

Towards an Africanisation of community engagement and service learning

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This article argues that the South African research community could benefit by engaging in more collaborative partnerships within the African continent in relation to community engagement. This argument relates to literature in South Africa concerning an Africanised notion of service learning (SL) and community engagement (CE), university contributions to sustainable development, and recent discussions which suggest that South Africa is ready to explore local solutions to local problems in Africa.

The article briefly introduces the global interest in universities and engagement, followed by a reflection on the historical context for African universities in this regard. The South African context is highlighted as a major player in advancing research and scholarship in relation to CE and SL. The article then refers to concerns within the South African research community that reflect the need for greater theorisation, a deepening of our understanding of how to Africanise an agenda, which has been, to a large extent, imported from the West, and how to address community perspectives and sustainable development in relation to CE and SL.

The article concludes that one way forward is to explore the potential for intra-continental collaborations and comparative studies in order to expand our understanding of some of the above issues. Some examples of initiatives, studies and publications from other African countries are cited to illustrate ways in which mutual learning might take place across the continent. Key themes from these studies include the use of multi-partner collaborations, networking, a focus on community relationships, interdisciplinary approaches to community-identified concerns, and the application and elaboration of context-specific indigenous knowledge. It is suggested that one of the strengths of country initiatives outside of South Africa is their focus on CE which informs SL, rather than the other way around. Conversely, South African theoretical and pedagogical perspectives on SL can contribute to a broader understanding of this aspect within higher education institutions on the continent.

Keywords: collaborative partnerships; community engagement; sustainable development; interdisciplinary approaches; indigenous knowledge

The global context for universities and engagement

There are growing expectations that universities should be more proactive in contributing to development. Two examples on a global scale, which have explored these issues, are a study organised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007) and one organised by the PASCAL International Observatory (n.d.). The OECD study took place between 2004 and 2007 and focused on the contributions of higher education institutions in 12 OECD countries to regional economic development. The PASCAL project, between 2009 and 2011, and under the acronym PURE (Pascal Universities and Regional Engagement), took a broader social purpose perspective and focused, to a large extent, on Australia, Europe and the USA, although some African universities also took part.

There is now an increasing amount of literature from advanced industrialised countries which explores how the university's traditional mission of community service can be a resource for regional and community engagement. In other words, it is argued that community 'engagement' is the new interpretation of the traditional third mission of community 'service' that binds the university's three missions together for the public good (Inman & Schuetze, 2010).

The African context for university engagement

The historical context for CE in many African universities emanates from the establishment in the 1940s and 1950s of extramural departments to service their wider communities. These were initiated, in the first instance, as a result of two British Commissions, namely Asquith and Elliot in 1943 and 1944, respectively, and the Oxford Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies in 1945 (Amedzro, 2004). Extramural departments that started in West Africa and Uganda throughout the 1940s and 1950s were later extended to other nations on the continent, as evidenced by Lesotho's Extra-Mural Institute which started in 1960. These initiatives were supported by various independence governments such as those by Nkrumah in Ghana and Nyerere in Tanzania. Amedzro (2004) highlights, for example, how the People's Education Association was established in Ghana, with a number of community improvement programmes running throughout the 1950s, followed by other community development initiatives during the decolonisation era of the 1960s and 1970s.

However, a second context for African universities is that they have never been as autonomous as their European or North American counterparts. They have been subject to the development agendas of international aid, government responses to aid conditionalities and government control over university administration. As Ade-Ajayi, Lameck and Ampah Johnson (1996) and others have highlighted, African universities have experienced a rise of and decline in fortunes. While the 1970s demonstrated support for university contribution to rural development and social transformation, the 1980s witnessed a change in aid thinking, primarily influenced by the World Bank (WB) which began to view higher education as less an investment for the public good but more a 'private good' (Sawyer, 2004:22). In addition to the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, a subsequent decline in support resulted in severe funding cuts for African universities by their governments and many other agencies, especially for extramural work (Sawyer, 2004).

The neo-liberal ideology of the 1980s exerted pressure on universities to become market driven, and the majority of extramural departments transformed into open and distance learning centres with fee-paying students.

Recent trends, however, supported by a changed WB philosophy (WB, 2009), have shown a revival of interest in the contribution of universities to national development, the search for relevance and the purpose of innovation (AAU, 2004). The African university's third mission of community service is being reviewed in this new context for CE (Oyewole, 2010).

In addition, increasing emphasis is placed on lifelong learning and the role of higher education institutions in educating their students to respond to a rapidly changing world (WB, 2000; UNESCO, 2009). In this respect it is advocated that academic work should be interdisciplinary and promote critical thinking, including a focus on active citizenship, human rights and ethics. It is argued that universities should seek common solutions through international networks, partnerships and knowledge transfer, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2009). This includes engagement with their local communities, as stated as follows: "Higher education should create mutually beneficial partnerships with communities and civil societies to facilitate the sharing and transmission of appropriate knowledge" (UNESCO, 2009:6).

