

Just Anchor Institutions: A Case Study of a University Promoting Inclusive Economic Growth

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Abstract

The concept of a just anchor institution emphasises the obligation of higher education institutions (HEIs) to contribute holistically to advance social justice in the local communities in which they are anchored, and can serve as a framework for HEI community engagement. Furthermore, within the higher education sector, community engagement initiatives can be positioned to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those related to economic growth. SDG 8, in particular, is focused on decent work and economic growth.

This paper explains how a South African university introduced a programme to promote inclusive economic growth through enterprise development and supplier development, utilising existing legislative frameworks to achieve this goal. The Masakhe Enterprise and Supplier Development Programme at Rhodes University encompasses economic, infrastructural, and educational components.

A justice perspective on the concept of an anchor institution is used to analyse the project and the broader role of the Community Engagement Division, focusing on principles of creating shared value, accessibility, visibility, and empowerment.

Data collection methods included interviews and documentation related to the project. A content analysis approach was used to analyse the data. The main findings of the study highlight the value of a just anchor institution framework for the holistic development of local communities in realising the SDGs. The case study also highlights the significance of a sustained relationship between the anchor institution and its local community, as well as how broad-based black empowerment legislation can serve as a source of funding for the inclusive economic development of small enterprises.

Keywords: *anchor institution, higher education, Sustainable Development Goals, enterprise development*

Introduction

As societies grapple with multifaceted environmental, social, and economic challenges, collaborative, trans-sector, and grassroots interventions and practices have been proposed as key drivers for sustainable development (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). On a global scale, the United Nations (UN) has developed a plan of action comprising 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals and targets to be achieved by 2030 (UN General Assembly, 2015). The importance of universities' contributions to the realisation of the SDGs is recognised (Kinol et al., 2023; World Economic Forum, 2025), and the SDGs are also relevant to universities as they can provide a means of framing priorities to ensure the university's goals are locally responsive and globally engaged, and for contributions to be formally recognised and measured (Bell, 2019). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), such as universities, are vital to achieving the SDGs due to their role in "human formation, knowledge production and innovation" (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021, p. 1). Through their education, research, outreach, campus operations and the campus experiences they provide, universities can potentially impact SDG areas such as the economy, societal challenges, the natural environment, policies, culture, and demographics (Findler et al., 2019). While there is an expectation that HEIs can and should contribute to realising the SDGs, the reality is that relatively few are doing so (Leal Filho et al., 2023), or at least, do not draw explicitly on the SDGs to shape their community engagement (CE) policy and practice (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021).

In South Africa, the public good orientation of universities is mandated in national legislation (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013; South African Government Department of Education, 1997). The development of Higher Education Community Engagement (HECE) in South Africa has progressed through key milestones, including the White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997), the Higher Education Amendment Act (DoE, 1998), the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001), and the HEQC founding document (2001), establishing CE as a core university function. Further initiatives, such as the 2006 Bantury Bay Conference and the 2010 Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP), consolidated its role in promoting transformation, sustainability and social responsiveness in South African universities.

At the same time, community engagement is not formally defined; there are no standardised measures of quality assurance or evaluation, and it is unfunded (Bank, 2018). Challenges to strategising and implementing CE activities in HEIs include some conceptual ambiguity with no shared understanding of what CE entails (Netshandama, 2023). There is also ideological resistance from some academics and leaders who often view CE as peripheral or a threat to academic autonomy, which limits its institutionalisation (Mohale, 2023; Saidi, 2023). Furthermore, structural and financial constraints, including limited funding, a lack of incentives, and competing priorities such as global rankings, hinder the implementation of CE initiatives (Dube and Hendricks, 2023; Vally, 2023). Netshandama (2023) critically examines the challenges and necessity of monitoring and evaluating

(M&E) community engagement (CE) in South African universities, arguing that while M&E is vital for accountability and learning, it faces deep conceptual and practical barriers. She advocates for a reflective, participatory, and decolonial approach to impact assessment that prioritises inclusivity, transformation and epistemic justice.

To overcome these challenges, universities are adopting socially innovative approaches to align their activities with both local needs and global challenges. For example, universities are key contributors to the local economy and can leverage their economic power to drive community engagement (Yamamura & Roth, 2023; Mbah, 2019). This paper focuses on a programme by a South African university that adopted a holistic approach to addressing inclusive economic growth, utilising existing legislative frameworks to achieve this goal.

Furthermore, this programme is analysed from the perspective of the university as a just anchor institution, which is introduced next. Thereafter, the aim and objectives of the paper are stated, followed by a discussion on the research methods employed. This is followed by the findings, which present the background to the programme, the role of community engagement in positioning the University as an anchor institution, the details of the project's formation and operation, and its outputs and outcomes. This is followed by a discussion of the positioning of community engagement for sustainability in general and inclusive economic growth in particular.

