Grounded in Place, Connected to the World: Community Engagement at the Heart of the African University

Claire McCann, Deputy Editor, University of Oxford
Margie Maistry, Chief Editor, Rhodes University

Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves [...] After we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 87).

What does a distinctly 'African' university look like in the 21st century? What is the purpose of these higher education institutions? The mid- to late-twentieth century was a period of reimagination and contestation about the character and role of the university as countries on the African continent regained their independence. At the heart of these debates was a tension between 'excellence' and 'relevance', or the simultaneous need to be "responsive to the local and engaged with the global" (Mamdani, 2019 p. 16). This tension was not only about the outlook of universities but also the type of graduate produced: the 'global scholar' whose ideas transcend national boundaries and imagine new possibilities, or the 'public intellectual' connected and committed to society (Mamdani, 2018).

By tracing the twentieth century debate about the purpose of the African university between Walter Rodney, writing from the University of Dar es Salaam (est. 1963) in Tanzania, and Ali Mazrui, writing from Makerere University (est. 1922), Mamdani (2019) illustrates this contestation. In this debate, Rodney indicated that universities should join the struggle to consolidate national independence and effect social justice, whereas Mazrui called attention to the authoritarian tendency of those in power and the danger this posed for university functions of teaching and research, as well as their capability to hold the state to account. In this comparison, Mamdani highlights the tension between universities as sites of public engagement, where intellectuals are embedded in the place from which they research (Rodney), and as sites where scholars are free to become fascinated by ideas transcending national boundaries (Mazrui). A core question emerged: should African universities serve as sites of public engagement or as havens for unfettered intellectual inquiry?

Although this debate indicates opposed viewpoints about the purpose of universities, these positions need not be mutually exclusive. Instead, this contestation indicates a need to balance knowledge that reflects local society and the global scholarly community, so that one can simultaneously be a global scholar *and* context-based public intellectual. A balance

between these two purposes is also essential for the functioning of universities: they enable an embeddedness in place as well as the development of relationships of solidarity (Ajayi et al., 1996). They are both locally responsive and globally engaged.

In this light, higher education community engagement holds promise. Defined as the mutually beneficial relationships between universities and surrounding communities in pursuit of co-generated knowledge and solutions to societal challenges, community engagement anchors universities in their contexts. It affirms that they are not detached 'ivory towers' but institutions embedded in and dependent on place (Almjeld, 2021). By recognising the knowledge of surrounding communities, community engagement signifies the value of relational ways of understanding and meaning-making through context. In this sense, universities are called to be present *in* and *for* their localities, contributing not only knowledge but, as socially responsible institutions, to livelihoods, opportunities, and capacity-building.

Relationality and reciprocity are central. Universities cannot simply respond to local needs at a distance; they must be locally embedded, attentive to histories and to the power imbalances that shape relationships with communities, and honour agency and knowledges within communities. Engaged research practices, which draw in communities as knowledge co-creators, are especially powerful. Many community-based research approaches have roots in Africa and the Global South more generally and provide a guide for democratised knowledge production practices (Lepore et al., 2021). At the same time, community-based engaged research practices, like all human collaborations, are rarely perfect: these partnerships are complicated and often contradictory, but are significant as productive exercises of imagining alternative ways of knowing (Martinez-Vargas, 2020). They call on researchers to imagine and innovate more equitable ways of doing research in ways that are ethical and relevant to the places and landscapes in which universities are embedded.

Yet place itself is never static. It is constructed through the lived experiences of people, and its meanings are dynamic and fluid. Places are woven together through evolving practices and movement (of people and knowledges) that extend across communities, institutions, and continents. In this way, place is constructed consciously through our social practices, and is thus connected to other communities and landscapes (Agnew, 2011). Although rooted in the local, community engagement also unfolds through relationships that stretch across institutions and countries. Community engagement therefore straddles the local and the global, deeply rooted in context whilst also unfolding through practices of solidarity. Indeed, the voices calling for increased South-South collaborations in community engagement and knowledge production continue to grow louder (Flores, 2024; Lepore et al., 2021).

The contributions gathered in this volume offer fresh insights into how community engagement is being enacted across diverse contexts, from 'doing research the African way', to local economic contributions and social enterprise development, to multilingual career

guidance, to transnational South-South research networks, and reflexive explorations of what it means to undertake community-based engaged research.

