of the institution. Through the Law Faculty, the Dullah Omar Centre and the legal clinic are carrying out outreach programs to assist people in disadvantaged communities, educating them about legal issues, their rights, as well as

those of others. They also provide legal counsel to people seeking to prosecute, and vice versa. In some instances, these arms of the Law Faculty have been involved in conflict resolution in various communities. A participant from the Dullah Omar Centre noted the following:

The centre's involvement with disadvantaged communities and the benefits the university and students get from community engagement through service-learning and research.

In the similar vein, this participant further points out:

The institute upholds the 1996 constitution of the republic especially on issues around social-economic rights. We are one of the few institutes globally that work directly with the community he further emphasises. (Participant 12, personal communication, March 13, 2019)

The above understanding seems to echo what Green (2011) pointed out as a deliberate shift from the rhetoric to promote community engagement to keenly inculcate into students some tenets of civic participation and engagement to curtail the mismatch between "community engagement" and what exists in reality. Furthermore, the work of the Dullah Omar Centre is pragmatic, because they work with vulnerable groups. Importantly, they ensure that people's rights to housing, water, sanitation, health, and electricity, among others, are upheld.

Highlighting other pivotal activities carried out by the Centre, another participant from the Law Faculty pointed out that:

In 2014, for example, we started assisting people in informal settlements to improve their housing conditions and it was done in respect with the constitution. We have the understanding that because of legal ignorance, people in the community have limitation to their rights in many ways. (Participant 12, personal communication, February 12, 2019)

The above analysis resonates with what Larsen (2015) and Preece (2013) referred to as "community well-being." This well-being seems to indicate that universities should captivate immediate social issues, such as alleviating poverty, housing, improving public health, achieving universal primary and secondary education, and enabling locally controlled economic development (Erasmus, 2014).

The above findings seem to disagree with M. Hall's (2010) notion of mere engagement without necessarily contributing to the development of the university and the country at large.

Another participant from the Dullah Omar Centre remarked the following:

In 2017, we started going back to communities we have worked with in places like Ilitha park in Khayelitsha and Joe Slovo, to ascertain the impact of our work. We noted that communities were able to write letters and demand for human rights issues

such as access to houses, health, education etc. Other than that, we introduced SA marriage rights assuming that knowing these rights would help them know where to go when domestic violence breaks out. We do this by engaging with the local councillors. (Participant 12, personal communication, March 13, 2019)

Generally, the study's findings reveal that community engagement is a continuous process, and in cases where improvement is not realized, one could perhaps think about alternative measures. As the excerpts from the participants show, effort needs to be made to train community leaders so that they are able to transfer the knowledge obtained to their community members. For example, a participant from the Dullah Omar Centre indicates that different aspects of socio-economic rights are explained in relation to the obligations of the Constitution. In addition, they go even further by educating communities about reproductive health rights and the role of government in this respect. Moreover, they empower them so that they can have meaningful engagement with the city, local councilors, and government. In this way, people are helped how to write petition letters and demand what is right for their community (Participant 12, personal communication, March 13, 2019).

In light of the above, the community provides an opportunity for research and service learning on the part of students and academics (Julie & Adejumo, 2014). In addition to the above, another participant mentioned,

Research being carried by academics is based on practical experience. "We don't sit in the office and analyse data, but rather, we do academic work based on lived experiences. It helps to understand what is really happening on the ground. For this reason, we write articles that reflect the lived experiences of everyday life." (Participant 5, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

The study's findings further reveal that involving students in their communities helps them identify a niche for their research projects. One such example is the Joe Slovo informal settlement in which government wanted to take away land. In this case, the state defense lawyers demanded research which the Dullah Omar Centre does through its students to ascertain the nitty-gritty of the problem. The study findings helped the city to resettle people in the area not far away from services, such as schools and health care (Participant 12, personal communication, March 13, 2019). This provides a classic example why community engagement is relevant to institutions of HE.

The Faculty of Community and Health Science is renowned for its commitment to community activities. The faculty immerses itself in the integration of both teaching and research with service, applied to high-priority community development projects (Daniels et al., 2013; Julie & Adejumo, 2014). A participant from the Department of Dietetics expressed the following:

There are several reasons why community engagement has become a very important aspect at UWC. For her “four key issues for community engagement at UWC are: leadership, community engagement, research, as well as teaching and learning.” Furthermore, the promotion of lecturers in her department depended on their participation in community activities which focus on service delivery on health-promoting and nutrition. (Participant 8, personal communication, February 11, 2019).