Anchor Institutions

The concept of an anchor institution refers to institutions that are rooted within a particular locality due to their physical investments and/or mission (Ehlenz, 2016). These institutions have a significant economic and social impact, providing jobs and services, and often facilitating innovation, education, and cultural activities. Given their prominence as employers and landowners, the future of the institution and city are intertwined, prompting the institution to intervene in the development and revitalisation of the community (Ehlenz, 2016; Rodin, 2005). The concept of anchor institutions emerged in the United States of America (USA) in the 1960s in response to the impact of neoliberal policies on communities facing systemic barriers to economic growth. Assets found in the community, such as infrastructure, green spaces and individual assets, underpinned development interventions. The concept has also been applied by the United Kingdom (UK) government in development initiatives (Smallbone, Kitching and Blackburn, 2015).

Roles and Contributions of Anchor Institutions

According to Jeffrey (2025), as anchor institutions, universities can either (1) build the local community, (2) broker knowledge and/or relationships, (3) serve as beacons to draw people to their site or point to a desired future, and (4) operate as a base for community engagement. The literature on anchor institutions offers examples of a diverse range of initiatives, with limited consensus on a common language to describe or research the

initiatives being undertaken (Garton, 2021). Despite the wide range of initiatives, anchor institutions frequently adopt collective impact initiatives (Kania & Kramer, 2011) or a collective impact approach, whereby they attempt to “align the goals, priorities, strategies and resources of the separate organizations in order to drive change simultaneously” (Allen et al., 2017, p. 3). By leveraging their resources and influence, and through collaboration, anchor institutions can drive regional growth, improve quality of life, and help address local challenges. In this way, universities can contribute to development by helping to design institutional arrangements that involve different strategies, such as organising sufficient resources and then mobilising these resources and power to enact the necessary institutional changes (Kumari et al., 2020).

The Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC) has identified four categories of anchor institution roles, namely: core institutional roles, economic roles, physical roles, and public purpose roles, with strategies for economic development including local procurement, employment, workforce development, business incubation and arts and cultural development (Ehlenz, 2018). These roles explain how anchor institutions in urban or rural communities can have a meaningful impact on disadvantaged areas to stimulate community revitalisation (Ehlenz, 2018). The framework focuses primarily on the economic impact of anchor institutions within inner cities or disadvantaged areas. It identifies seven key areas through which these institutions can stimulate community revitalisation. These areas are (1) purchasing goods and services, (2) employment, (3) developing real estate, (4) creating business incubators, (5) advising businesses and building networks, (6) workforce development, and (7) creating an enabling environment for skills development through co-curriculum development, internships and entrepreneurial training opportunities, as well as the attraction of venture capital.

Universities as Anchor Institutions

Universities and hospitals are most frequently cited as examples of anchor institutions (Garton, 2021). Early models of universities as anchor institutions emerged in the USA in response to the transformational role being adopted by inner-city universities (Bank, 2018). The University of Pennsylvania is often showcased as an example of a university recognising its anchor institution status, and it has had, over several decades, an impactful intervention in its surrounding neighbourhoods (Rodin, 2005). In other examples, the US land-grant colleges began to connect universities with regional economies and practical education. Metropolitan universities in the UK, particularly those located in depressed inner-city areas, also contributed to the development of the concept (Bank, 2018).

Anchor university models continued to evolve, incorporating urban renewal in the mid-20th century and embracing partnerships and reciprocal relationships with the communities in which they were located in the late 20th century (Perry & Villamizar-Duarte, 2018). The role of universities as anchor institutions is currently understood as a comprehensive approach that includes economic development, infrastructural

revitalisation, and the promotion of social, cultural, and democratic values. Drawing on the ICIC's model, Fongwa (2021) proposes a framework relevant to universities in the global South to act as anchors in their communities. This model emphasises holistic, historicised and contextualised development, ensuring that universities contribute to development beyond their institutional role and economic functions (Ubhayakar et al., 2017). Fongwa's framework presents a hybrid approach that captures four key roles for anchor institutions, whether in urban or rural settings, along with governing principles. Anchor universities have (1) a core institutional role, (2) an economic role, (3) an urban developer role and (4) a public good purpose. The principles include (1) establishing a clear mission and vision towards responsiveness, (2) embracing institutional partnerships, collaboration and networks, and (3) leveraging university resources and expertise for the greater community good. The model further describes the university's primary functions as an anchor, encompassing (1) providing educational services through teaching, conducting research and knowledge production, (2) acting as an innovation hub, (3) supporting human capital development within the region, and (4) nurturing business development and growth.

The implementation of the anchor institution concept has already been adopted by several South African universities as a model for community engagement (Saidi, 2021). In South Africa, universities were historically shaped by apartheid, which significantly influenced their contributions to social and economic development. Universities reinforced the inequalities within their specific regions through charity-based community development activities and by aligning their institutional, teaching and research functions with national policies of the time (Bank, 2018). In the post-apartheid era, a more traditional British university model was adopted, limiting the potential of universities to drive regional development. Instead, bodies such as the National Research Foundation were established to align and guide universities in meeting their development imperatives. The early implementation of these guidelines was particularly focused on teaching a new demographic of students, and on conducting research. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for universities to play a more active role in addressing systemic challenges in their surrounding communities through their core functions (Bell, 2019).

