



Editorial: Higher Education Community Engagement

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The African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement (AJHECE) was born out of the firm belief that Community Engagement (CE) has a significant role to play in the repositioning of higher education in South Africa, Africa, and those countries across the globe that choose to learn with and/or from Africa. The notions of repositioning and reimagining higher education were often mentioned in issues of the *University World News* and webinars during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the prevailing view was that higher education institutions globally could no longer continue with the ‘business as usual’ ethos.

Community engagement, serving as the bridge between universities, local communities, and the broader society, is a continuous reminder to universities of their public good responsibility. Its presence as a core function or ‘third mission’ of higher education, to some extent, impels universities to make or consider making the paradigm shift from being ‘ivory towers’ to anchoring themselves in communities; from merely ‘educating for a living’ to ‘educating for life and living’. As institutions of higher learning, universities have a developmental and transformative role to play, given that the triple challenges of inequality, poverty and unemployment, and the pandemic of corruption are on the perpetual rise, specifically in South Africa and generally in the African context. Universities cannot remain aloof from the socio-economic conditions afflicting the majority of people in their contexts. And neither is it sufficient to merely educate students for careers only. The imperative to ‘educate for life’ and cultivate humanity became obvious when the COVID-19 pandemic revealed to the world that all of us and, especially the youth, need to be prepared for the uncertainties and challenges of life and be socially responsible.

Community engagement is conceptualised in a variety of ways depending on the context and history of the higher education institution. In South Africa, there is no nationally agreed upon framework to guide the implementation of community engagement in universities. The Glossary of the Higher Education Quality Committee’s Framework for Institutional Audits provides a rudimentary definition of CE as:

“... initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to the community. Community Engagement typically finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed at community needs and some projects might be conducive towards the creation of a better

environment while others might be directly related to teaching and learning and research” (HEQC, 2004, p.19).

Another definition of CE is as follows: “Community Engagement is a process of creating a shared vision among the community (especially disadvantaged) and partners (local, provincial, national government, NGOs, HEIs, businesses and donors) in society, as equal partners that result in long term collaborative programmes of action with outcomes that benefit the whole community equitably” (Hall 2010, p. 25). Such collaboration has the potential to empower both communities and students through shared knowledge and skills development.

Notwithstanding the various ways in which community engagement is understood, there are some common characteristics of community engagement that apply to all contexts, namely that community engagement:

1. contributes to the developmental and transformative roles of universities (The White Paper for the Transformation of Higher Education, 1997)
2. fosters the cultivation of humanity (Nussbaum, 1998)
3. gives effect to the values of Ubuntu (Kamwangamalu, 1999; Lefa, 2015; Letseka, 2013)
4. promotes an eco-systems perspective of life (Capra, 1997, 2004)
5. transcends the silo mentality of discipline-based learning only, and encourages multi-disciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and collaboration with community partners, through its nexus with teaching and learning, and research (Mokhele & Pinfeld, 2021)
6. promotes knowledge democracy, co-creation of knowledge, social justice, integral and ethical development, epistemic justice, and the understanding of different knowledge cultures through engaged research (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Heleta, 2016)
7. emphasises that relationship building, unity in diversity, understanding and mitigating power dynamics are some of the key factors to respecting and transcending differences such as class, culture and gender between the various role-players involved in higher education community engagement (Wilson, 2008)
8. educates students through its various forms such as engaged citizenry (volunteerism) and critical service learning to adjust and function in challenging, unpredictable environments (Mokhele & Pinfeld, 2021)

The notion of CE is not new. In Africa, former President Nyerere of Tanzania strategically linked university education in the late 1960s and 1970s with his nation-building goals of ‘ujamaa’ (people working together). This strategy included a university requirement that all students work in rural villages during their vacations as part of their degree assessment (Preece, 2013). Similarly, in South Africa, Steve Biko and fellow activists of the

Black Consciousness Movement were deeply engaged with communities through several community-based projects (Biko, 2004).

What is seriously lacking though, is a comprehensive knowledge trajectory of community engagement from the past to the present that will guide us towards a future direction. The aim of the AJHECE is to build a body of knowledge on community engagement based on philosophical, theoretical and praxis perspectives relevant to the African context while simultaneously encompassing and deepening knowledge on the above-mentioned characteristics of community engagement.

This first issue of AJHECE is a momentous one. It is the first journal of its kind, solely dedicated to Community Engagement in South Africa and the rest of Africa. AJHECE provides a space for academics and students as well as collaborative efforts with community partners, inviting contributions from the global South, and from partnerships between the global South and global North that contributes to building a corpus of knowledge on Community Engagement for the African continent.

Overview of the Contributions in Volume 1

Jacqueline Scheepers and her co-authors Lloyd Christopher and Stephen Harrison open this volume with a conceptual and theoretical paper that highlights ethical imperatives in community engagement. Key ethical concepts are explored to underpin established frameworks for governance and leadership; and core ethical principles such as sustainable development, integrity, and accountability are highlighted. The discussion then focuses on the application of ethics to the specifics of CE initiatives through Beauchamp and Childress's 'four principles' of non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and autonomy. The authors conclude with recommendations for the way forward which incorporates the inclusion of ethical frameworks in CE policies of universities; the establishment of ethics committees/forums to guide CE; and the need to heighten ethical consciousness among CE practitioners.

