

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT CUT AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

J. MUNSAMY

Abstract

Increasingly universities are being expected to address community engagement and sustainable development as inherent characteristics of its daily operations, as well as its academic endeavour. In many cases it necessitates a change in the approach of academics and university managers with respect to their interactions with students and academic matters.

This article addresses these matters with respect to Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT). In particular the interaction between the teaching and learning, research and service provision as substantial elements of the 21st century academic enterprise is indicated and discussed.

Keywords: community engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

“The apprenticeship of liberty requires for revitalization for faculty, academics and students”

Benjamin Barber (2004, 2012) together with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) made this profound statement in 1985. They believed that it is an imperative for colleges and universities to provide the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are essential in developing critical thinkers and engaged citizens. In this effort, the universities need to deeply institutionalize the notion of engagement. Emphasis has later been placed on university/community engagement, which is sustainable, intensified and given its due prominence in the broader socio-economic development discourse at national and regional level (Butin, 2012:1). Altbach (2010) states that the changes that have taken place in higher education worldwide over the past few years can be referred to as a revolution. The emergence of a knowledge society is a major development for society (Jowi, 2012:49).

The above imperative applies to South African universities as well as international universities. The expectation was that the university moves with contemporary society changing from its internal focus and insulating nature otherwise known as the “The Ivory Tower” of teaching and learning and research to embrace and encompass engagement with the broader society as its third mission. Perry (2003) stated that most often universities are unresponsive ‘Ivory towers’.

Hall (2010), Muller (2010) both alluded that the characterisation of universities must conform to community engagement and are tools to support and sustain regional socio-economic development (Kagisano, 2010:81).

Pablo Jensen and his collaborators (2008) claimed that the most successful researchers are those that engage with the public domain and the academia. The academia and research goes together and the “ivory tower has these days little more substance than the unicorn” (Community Engagement for Southern African Universities, 2010: 81). However, Yojana (2012) asserts that many large universities perform research and teaching as if they are operating disconnected from the society and region around them. Yojana further opines that the desire to become world-class can be achieved by better serving their locality (Yojana, 2012). The means to achieving globalization can be tackled locally (OECD, 2007). Though admitting such realities, most universities still face significant challenges to move away from their “Ivory Tower” nature.

Governments are trying to mobilize education to drive the social and economic development at regional and national levels. In view of this fact, universities are expected to maximize this opportunity to support local economies by engaging in regional development discourse and practice through their community engagement function (Yojana; 2012). In other words, universities should be the agents of change in terms of development.

This paper discusses the changing trends of community engagement at the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT). The reason being is to illustrate as well as acknowledge the changing paradigms, i.e. from community service to community engagement and the benefits that arose from this shift.



Figure 1: Silo Model vs. the Intersecting Model

Community engagement at the CUT previously consisted of two features, namely service learning and community service. Fourie (2006:6) states that “community service is a form of welfare, or something separate from the University”. Service learning is a credit-bearing course in which students gain from the educational experience. Students participate in an activity whereby the needs are identified by the community. Reflection of the activity takes place after the event. This reflection helps the students to gain a better understanding of the course content, broader insight of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Unlike community service, service learning is a course-based service experience that has beneficial outcomes. Service learning provides the means for reaching educational objectives, makes learning more interesting and exposes the students to civic education (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996:3).

Below is a figure of a model which illustrates how CUT began functioning. The academia and industry was involved with government but very much in a silo fashion. No intersection took place between the various sectors.

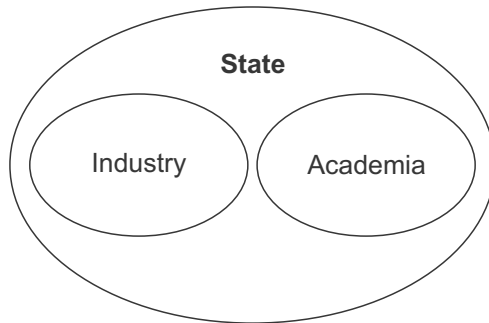


Figure 2: Etatic model of university–industry–government relations (from Etzkowitz ,H &Leydesdorff, L. 2000).