The Economic Contribution of Anchor Institutions

In this paper, the economic role universities can play as anchor institutions is of particular interest. The economic impact of universities can be substantial (Guerrero et al., 2015). This can take various forms, such as the wholesale transformation of institutions to become entrepreneurial universities (Corazza et al., 2024). While this idea is gaining momentum, it is still a contested concept (Garomssa, 2025). Several strategic challenges have also surfaced when implementing the change (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Klofsten et al., 2019). Other forms that the economic role of universities can take are the promotion of inclusive economic development (Dostilio, 2023) and the creation of innovation hubs (Youtie & Shapira, 2008). University research (Harris, 2021), business (Guerrieri et al., 2023) and

education programmes, including service-learning (Kebea, 2019), can also be designed to promote economic growth. Small and medium-sized enterprises have also been the focus of such economic initiatives, but relatively little research has been conducted, and that which is reported often indicates mixed success of these efforts (McCauley-Smith et al., 2022; Wang, 2021). Garton (2021) identifies four types of strategies universities have adopted based on the kind of capital they invest in, namely, financial, physical, intellectual, or human. Financial capital is most often leveraged through intervening in the housing market, prioritising procurement from local businesses, and funding community development (Garton, 2021).

The potential for anchor universities to contribute to economic growth, job creation, skills development and innovation aligns directly with the goals of SDG 8. One way the interrelatedness of the SDG goals has been represented is in the form of the ‘SDGs wedding cake’, with the three tiers of the cake representing the economy, society and the biosphere (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). The focus of this paper is SDG 8, which is contained within the top economic layer of the ‘SDGs wedding cake’. SDG 8 promotes “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN, 2015, p. 19). Among several concerns, it recognises the prevalence of informal jobs without social protections and the challenge of high levels of unemployment, particularly among youth, and identifies employment and income-generating programmes as important means to eradicate poverty (UN Division for Sustainable Development, 1992; UN, 2012). Furthermore, it recognises the importance of infrastructural development to support sustained economic growth, poverty eradication, and employment creation (UN, 2002).

The emphasis on place-based development, community engagement and utilising institutional resources for the benefit of the local community further supports the idea that anchor institutions play a vital role in achieving the aims of inclusive economic growth and decent work (UN General Assembly, 2015). Universities can also contribute to SDG8 by aligning knowledge and innovation policies to development objectives (Dellve et al., 2025; Kaplan, 2008).

Just Anchor Institutions and Social Justice

In this study, a social justice perspective is adopted, viewing the university as a just anchor. In creating the concept of a just anchor, O’Farrell et al. (2022, p. 2406), combine the concepts of an anchor institution with that of visibility and a civic university, and describe a just anchor as “institutions with the capacity for long-term strategies to deliver progressive social, economic and epistemic impacts, using the university as an archetype”. By implication, just anchor institutions should have economic, social, and democratic impacts. This position combines the anchoring and civic (Goddard et al., 2016) roles of universities, acknowledging that transformation is needed both within universities and in the surrounding communities to strengthen a participatory culture and democratic

processes, including community participation in knowledge production (O'Farrell et al., 2022). Visibility is a central consideration for a just anchor institution, which should not only maintain a physical presence in its communities but simultaneously should be accessible to the public (O'Farrell et al., 2022). In analysing the economic activities of a just anchor institution, the following principles guide socially just activity.

The first principle is shared value. As an anchor institution, the university shares economic value to benefit the community (Ehlenz, 2016; Rodin, 2005). The idea of the creation of shared value has been defined as "the strategic process through which corporations can solve a social problem which is aligned to their value chain while pursuing economic profits" (Menghwar & Daoood, 2021, p. 473). The creation of shared value also contributes to a positive reputation (Menghwar & Daoood, 2021). While the concept has had its share of criticism (Crane et al., 2014; Menghwar & Daoood, 2021) it is useful here in describing the mutually beneficial outcomes that anchor institutions pursue when tackling local social problems, including those related to the SDGs (Saenz, 2023). By creating shared value, a just anchor university therefore repositions the university and addresses critiques of it as an 'ivory tower' while also eroding the perceived divide between 'town and gown' (Hornby & Maistry, 2025; Saidi & Boti, 2021).