In 'The African Knowledge Production Incubators: Doing Research the African Way', **Nevashnee Perumal and colleagues from six South African universities** explore what it means to decolonise social work education through the *African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI)* project. Grounded in Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) and Zavala's decolonial framework, the project creates 'incubation spaces' where African scholars and students engage in collective storytelling, reflection, and healing as acts of reclaiming epistemic agency. The incubators become relational and transformative spaces, sites for 'the decolonisation of self' as a precursor to curriculum change, demonstrating how knowledge production can be both deeply local and profoundly collaborative. Through a series of imbizos, photovoice projects, and South–South exchanges (including engagements with scholars in India), the project illustrates that African knowledge is generated through connection, community, and care, challenging the individualism and hierarchies of Western academic traditions. It offers a model for relational, place-based and democratic scholarship that re-centres African epistemologies while remaining open to dialogue across contexts.

In the second paper, 'Universities as Just Anchor Institutions: Promoting Inclusive Economic Growth', **Noel Pearse and Thandiwe Matyobeni** examine how Rhodes University's *Masakhe Enterprise and Supplier Development Programme* embodies the principles of a 'just anchor' institution. Framed around social justice and the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), the study illustrates how universities can leverage their resources, procurement systems, and partnerships to stimulate local enterprise, create decent work, and foster economic inclusion. By aligning the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment framework with community engagement, Rhodes University's Community Engagement Division serves as a catalyst for accessibility and empowerment in Makhanda. This case highlights how an African university can act as both a driver of inclusive development and a custodian of social transformation, translating its embeddedness in place into tangible contributions toward economic justice.

In the third contribution, 'Community-Based Participatory Research as a Driver of Social Enterprise Development', **Ekaete Benedict** offers a case study from the University of the Free State that illustrates how community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) can strengthen both student learning and community capacity. Working in partnership with the student-led ACCESS social enterprise, the project enabled students to co-create a business model canvas, conduct SOAR analyses, and develop practical strategies that enhanced ACCESS's organisational sustainability. Through reciprocal learning and co-production, participants deepened their understanding of social entrepreneurship, decoloniality, and Ubuntu-informed engagement. Benedict's study demonstrates how embedding CBPR/PALAR in entrepreneurship curricula can enrich experiential learning, strengthen employability, and support community-driven social enterprise development.

The fourth contribution, 'Language, Relationality, and Career Guidance: A Community-Engaged Psychology Perspective' by **Centurion Zwane**, extends this conversation by foregrounding language and relational ethics as central to meaningful community engagement. Drawing on the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), the study examines how multilingual, Ubuntu-informed pedagogies can transform career guidance in under-resourced South African schools. Through a service-learning partnership between Rhodes University psychology students and local high school learners, the paper shows how translanguaging and relational teaching foster comprehension, confidence and belonging. By integrating theory, language, and lived experience, this contribution demonstrates that career guidance, like all forms of community engagement, is most powerful when it is relational and contextual, affirming learners' dignity and agency while reimagining psychology education as a socially responsive practice.

The fifth paper, 'South–South Networks Catalysing Social Responsibility in Higher Education', by **David Monk** (Gulu University), **Irma Alicia Flores-Hinojos** (University of Los Andes) and **Mahazan Abdul Mutalib** (Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia), expands the collection's geographic and conceptual horizons by situating community engagement within transnational networks of epistemic justice. Anchored in the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium, a Global South-led initiative in community-based participatory research, the authors reflect on their experiences establishing regional training centres in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through narrative inquiry, they reveal how collaboration, reciprocity, and relational learning challenge the 'danger of a single story' in global development discourse. These regional centres function as hubs for epistemic justice, advancing participatory methodologies that honour Indigenous and local knowledges while cultivating new generations of socially responsible researchers. By fostering South–South solidarity, this work demonstrates universities as globally connected yet locally grounded communities of practice, reclaiming knowledge production as a collective act.

In the final contribution, 'Carefully Navigating the Messiness of Community-Engaged Research', **Nyx McLean** argues that the inevitable complexities and contradictions of engaged research are not signs of failure but vital sources of insight. Drawing on feminist internet research projects within the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN), McLean illustrates how grappling with positionality, intra-community tensions, ethical dilemmas, and shifting research questions can deepen reflexivity and strengthen the rigour of engaged scholarship. The paper frames "messiness" as an ethical and methodological resource, calling for researchers to cultivate reflexive practice, communities of practice, and an ethic of care that holds space for discomfort while ensuring accountability. In foregrounding care, relationality and reflexivity, McLean invites researchers to embrace the complexities that animate engaged research.

A lesson that emerges throughout these contributions is that community engagement, in its multifaceted forms, is less about perfection than it is about persistence. Justice and community development, in this framing, are not singular, complete, or linear. Instead,

it is through these imperfect but meaningful and sustained connections that African higher education honours its transformative promise. By embracing place, relationality and solidarity, the community engagement mission of higher education affirms that the purpose of universities is not only to (co-)produce and share knowledges but is about building the relationships that make these knowledges instruments for social change.

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