An assessment visit by the HEQC to CUT during 2004 addressed shortcomings in its report. Community engagement at CUT was seen as a double-tiered system. In one mode, service learning was integrated into the curricula of mainstream academic programmes, and the other consists of extra-curricular community service projects. The HEQC panel noted a lack of a common understanding across the institution regarding the nature and place of community engagement, its links to service-learning and community service.

The HEQC recommended that CUT should give serious attention to all aspects of community engagement. An initial focus on its place in the overall institutional strategy and its integration with the other two core functions, namely teaching and learning, and research should be considered. This should be reflected in an appropriate policy framework and institutional apparatus. The allocation of adequate resources and regular monitoring of implementation in this area was imperative (CUT, Community Engagement Report for Workshop 2009:2 and HEQC, 2007a, 26).

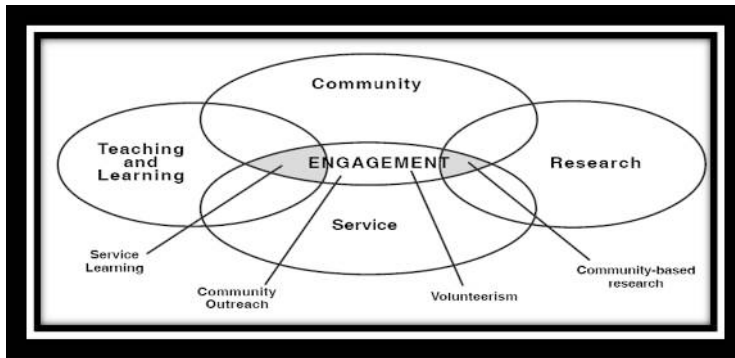


Figure 3: Intersecting Model (Bender, Bringle and Hatcher(2008))

Any Higher Education Institution (HEI) has two fundamental roles – teaching and learning, and research – and defines community engagement (CE) as a fundamental idea and perspective infused in and integrated with teaching and learning, and research. In this model, CE is informed by and conversely informs teaching and learning, and research. Teaching and learning, and research, are enriched in the context of CE; and CE in turn is enriched through the knowledge base of teaching and learning, and research (scholarship of engagement) (HEQC/JET, 2007a).

Teaching and learning should be about creating new knowledge and producing what has never been, i.e. academic innovation. Furthermore, one needs to engage with society on the basis of teaching and learning, research, innovation and technology transfer that would benefit the graduates for the workplace, for society as a whole and for the benefit of the university. Community engagement, in Professor's Mthembu's opinion, referred to only one sector of our society: the poor and the destitute and he therefore preferred to use the term "Engagement with Society" (Mthembu, 2007). However, it was felt that as a university it should be one that produces for the workplace, whose curriculum requires intimate engagement with business and industry and whose innovations are in the area of application; then, our primary partner and community should be business and industry i.e. the Triple Helix Approach (Mthembu, 2007). Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) refers to the triple helix approach when the university can play an enhanced role in innovation in increasingly knowledge-based societies.

2. CUT'S VISION FOR CE

"Universities face high expectations from the societies of which they are part. They will be judged, and learn to judge themselves, by the variety and vitality of their interactions with society. Those interactions, and university decision-making to foster them, are what we term 'engagement'.

Twenty-first century academic life is no longer pursued in seclusion (if it ever was) but rather must champion reason and imagination in engagement with the wider society and its concerns” (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2001, p. i)

CUT must respond to the demands from the community. It is mutually beneficial and development is a necessary element of CE. CUT must become an entrepreneurial university and this is achieved by assisting in addressing challenges of the community i.e. poverty alleviation, empowerment of individuals to improve their employability and the scope and competitiveness of SMME's. Furthermore, the core business of universities in the 21st century is: “Community Engagement, Research, Teaching and Learning” (CUT, 2009). Nishishiba (2012:1) states that the critical role of higher education is to prepare students to live and work in interdependent and ever-changing global environments. Due to the complexities of today's world, students must develop a high level of civic literacy and critical thinking skills to lead in a power-shared world Ehrlich (2000); Morgan, Green, Shinn, & Robinson (2008), Newell & Davis (1988). In Nishishiba (2012), it is stated that students must be able to make intellectual, moral decisions and take action for the betterment of all concerned.

Therefore, university leadership of this type requires development of traditional management skills such as planning, coordinating, and directing; yet it also requires an additional set of skills that include collaborative decision making, deal brokering, and resource bridging (Nishishiba, 2012:1).