The second principle is accessibility and visibility. Genuine access to the university space, its resources and opportunities, is required to give meaning to the idea of shared value. By implication, in pursuit of justice, universities must seek ways to remove the invisibility that marginalised community members may have encountered in their interaction with the university and its spaces, due to power imbalances, prejudice or university structures (O'Farrell et al., 2022). In this paper, it is argued that accessibility extends beyond the university as a physical space and that to promote inclusive economic growth, economic opportunities should also be accessible. Legislation and university policy can serve as a vehicle for promoting accessibility. Specifically, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act was first promulgated in 2003 and then amended in 2013 (Forbes & Rust, 2019). Its aim was to achieve economic transformation through increasing the inclusion and economic participation of black people in economic activity. The Act also provides for the development of a scorecard consisting of eight weighted elements, including skills development, preferential procurement, and enterprise development (Arya & Bassi, 2011). This scorecard, therefore, incentivises organisations to set aside funds for empowerment initiatives.

The third principle is empowerment. To promote shared value and access to economic opportunities, universities need to empower the broader community through human capital development. Garton (2021) highlights the importance of universities investing in intellectual or human capital. Furthermore, Fongwa (2021) highlights the importance of anchor institutions supporting the development of human capital.

This paper analyses the case of a university as a just anchor institution that has expanded its economic role to ensure a more inclusive and holistic approach to sustainable development. The study describes how the Masakhe Project, implemented at Rhodes University, has

leveraged its financial capital, targeted microenterprises and collaborated with existing initiatives to contribute to SDG 8 in its local community. The Masakhe Project provides the opportunity to analyse the development of partnering relationships within Rhodes University, as a higher education institution, with community partners and beneficiaries. This study employs a justice perspective of anchor institutions as a framework to analyse the structuring of the university's contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on SDG8. To better understand Rhodes University's contribution to SDG8, this study examines the role that Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) plays in positioning the university as a just anchor institution through the Masakhe Project. The study is further concerned with whether RUCE through the Masakhe project contributes holistically and collaboratively to the sustainable development of Makhanda, particularly its inclusive economic growth.

Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to analyse, from the perspective of the theory of just anchor institutions, how Rhodes University, through the Masakhe Programme, has contributed to the upliftment of Makhanda in a sustainable and holistic manner. Specific research objectives are:

1. To describe the approach adopted by Rhodes University to the sustainable development of the city.
2. To describe and analyse the role of community engagement in positioning the university as a just anchor institution for sustainable development.
3. To describe the formation and operation of the Masakhe Project to promote inclusive economic growth.
4. From a social justice perspective, to analyse the outputs and outcomes of the Masakhe Project regarding the social, economic, physical, and educational wellbeing of residents of Makhanda.

Research Method

This study employs an exploratory case study method, which utilises an inductive approach to build understanding through the analysis of data (Yin, 2014). This interpretivist approach to understanding Masakhe ESD as a case study enables a nuanced investigation of how stakeholders in the project understand and conceptualise it. The research was initiated by the project committee to investigate the project's progress and identify areas for improvement, and was conducted by two committee members. Before collecting data, ethics approval was obtained from the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: 2024-8114-9176).

Data were collected through eleven qualitative interviews, with interviewees purposefully selected. Interviewees included members of the Masakhe Programme committee, suppliers, and project beneficiaries. Three members of the committee were interviewed because they were involved in initiating the programme, were responsible for procurement in the university, or represented the community partner responsible for identifying potential beneficiaries from the local community. The interviews with committee members gathered data on the project's origin, decisions regarding its structure, agenda, functioning, record-keeping and future plans. The researchers were somewhat familiar with some of this information, but not all of it, and the insights they already had served as a common point of reference to build rapport and a common understanding of the project's origins, membership, and functioning. Interviewees also included a representative from the Department of Health, three individuals who had benefited from supplier development as existing suppliers, and three beneficiaries who had received enterprise development. In the case of beneficiaries, the interviews focused on the history of the enterprises, the challenges they had encountered, the needs that had been identified, the type of support and resources received through the project, and the project's impact on the enterprises. Here, too, the researchers had some background knowledge of the support given to the enterprises, which served as a common point of reference.

The researchers had also met most of the interviewees on at least one prior occasion. At the start of the interview, the researchers reminded the interviewees that they were members of the project committee. Power relations were therefore evident, as the beneficiaries were informed that the researchers had been involved as committee members in making decisions about the allocation of project resources and support to them. The researchers, therefore, carefully explained that while they were there to gather information on the project's impact on the beneficiaries, the support they had received would not be prejudged by the findings. Equally, the researchers were cautious not to set any expectations of future direct benefits for participating in the research, and explained that the findings focused on identifying ways to improve the project in general, rather than constituting an analysis of the future needs of the enterprises. At the same time, they did undertake to convey any specific feedback the beneficiaries wanted to highlight to the committee.

The interview data were complemented by analysing documentation related to the project, including concept documents, meeting minutes, logos, and brands developed for beneficiaries, as well as other social media related to the project. Documentation played a significant role in shaping an understanding of the project's structure and its outputs. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse both the interview and documentation data to address the research aims and objectives of this study (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative content analysis combines openness with theory-guided investigation to understand data generated through mixed methods (Kohlbacher, 2006). The inductive analysis aims to discover underlying themes or patterns and begins without defined categories (Elo et al., 2014; Spiggle, 1994; Vears & Gillam, 2022). A process of reading and rereading the data was followed by a process of determining emerging themes. The data was further analysed using

Notebook LLM software to refine the emerging themes (Krippendorff, 2004). Four themes emerged and are presented in the following section.