If lecturers apply for promotion, they need to provide evidence of their participation in community engagement (Bender, 2013; DoE, 1997; M. Hall, 2010). Moreover, as service delivery, the dietetics department has programs in schools focusing on health promotion and nutrition. For example, third-year nutrition students are mandated to work in the community and purposely create awareness about nutrition as well as communicable diseases, especially in Delft and Mitchells Plain where the disadvantaged communities are located. The department also has a module on community engagement for fourth-year students, who have a 9-week block for community engagement. During the block, the students work in primary health care and schools, especially early child development centers. Here, the department does interventions, assessments, and evaluations. They also work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). In this way, they intervene in nutrition and non-communicable diseases as part of their training for students. The third-year students then engage in programs on campus called Redesigning Campus and Nutrition Well-Being (Participant 8, personal communication, March 8, 2019).

Under this faculty is the Department of Nursing. The views of one of the participants from this department are succinctly captured in the excerpt below:

Our engagement with the community is about ploughing back to these communities since their students are community members themselves. She states that: “We run activities ranging from HIV education and other communicable diseases. We are quite involved in these areas and we closely work with the surrounding communities. We also send our students for practical work in both primary and tertiary health centres which fortunately are located within our broad communities in the city. We have been in this game for quite some time now and I may say we contribute immensely in the community.” (Participant 8, personal communication, March 8, 2019).

The findings indicate that the activities of this department speak to service learning, community outreach, and community-based research. In community engagement, a number of problems may be encountered in the process. The first notable challenge is providing feedback to the community after conducting research and studies. In this regard, the participants reiterated that there is a general lack of trust from disgruntled community members who lament that they seldom receive feedback from university students and staff after they

have completed their research/studies. As Olowu (2012) noted earlier, the studies of HEIs have to be responsive to the reconstruction of the country by addressing the socioeconomic disparities through community engagement programs (DoE, 1997; Jansen, 2010). Further community engagement adds great significance to the teaching and research programs, and can produce tangible benefits to their local communities and beyond (Driscoll, 2009; Lazarus, 2008; Naidu, 2019; Preece, 2013).

The general consensus from the interviews is for critical thought in the humanities, as they encounter leadership polarization or power struggles among leaders in some communities they work with. In such situations, they remain neutral because they deal with disadvantaged groups or social-economic rights of vulnerable groups. In such cases, they sort of play a conflict resolution role.

Working with some of these communities puts the lives of students and staff at risk. Some of these communities are a haven for criminals, and students and staff who engage with these communities become targets of these criminals. Participants from the dietetics department opine that the safety of students and staff is a matter of concern, as they sometimes do house-to-house visits in dangerous communities (Participant 7, personal communication, February 11, 2019).

The Community in Relation to HE

As one of the findings in this study, we view the community as having the key to the development of a win-win position in the university perspective. This means that the engagement with the university has a bearing on their well-being, and thus improves their lives in a number of ways, for example, the beneficial results ensuing from these engagements. Moreover, community engagement harmonizes Indigenous knowledge and encourages participation in terms of research activities. It is also about confidence building, which encourages them to participate in much-needed interventions. As a result, engagement is a give and take; an equally beneficial relationship with the university plays a role in incorporating HEIs in the mainstream of society, thus putting an end to their exclusion. We have observed that engagement should be awarded respect, recognition, and value in the academic environment, opening up multiple opportunities professionally and personally.

One participant from the Education Faculty remarked the following:

The role played by the community is that of building new institutions of civic society, developing new cultural values, training, and understanding the social economic dynamics that affect them. In this way, the university play an important role by creating prosperity through research and development and well as promoting culture. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 18, 2019).

The study's findings further show that the university can also play a significant role by encouraging better access for students from poor backgrounds.

Communities, especially those in close proximity to the university, think that HEIs do not do enough to sensitize young people about what the university has to offer. The proposed endeavor from these institutions is to have students and official visits to schools in these communities where Grade 8, 10, or 11 learners could be well informed about what tertiary education has to offer before they write matric (Participant 4, personal communication, April 17, 2018). Another participant from the Department of Social Development indicated,

The inaccessibility of HEIs to engage the community contributes to poor rate of students from the community who are attending the university. (Participant 6, personal communication, May 12, 2018)

Similarly, a participant from the Dietetics department proposed the following:

Based on the services, student and staff have to work with the community so that they can make a difference even if it is on a small scale. She finds some students and researchers not adhering to issues of ethics giving back feedback. According to her, there must be feedback to buy trust. (Participant 8, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

In terms of policy development, issues like the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) often take time to obtain the required signatures. To facilitate the process, it is suggested that the procedure surrounding the necessary paperwork, such as the MOU or ethics clearance, be moderated, so that students and researchers may find it easier to carry out important work with their communities (Jansen, 2010). MOU helps to balance the key functions and provides enormous expectations in university education, especially in relation to up-skilling and further provision of solutions to challenges facing contemporary society (Tshishonga, 2020).