However, CE will only thrive if it is not a one-way activity with the university providing assistance and the community simply accepting it. The CUT also have to benefit directly or indirectly from such actions before university staff will really commit themselves to CE Engagement - connotes a two-way mutually beneficially activity. It is a proactive process of fundamental “interpenetration” between a university and the broader society” (CUT; 2009). McCabe, Keast and Brown (2006:2) says that “community engagement is argued to provide government decision makers and policy developers with the ability to enhance services to the community through improved communication engendered by integrated interaction with the community”. They further state that community engagement is intended to provide an integrated, involved, face to face interaction between citizens within the community and government. However, they also confirm that the concept of community engagement has dual boundaries (government and the community) and functions with ambiguity.

Further, Considine (2005: 1-2) states that community engagement has the ability to develop autonomously and achieve results whilst working within these boundaries between government and the community. Cognizance needs to be taken of the complexities of community engagement in order for it to be successful (McCabe, et al., 2006: 2).

CUT's areas of engagement should be formal teaching and learning, knowledge and skills transfer and exchange, technology transfer and exchange, public intellectual engagement and development of public precincts and transactional spaces. CE is an imperative for all universities and should be integrated in the normal learning experience of all students. New knowledge creation is paramount for solving societal problems, thus the emphasis on the need for continuous research engagement" (CUT; 2008).

CE should be a value-adding partnership between the providers of such and the community, resulting in good relationships. It is a process towards economic and societal growth. The expertise of all possible stakeholders is required in order to optimize such an activity. "Such an involvement often forms the foundation of respect and trust between the participants" (CUT; 2008).

In 2012, the following model emerged:

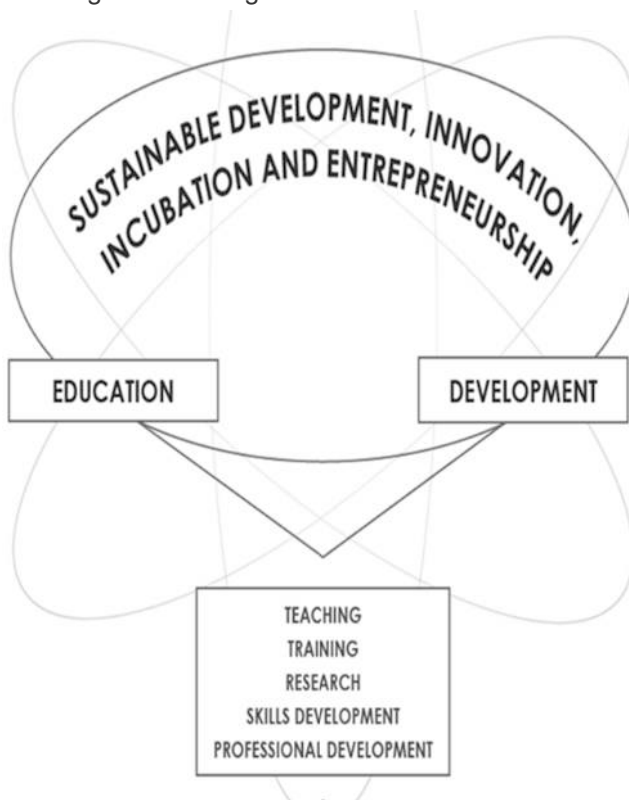


Figure 4: CE is executed through two foci areas: education and development whilst Sustainable Development, Innovation, Incubation and Entrepreneurship form the overarching goals of CE (Community Engagement Brochure, 2012).

The model of Community Engagement encapsulates how CE functions at CUT. It is executed through two foci areas: Education and Development which is divided into the following programmes: Teaching, Training, Research, Skills Development and Professional Development. Sustainable Development, Innovation, Incubation and Entrepreneurship form the overarching goals of CE.

Education is vital in collaborating with the triple helix partners to better support and develop our communities. The modes of service delivery are teaching and training. Community members are enriched through the interaction of peers. This action brings about cohesion in the groups and its communities. Members gain better identities and as a result afford the participants better opportunities. Common values are shared. The members of these projects are assisted to have equal access and to be brought on par with the rest. Training assists our students to create new knowledge, to enhance their knowledge base and to graduate with valuable attributes.