Findings

This section of the study's findings begins by describing the context of the programme, followed by an analysis of Rhodes University's role in addressing SDG 8 and the Community Engagement Division's role as an anchor institution. Finally, the operation of the project and its outcomes are analysed from a social justice perspective.

Local Context of the Programme

Rhodes University is a public university situated in a largely rural setting in the city of Grahamstown (now known as Makhanda) in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. In the 2022 census, the city had an estimated population of about 100 000 (Lang, 2023). Unemployment is estimated to be around 75% (Matai-Sigudla & Masuku, 2024), with most (i.e. 86.5%) of the Gross Value Added (GVA) within the city's municipality coming from the tertiary economic sector, which includes Rhodes University and private schools (Makana Municipality, 2022). Currently, significant hindrances to local economic development include poor governance, inadequate service delivery, limited state support, and a small industry base. SMMEs consider the municipality's performance in governance, financial management, and service delivery to be "abysmal," having a negative impact on business performance and revenue (Nyaku & Morrow, 2024). The Makana Municipality has regularly received disclaimed audit opinions (Auditor-General South Africa, 2025). The Executive Mayor and Municipal Manager have been subpoenaed to appear before the South African Human Rights Commission due to service delivery failures (South African Human Rights Commission, 2025). The degree of dysfunction of the municipality has a knock-on effect on the establishment, operation and sustainability of enterprises in the city.

The Role of RUCE in Positioning the University as an Anchor Institution

To meaningfully fulfil its community development mandate and to respond to its community's challenges, Rhodes University established a division for Community Engagement in 2010 (Dano, 2015). Recognising the inextricable realities and futures of the university and Makhanda, Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) aims to align the university's resources with the needs of the local community in Makanda (Matyobeni and Maistry, 2023). In effect, RUCE exercises the anchor institution roles and functions on behalf of the university. The relationship between RUCE and the community-based partner organisations evolves over time. Participants in the study describe RUCE as an initiator, facilitator, and strategic partner of projects, serving as a resource for

community engagement activities across its campus and in Makhanda. For example, one community-based participant describes how access to the university has evolved through their initial relationship with RUCE:

Initially, we used to work with [RUCE] predominantly. Now it has grown to working with different departments - the Psychology Department, the Linguistics Department, the School of Journalism and Media Studies, and the Business School, just to name a few. It has matured ... Now, we go directly to [Rhodes] departments and request what we need... We continue to work with Community Engagement, and we're convinced they're a strategic partner for us.

RUCE programmes tend to be categorised under one of four interrelated forms of community engagement: engaged research, service learning, engaged citizenry, and social innovation and enterprise development (RUCE Strategic Plan 2020–2025). Engaged research is an approach to knowledge construction that is collaborative and involves community members at various aspects of the research design and process. Service learning involves co-designing teaching programmes with communities to facilitate practical learning experiences for students. Engaged citizenry involves extra-curricular opportunities for students to volunteer at a community-based organisation in a structured programme. These programmes are designed to holistically contribute to the development of community organisations and student volunteers. Social innovation and enterprise development was adopted in 2019 as a pathway for changemakers to build their skills and competencies and to establish commercially viable, sustainable enterprises and social organisations. Through these forms, RUCE seeks to embed community engagement activities in academic and support departments and divisions, as well as support community-based organisations and local enterprises.

The Sustainable Development Goals have been pivotal in the development of RUCE programmes and partnerships. In 2017, the division implemented its Knowledge Project, which provided a framework for assessing the impact of, and improving communication about, contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals in Makhanda. The Knowledge Project is aligned with the 17 SDGs with the African Union's *Agenda 2063*, the South African *National Development Plan* and the Rhodes University *Institutional Development Plan*. The purpose of this is to contextualise and localise the SDGs, and provide a unified framework for assessing how University projects are contributing to the 17 goals. It further enables the development and implementation of data-driven and sustainable programmes.

SDG 4 is about quality education (UN, 2015). In 2015, Rhodes University committed to establishing Makhanda as a city of educational excellence. The Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative was established in 2015, led by RUCE, the Faculty of Education, and the Centre for Social Development, as well as a community-based NPO, GADRA Education. The Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative was established to leverage community-university partnerships to achieve a shared goal of improving educational outcomes in Makhanda, and enhancing the chances for local high school learners to eventually enrol in Rhodes University. An Education Summit held in 2024 reflected on the initiative and set a vision

for the city of Makhanda to emerge as the leading academic and educational centre and city in South Africa (Rhodes University, 2024). To contribute holistically to the Makhanda ecosystem, Rhodes University extended this education-focused model to establish partnerships in economic development and health. The Masakhe Project is the primary initiative related to economic development.