In the next paper, **Jacqueline Akhurst and her co-authors Nqobile Msomi and Anneliese Maritz** focus on the learning of trainee and intern psychologists' in the context of a partnership with the Assumption Development Centre (ADC), by reflecting on their experiences through community-based service learning (CBSL), which was a key element of the Community Psychology module in the Master's programme for training psychologists at Rhodes University. After introducing a model showing how students gradually move from sensitisation to social justice issues at undergraduate levels towards conscientisation as postgraduates, the paper reflects on the interface between the professional training programmes and the community-based partnership with the ADC. Following a background on the partnership's development, the structure of the CBSL and its integration into the curricula is presented. Evidence of its impact on both the first year master's students, and the second year Counselling Psychology Interns is provided. Data is drawn from the trainee psychologists' reflections and through a thematic analysis of the reflections, the

commonalities in the accounts of learning, as well as the deepened insights and shifts evident in the accounts are illustrated. The reported reflective learning is then considered both practically and theoretically, with recommendations for further development.

In her paper, **Claire McCaan** explores the connections between postcolonial feminism and community engagement in pursuit of university transformation of teaching and research in ways that broaden epistemic access, incorporate various knowledge systems, and ensure local relevance. She proposes that academic feminism, especially postcolonial feminism, and community engagement together may provide a way forward, as both projects serve to deconstruct the binary between 'knower' and 'non-knower', contributing to epistemic justice. She offers a preliminary exploration of the connections between community engagement and postcolonial feminism, and the ways in which a mutually beneficial relationship between the two may enhance each project's contribution to epistemic justice. Her article brings together literature on feminism and community engagement, linking this literature to the ideas of postcolonial feminism. The focus on postcolonial feminism specifically emerges from the recognition that universities do not only need to transform, but also decolonise. She supports her ideas put forward in this paper by interspersing it with her subjective memories and recollections of her lived experiences, spanning two universities and continents.

Peter Clayton's thought piece is a critical examination of Community Engagement as Publishable Scholarship. He writes that *"the structures that evaluate what counts as novel and fundable knowledge have evolved over a long timeline, primarily driven by traditional forms of explorative, descriptive, and critical analysis research. Community Based Participatory Research does not always fit evaluation and funding structures as comfortably as these models of research which are more established in the global academy, and requires careful navigation of, and some further fine-tuning to, review and accreditation processes, to stand beside more traditionally accepted scholarly practices in being readily recognised as producing original scholarly knowledge"*. The sections on the frequent challenges that engaged research projects face in navigating current scholarly review and accreditation processes and his pointers to the fact the formal review and accreditation processes clearly need some nuancing to better reflect the requirements of engaged research, should be of great interest to engaged researchers. He clearly indicates that the voices of engaged research practitioners in the spaces where these processes can be steered, must be heard.

An international contribution from the global South follows next with **Matias Flores and his co-authors Romina Colacci and Agustín Cano's** paper which focuses on critical community engagement, the Latin American ethos and its contributions to a Global South dialogue. The paper presents the history that constitutes the Latin American community engagement ethos, its prevalence in critical community engagement, and some experiences that illustrate a living paradigm still under construction that responds to the continent's needs. It concludes with an invitation to review the critical traditions of community engagement and promote the dialogue of experiences in the Global South. In this paper, community engagement is understood as a disputed concept throughout history that

can potentially house an ethical-political pedagogical project that questions traditional university models.

Shadreck Muchaku and Grey Magaiza's paper is titled, *Contemporary narratives on climate-induced migration and community engagement interventions in rural communities: A systematic literature review*. It focuses on climate change as a critical factor in migration and displacement and posits that global efforts to address the impacts of climate change on migration have not been able to address climate change-induced migration substantially. Their study, therefore, explored how local challenges can be leveraged in addressing global issues by conducting a systematic literature review to analyse the potential of local solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change on migration. Data was collected from full-text peer-reviewed journals published between 2010 to 2023 from the Scopus database. Atlas ti.23 was used to create codes and themes and then construct flowcharts that effectively demonstrated the importance of addressing issues at the local level when dealing with global challenges. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on how local approaches can mitigate the impact of climate on migration.

Samuel Fongwa and co-authors Stewart Ngandu and Bongiwe Mncwango's paper explores university engagement as local economic development by estimating the economic impact of a South African university using a Keynesian multiplier approach. They highlight that a largely neglected form of engagement is the contribution of the university to local economic development. Their paper contributes to closing that gap through an empirical study of a newly established South African university within a secondary city characterized by high unemployment, a declining economic sector, but with a growing staff and student body and high university expenditures. The study used a Keynesian-type multiplier impact model, to demonstrate the extent to which the university contributes (through a combination of direct and indirect activities of the university and its constituencies – staff, students, visitors, and local businesses) to the local municipality, which translates to about 19% of the provincial GDP. In conclusion, the authors propose that intentional engagement policies and practices from universities coupled with active commitments from local or provincial government and other external stakeholders could ensure the universities serve a stronger anchoring and developmental role within the city and region.

Concluding Remarks

Community engagement is the interface between higher education institutions and local communities. The contributions in this volume highlight the diversity of issues that community engagement focuses on, as an attempt to draw attention to the challenges that confront society in general and communities in particular, and the role that higher education can play in addressing these challenges. Of note is that the papers in this first volume of AJHECE have contributed to amplifying the characteristics of Community Engagement.

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