5. CONCLUSION

A niche approach to CE needs to be developed, emphasising sustainable development in terms of poverty eradication, climate change, innovation and technology transfer. However, proper participation in CE necessitates the articulation of “what is a community?” with special reference to:

- Respect for people, engaging people in defining their community,
- Allow networks to develop,
- Embrace what the community wants from us - trust them to make their own decisions, and
- Does the community have a clear reason and purpose why it exists?

The primary purpose of the 21st century engaged university is to conduct research on important problems. This would address ideas and questions and promote the application of current knowledge to societal problems. In this way, students are prepared to address these issues through a curriculum that emphasizes scholarly work which has consequences both for the students and for society. Furthermore, the need for regional development and for universities and partners to act in unison has not been greater. Therefore, the new model meets the requisites for regional development. This model being espoused by CUT demands that there is close cooperation and collaboration between the CE office, the faculties and their partners. Therefore this requires a closer, trusting relationship to be developed among CUT and their new partners.

“At no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus.” (Boyer, 2004)

6. REFERENCES

Bender G (2008). Exploring conceptual models for community engagement at higher education institutions in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, Volume2 (1). Available from www.up.ac.za.

Bernardo M.A.C., Butcher J. and Howard P. (2012) An international comparison of community engagement in higher education. *International journal of Educational Development*32(2012)187-192..www.elsevier.com.

Boyer E. L. (2004). The Scholarship of Engagement: Introduction to Service Learning Toolkit. *The Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, 1(1): 143

Bringle JG & Hatcher JA (2000) Institutionalisation of Service Learning in Higher Education. *Jstor: The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol71(3) May- June. Available from <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2649291>

Butin D.W. (2012) Rethinking the "Apprenticeship of Liberty": The case for Academic Programs in Community Engagement in Higher Education. *Journal of College and Character*.Vol 13(1). Available from <http://journals.naspa.org/jcc>. Accessed via Taillores Network Newsletter May 2012.

Community Engagement at Southern African Higher Education (2010). Kagisano series No .6. Council on Higher Education. Available from www.che.ac.za.

Council of Higher Education, (2007). HEQC Evaluative Study of Institutional Audits. Audit report 2006, South Africa. Available from www.che.ac.za

CUT (2010) Community Engagement Brochure

CUT (2012) Workshop on Community Engagement held at CUT(5).

Draft Revision of the Current Community Engagement Philosophy at CUT. (2010) Unpublished.

Etzkowitz .H &Leydesdorff. L. 2000. The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and "Mode2" to a Triple Helix of university–industry–government relations: Science Policy Institute, State University of New York and Department of Science and Technology Dynamics, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, Netherlands. *Research Policy* (29):109–123. www.elsevier.nl/locate/reconbase

Fourie F. 2006. In pursuit of a South African scholarship of engagement. Paper presented at the CHE-HEQC/JET-CHESP Conference on Community Engagement in Higher Education 3 to 5 September 2006. Accessed via Taillores Network.

Jowi J.O. (2012). African universities in the global knowledge economy: the good and ugly of internationalization. (22)(1).

McCabe A. Keast R. Brown K.(2006). Community Engagement: Towards Community as Governance. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Refereed paper presented to the Governments and Communities in Partnership conference Centre for Public Policy University of Melbourne 25-27 September, 2006.

Mthembu TZ(2007) Inaugural Speech as Vice Chancellor at CUT.

Nishishiba M. & Kecskes K. (2012). Capacity Building for the Common Good: PSU's Interdisciplinary Minor in Civic Leadership. Journal of College & Character. (13), (1). Available from <http://journals.naspa.org/cgi>, Accessed via Talloires Network May 2012 Newsletter on 10 June 2012.

OECD (2007) Higher education and regions: globally competitive, locally engaged. Pillay P. (2010). Linking higher education and economic development: implications for Africa from Three successful systems. Published by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET).

Perry D. (2003) Terms of Engagement: Renewing the Role of the University as an Urban Institution. CHET discussion series jointly hosted with CHEC (Cape Higher Education Consortium) and CSHE (Centre for the Study of Higher Education). The Observation Deck, BoE Conference Centre .V&A Waterfront Cape Town . 19 September 2003. Available from <http://www.chet.org.za>

Yojana S (2012) Universities need to serve regional economy society-OECD (222).<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120518123421968>.