The Formation and Operation of the Masakhe Project

SDG8 is focused on decent work and economic growth, which is also supported by infrastructure development (United Nations, 2002). In 2022, Rhodes University implemented the Masakhe Enterprise and Supplier Development Programme (ESDP) to address inclusive economic growth through enterprise development and supplier development. Through Masakhe, provisions of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (B-BBEE) serve as a vehicle for the investment in skills development, supplier development and enterprise development in Makhanda. Given that the mandate of the Masakhe project and the source of funding were related to B-BBEE, the Committee sought ways to develop existing suppliers to Rhodes University, as well as to foster other enterprises that may become suppliers in the future. This focus on supplier and enterprise development was complemented by skills development initiatives aimed at enhancing skills related to managing suppliers and enterprises. The Committee outsourced the delivery of skills training to various training providers. While the programme primarily aims to contribute to the revitalisation of the economy by investing in small businesses, the project includes infrastructural and educational components.

Masakhe originated from the strategic thinking within RUCE to improve the university's impact on community development, specifically in the area of economic empowerment. Initial informal discussions between RUCE and Rhodes University Infrastructure and Operations division (I&O) highlighted several concerns impacting the economic sector in Makhanda. Firstly, there was no coordinated system for reporting on university-wide initiatives and contributions to economic and supplier development, which was impacting the university's capacity to improve its B-BBEE rating. Further, there is a limited number of statistics and academic research collected about Makhanda, which would inform the development of data-driven development programmes. Finally, obtaining funding to conduct research and implement projects was a challenge. The B-BBEE rating ultimately provided a lever to invest in the community, focusing on developing local suppliers and enterprises. One of the university-based participants noted the impact of the university's rating on academic functions:

When the impact of Rhodes being non-compliant [one] year started having an impact on the academic departments, specifically in terms of fundraising for them for their research, there was a huge request for the university to prioritise this rating.

When funding to improve enterprise and supplier development was eventually made available to I&O, they partnered with RUCE and formed the Masakhe ESDP Committee, which is led by the Infrastructure and Operations Division. Other partners include the Rhodes Business School and the Assumption Development Centre (ADC), a socio-economic development NGO. The ADC (of which Rhodes is a founding member) contributes a strong network within the local community and existing relationships with businesses. The committee, comprising representatives of the partner entities, meets regularly to identify potential projects, coordinate project activities, monitor their implementation, and review outcomes. The committee also acts as a conduit, helping businesses navigate the requirements for becoming university suppliers, including registration processes and understanding procurement procedures. While more time-consuming, this collaborative and strategic process is central to the programme. For instance, one participant noted,

It would have been very easy to just take the R1.6 million and just choose three suppliers, write them each a check and say, 'Okay, report the spend.' But this was what we wanted - for it to make an impact.

Masakhe operates through a collaborative framework among the committee and its stakeholders. The ADC plays a crucial role in identifying existing small businesses within the Makanda community that could benefit from the project. These are often businesses with which the ADC has already established a relationship and a level of trust. For example, the owners of some of the businesses may have participated in capacity-building programmes at the ADC or RUCE. The ADC has criteria that help to determine eligible businesses. These include the entity having existed and operated for some time, being a legitimate business, and having the potential to grow. The unique and specific needs of these businesses are then investigated by the committee. This can include requirements for equipment to improve their services or production, training to improve business skills, and support for branding and marketing to increase visibility and professionalism. The ADC is central to this needs assessment, often through ongoing communication and understanding of the businesses' challenges and aspirations. Furthermore, the ADC was contracted to help identify prospective businesses and assist with the project's administration, including contracts, quotations and reports. The Masakhe ESDP committee then facilitates the provision of various forms of support based on the identified needs. In some instances, the committee has provided funding for renovations to business premises to create a more professional and conducive working environment. The role of the ADC is central to the Masakhe programme, which involves maintaining a network of small township-based enterprises. For example, one of the business owners involved in the programme recalls the ADC as being recommended to him by members of the community:

I met a guy who has a restaurant who was part of the ADC. He advised me to go to the ADC to get some support because I struggled with admin... I went to the ADC, and I was blown away

with all of the services that they had. They decided to adopt me as one of the businesses that they work with and put through their programmes.

Conducting this research, and interviewing beneficiaries and partners, is part of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Masakhe Project. This research, therefore, contributes to identifying areas for improvement and informing future strategies. Feedback gathered from this research is also shared with the Masakhe ESDP committee to refine the project's approach and ensure it continues to address the evolving needs of the businesses.