What was prominent from the findings is a critique from communities on the issue of feedback from students, researchers, and academics who engage with these communities. Some of these community members have echoed their lack of trust toward students and academics that come to them to seek knowledge, but their findings are never known or implemented in these communities. Some participants call our attention to the idea that we must involve the community in what we do because they are our customers (Participant 3, personal communication, February 11, 2019).

The Student and Community Engagement in Relation to HE

Another finding is that because students belong to a particular community, they are an important part of it, and as such,

they cannot live in complete isolation. Students are bound to have links with other people who together form a community. Furthermore, they are the center in which academic activities revolve, and therefore, they affect engagement with the community in multiple ways, as outlined by Bhagwan (2017). In this study, it appears that the process enables learning in ways that enhance the objectives of the curriculum, especially by giving more meaning and value to students' theoretical knowledge. The practical experience obtained during the process of engagement enhances students' employability opportunities and widens their career choices after graduation (Bhagwan, 2017). Unfortunately, a participant from the SRC commented the following:

Students and researchers at times find it expensive to carry out work in certain communities because of issues like transportation and other logistics. The role of the university and its stakeholders could come a long way to provide some financial relief to student and academics working with communities. (Participant 9, Personal communication, March 6, 2018)

Naidu's (2019) opinion is that being in sync with societal realities and the challenges of sustainability and livelihoods inculcates among the students a sense of citizenship and responsibility toward the society they live in. Thus, they gradually evolve to be good ethical citizens, instead of merely a good workforce (Naidu, 2019).

The findings reveal that UWC students assist communities near the university's neighborhoods, such as Modderdam, Werkgenot, and Snake Park, where they built shanties and dug drainage ditches in the squatter camps located in these areas (Lalu & Murray, 2012). The activities of the students at UWC are also encouraged by the writings of Paolo Freire, especially his idea of "conscientisation," which refers to "arriving at a critical consciousness through dialogue and engagement with the contradictions of life and then arriving at an answer" (Lalu & Murray, 2012, p. 14). This idea has become popular among students as they come to the realization that their lived experiences, that of engaging with the community, did not only improve the lives of the students but also assisted them in their studies.

Base on the above understanding, we believe that community engagement could help students apply their theoretical knowledge and serve the communities around them, and thereby further enhance their practical know-how on how to deal with societal challenges. This combination of practical and academic knowledge seems to yield mutual benefits for students and the community alike.

Conclusion

UWC has since its inception embraced the concept of community engagement. Its early students and staff were involved with programs in the community that are still running today. This has been as a result of the institution's conviction to assist disadvantaged communities in the

surrounding vicinity as part of its mission statement, embracing the South African Government's policy of transformation through community engagement. UWC, through its CEU and seven faculties, provides an example of the successful transformation of the community as well as effecting an improvement in the academic lives of the students, researchers, university, and academics at the institution.

The study's findings show that substantive and systematic community engagement is paramount, because HEIs conduct research from the community in varied ways. Our research findings were analyzed and presented alongside existing scholarship. Theoretically, the article utilized community engagement theory, and the issues discussed in the text proffer tentative insights that warrant further exploration.

Community engagement has proven to be an important aspect of the development trajectory of HEIs, despite its complexities and challenges. In transforming HE in post-apartheid South Africa, the government encouraged the conceptualization and implementation of community engagement. Established to service the needs of its immediate community, UWC, from its inception in 1969, had its students and staff working in close collaboration with the community. In response to the government's policies toward community engagement, UWC established the CEU, which, in collaboration with the various faculties, built partnerships that benefited the community, the students, and the university as an institution, with the objective of producing and disseminating knowledge. The partnership between the university and the community has affected their well-being and brought improvement in their lives in various ways. The presence of students and researchers in the community has been of great assistance, especially in the medical and legal sectors where these services are provided free. The university and its students also benefit tremendously from their engagement with the community, as students are given the opportunity to conduct their field studies as well as gain experience in the practice of their profession. The community also provides a platform for students and staff to carry out research, which not only benefits academia but society as a whole. Although the study's findings show that community engagement is important and beneficial to both the university and the community, there are concerns raised by some members of the community who feel that the university is not as resourceful as it should be, especially when it comes to feedback from research conducted, and the educational development of young people in the vicinity area. Mindful of the fact that community engagement is an ongoing process and not a once-off event, there is room for strategic planning to create sustainable partnerships and collaborations between the university and the community, which will reduce and address the challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa. However, that being said, it is acknowledged that the unique experience of UWC might not reflect that of other HEIs in South Africa or across the African continent. Nevertheless, the outcomes and challenges that have resulted from its

community engagement endeavors could in one way or another serve as a point of reference for other institutions.

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