The Outputs and Outcomes of the Masakhe Project

Several project outputs can be measured or observed. Firstly, over its first two years, the direct financial contribution to the local economy has totalled R2.6 million. Secondly, community infrastructure has been upgraded, specifically through the renovation and expansion of the Joza Clinic (an R800 000 investment), a government health facility that ensures patient privacy and confidentiality. The renovations to the Joza Youth Hub's building are currently under construction. The Joza Youth Hub offers facilities utilised by several local NGOs. Investment in infrastructure has also benefited the small businesses. One owner commented, *"Our space was small, and we didn't have the funds to make the space big. And then here comes Masakhe! They gave us the chance to renovate the place."* Thirdly, several businesses have been upgraded, and some have received new equipment. A number of training courses were delivered, including a financial literacy course for artists, enterprise development and business development consulting short courses, and a hospitality and culinary course for 14 youth, who also received work placements for experiential learning. Branding was described as *"one of the challenges that businesses are facing in the township. We can't easily see that there is a business there if there's no board outside."* A total of 14 SMMEs received marketing and branding support, as well as business marketing materials, including 12 that received large Chromadek signs. Sixteen early childhood development centres underwent site upgrades and were also provided with branded school stationery materials, including report cards, certificates, and report folders. This is described as *"huge for the kids,"* as it contributes to professionalising and generating income in an under-subsidised sector. Three sports coaches working with primary schools each received a monthly financial support of R5,000.

Some of the outcomes of the Masakhe Project are evident, including the growth of several businesses in terms of customer numbers and sales revenue, with at least three of them each employing two additional employees through the Skills Employment Fund (SEF) programme. One owner notes that the SEF employees also benefit from ADC programmes that target youth. *"I do hire youth; they go through the ADCs programmes themselves."* The Joza Clinic is now able to better serve the Joza community, with various health services being enhanced, including maternal child and women's health services, a dedicated office for confidential HIV counselling, and dedicated space for allied services (including dieticians,

physiotherapists, and occupational therapists), which improves “*confidentiality and privacy*” for patients who previously had to receive services in the passages of the clinic. Finally, an outbuilding was provided for the primary healthcare team to conduct their administrative work, so they no longer had to use the kitchen for this purpose. Not surprisingly, the expansion and upgrading of the Joza Clinic has had a positive effect on staff morale and “*restores dignity*” for patients.

While some positive outcomes are emerging from the Masakhe Project, the enterprises still face challenges to their growth. For example, infrastructural problems remain, such as an unreliable or inadequate electricity supply. There is also a limited local market for goods and services. Furthermore, some enterprises are also struggling to formalise their business and have inadequate financial administration, record-keeping and reporting. This means that they have not yet been able to secure a tax compliance certificate and, therefore, do not yet qualify to be a supplier to the university or other large organisations and government departments.

Discussion

Four issues are discussed here, namely, (1) positioning Rhodes University as an anchor institution through its Community Engagement (RUCE) division, (2) the contribution of higher education community engagement to addressing the SDGs, (3) the approach to funding the Masakhe project, and (4) the Masakhe Project as giving effect to the university as a just anchor.

The research findings describe how RUCE has positioned Rhodes University as an anchor institution to contribute holistically and collaboratively to the sustainable development of Makhandla, including its inclusive economic growth. Drawing from Fongwa (2021), four aspects of this positioning are discussed. Firstly, the case study demonstrates how, through its diverse range of programmes, RUCE has enabled Rhodes University to serve as an anchor institution in its community by fulfilling public purposes and economic roles in addition to its core institutional role (Ehlenz, 2018). Very evident in the Vice-Chancellor’s Education Initiative, Rhodes University fulfils a public good role (Fongwa, 2021). This and other activities are coordinated by RUCE but occur throughout the University. In this way, through RUCE, the University leverages its core institutional role (Fongwa, 2021) to contribute to community development. Furthermore, through some of the construction projects approved by the Masakhe Committee, such as the expansion of the Joza Clinic and the renovation of the Joza Youth Hub, the University is fulfilling its role in urban development (Fongwa, 2021). However, it should be noted that its main contribution as an urban developer is as a major landowner and the real estate developer of its campus, which is located on the western side of the city, away from the poorer economic areas. Consequently, from a city-wide perspective, urban development is limited and unequal. Finally, the economic engine role (Fongwa, 2021) is being developed through the Masakhe

Project. In summary, there is evidence of all four dimensions of Fongwa's (2021) place-based development.

As a second issue, the research findings also highlight contributions to some of the SDGs, particularly SDGs 4 and 8. The case study has illustrated the economic role a university plays as an anchor institution by promoting inclusive economic development (Dostilio, 2023), supported by educational programs (Kebea, 2019), and by investing in financial, physical, intellectual, and human capital (Garton, 2021). Furthermore, the range of activities that are included in the Masakhe Project illustrates a holistic approach to inclusive economic development. While not all 17 SDGs have been considered here, from the perspective of the 'SDGs wedding cake' (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016), community engagement has so far emphasised the economic and societal tiers, with the biosphere largely neglected. This presents an opportunity for future development of community engagement initiatives. For example, clean water and sanitation (i.e. SDG 6) are a priority, given the prolonged water crisis that has arisen in Makhanda due to poor service delivery and infrastructure failure in the city (Baliti, 2024; Mbatha, 2025). In addition, it has been argued that universities have unique opportunities to address climate action (i.e. SDG 13) and climate injustices (Kinol et al., 2023).

Thirdly, by using B-BBEE as a vehicle for inclusive economic growth, Rhodes is positioning itself as an economic engine (Fongwa, 2021) in Makhanda, having amended its procurement policies to prioritise local procurement as a means to stimulate community revitalisation (Ehlenz, 2018). Furthermore, by linking economic development to funding that is channelled through the application of B-BBEE, the university has developed a unique funding model for community engagement activities of an economic nature. However, this approach could also limit the range of economic activity that is possible. That is, given that the source of funding is linked to B-BBEE, supplier and enterprise development activities are prioritised, and the logic adopted is to formalise these enterprises. Recent debates have highlighted the value of South Africa's informal economy, which is estimated to be worth R900 billion annually (Blaauw, 2025; Mkentane & Khumal, 2025). This raises questions of how to attain the SDGs in developing economies and whether the local economy is best served by stimulating informal economic activity or formalising it (Afful et al., 2025).

Finally, the Masakhe Project is discussed as giving effect to the concept of a just anchor. The initiation of the Masakhe Project is, in itself, an acknowledgement of the university's role as a just anchor institution, and its commitment to the revitalisation of the local economy (Ehlenz, 2016; Rodin, 2005) and of creating shared value (Menghwar & Daood, 2021). Furthermore, RUCE has developed a particular approach to its community engagement activities. The conception and implementation of projects are characterised by the formation of collaborative partnerships, or collective impact initiatives (Allen et al., 2017; Kania & Kramer, 2011), with partners both within the Rhodes community and in the city more generally, thereby upholding the principle of accessibility and visibility. It should be noted that the B-BBEE scorecard has not been approached from a mere compliance perspective or treated as a 'tick-box exercise'. Instead, there has been a sincere attempt

to adopt a broad-based approach to developing and supporting a range of enterprises on a long-term and relational basis. However, many of the beneficiary enterprises are still struggling to formalise their business so that they can access Rhodes University and other large organisations. While these attempts to promote access to the university are reflective of being a just anchor, the fact that this is proving to be a bridge too far for some enterprises raises concerns about aligning the capacity of informal businesses with the stringent university requirements. Similarly, in other settings, formalised institutional procedures of universities have been identified as an obstacle to the more informal and agile needs of community organisations, impeding access (Barry et al., 2025). These concerns question how the principle of empowerment can be strengthened in the Masakhe Project, and the appropriateness of the enterprise formalisation approach that has been promoted.

Conclusion

The case study illustrates how, as an anchor institution, university resources can be leveraged holistically by using community engagement as a base to build community (Jeffrey, 2025). Rhodes University has implemented community engagement as a vehicle for achieving some of the SDGs and demonstrating its role as a just anchor institution, following principles of creating shared value, promoting accessibility and visibility, and empowering community members. Through its Community Engagement Division (RUCE), Rhodes University implements a holistic and collaborative approach in a wide range of programmes, fulfilling its core institutional role as well as its public purpose, urban development, and economic roles (Fongwa, 2021). This study further demonstrates how, in a funding-constrained environment, the B-BBEE legislation can be used as a vehicle to channel funding towards broad-based economic and community development. The study also contributes to the understanding of anchor universities, and the holistic role universities in South Africa can play in the development of their broader communities.

With SDG 8 in mind, the Masakhe Project has also promoted inclusive economic development through the collaborative efforts of Rhodes University, the ADC, and other partners. This project has provided various forms of support to small businesses in Makanda, resulting in tangible benefits, including improved visibility and professionalism, formalisation of businesses, increased income, and job creation. The project has also contributed to broader community development through the development of infrastructure.

However, challenges have also been encountered, and several implications for the project arise from the study. The project requires ongoing monitoring and support to ensure its long-term viability and realise its diverse impacts. Relationship-building is central to the process, enabling the leveraging and sharing of resources. Additionally, ongoing support for businesses is necessary beyond the initial project phase, given the multifaceted challenges they face. Developing a log frame, as well as monitoring and evaluation and learning structures, is also necessary. Finally, adopting a more comprehensive approach to

contributing to the SDGs and extending the focus of Masakhe to address the biosphere can strengthen the outcomes and impact of the Masakhe Project.

More research is also recommended. Economic studies of Makhanda can contribute to a better understanding of the local economy, including its informal dimensions, which in turn will enable more strategic and focused actions to be identified that will advance SDG 8 in Makhanda. Additionally, a longitudinal study of the Masakhe Project would provide insight into whether the ongoing support to enterprises translates the project's outputs and outcomes into longer-term impacts. Finally, to better understand the role of Rhodes University as an anchor institution and the holistic approach to development adopted by the university, more comprehensive research on RUCE and its programmes is recommended.

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