The interest in the way universities contribute to regional and national development needs is reflected in higher education policy recommendations (WB, 2009), international initiatives to stimulate 'engagement' (OECD, 2007; PURE, 2010) and academic literature (e.g. Waghid, 2002; Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008).

South Africa has enshrined the notion of CE within higher education policy, with a particular focus on SL as a strategy for engendering responsible citizenship in the context of the country's post-apartheid agenda with the aim to address issues of social justice and nurture a more inclusive and integrated nation (e.g. DoE, 1997; 2001; HEQC, 2004; 2004a). This has resulted since 1997 in a proliferation of national initiatives such as the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHE, 2008; Bender, 2008a; Kruss, Visser, Aphane & Haupt, 2011), national debates (e.g. SAARDHE, 2007; HEQC, 2007; Smith-Tolken & Williams, 2011), and academic literature.

Community engagement and service learning in South Africa

South African debates concerning the evolution of discourses on the concept of CE (e.g. Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamati, 2008) have been well documented. The focus has been, to a large extent, on community, rather than regional, engagement, although Walters (2009) is a notable exception. There are indications of emerging interest in this direction in some provinces. For instance, the eThekweni Municipality in Durban, South Africa, is positioning itself as a learning city with the recent launch of the Municipal Institute of Learning (Mile.org, 2010).

Most academic discussions centre on the concept of SL as a particular feature of CE which aims to integrate the university's three core functions of teaching, research and community service, and which has been borrowed from the United States. In this respect, a number of universities have adopted their own definition of SL to reflect the South African context. Stellenbosch University, for example, describes SL as:

... an educational approach involving curriculum-based, credit-bearing learning experiences in which students (a) participate in contextualised, well-structured and organised service activities aimed at addressing identified service needs in a community, and (b) reflect on the service experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the linkage between curriculum content and community dynamics, as well as achieve personal growth and a sense of social responsibility. It requires a collaborative partnership context that enhances mutual, reciprocal teaching and learning among all members of the partnership (lecturers and students, members of the communities and representatives of the service sector) (SU, 2009:2).

The extent to which notions of collaboration and reciprocity in SL are a reality, rather than aspirational goals, however, has been questioned (Kruss *et al.*, 2011). A great deal of the South African academic literature focuses on SL as a pedagogy (e.g. Erasmus, 2007) and its contribution to curriculum development (e.g. Hlengwa, 2010; and Albertyn & Daniels, 2009, in relation to mode 2 knowledge). Theoretical perspectives include Osman and Castle's (2006) use of a critical theory lens to examine their work, and Bender's (2008a) use of curriculum theory and (2008b) conceptual modelling of CE. Hlengwa (2010) applies Bernstein's theory of vertical and horizontal discourses in relation to infusing SL into the curriculum. Le Grange (2007) argues for rhizomatic thinking in relation to viewing knowledge as an organic construct in an effort to de-colonise the process of knowledge production that is dominated by the West. Doctoral studies include that of Petersen (2007), which uses social justice theory to examine SL in teacher education, while O'Brien's study (2010) adopts a grounded theory approach to conceptualise a typology of SL. Practical studies mostly concentrate on exploring the benefits of community SL for students. These include, for example, Petersen and Henning's study (2010) which explores pre-service teacher education designs to bring practice closer to theory, and Ebersöhn, Bender and Carvalho-Malekane's (2010) who evaluate students' experiences of CE in an educational psychology practicum. However, this dominance of attention to student benefits has been criticised by, among others, Alperstein (2007) in her article *Getting closer to the community voice*.

Recently, researchers have begun to explore participatory approaches to address community perspectives (Van der Merwe & Albertyn, 2009; Van Schalkwyck & Erasmus, 2011). Erasmus (2011), in particular, challenges the value of uncritical international transfer of SL conceptual frameworks. She highlights growing concerns in the literature regarding issues of reciprocity, unequal power relations in community SL projects, the lack of multisectoral approaches, and dominance of single disciplinary engagement endeavours which are not necessarily appropriate for sustainable community development: "Where is the sustainability after the service learning aspect is finished?" (Erasmus, 2011a:357). In an earlier work (Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008) she emphasised the need to pay more attention to indigenous ways of knowing. She cites flagship sites at the University of the Free State which are endeavouring to promote a two-way flow of multidisciplinary knowledge in recognition of the contribution of local knowledge to curriculum development and community empowerment (Erasmus, 2011a; 2011b).

Kotecha and VOSESA (2011:16) also examine the goal of "creating southern African knowledge that provides solutions to southern African problems" by interrogating dominant Western paradigms. They expand this vision to initiate a discussion on the role of higher education for regional development and

more collaboration with a wider range of partners, although Kruss *et al.* (2011:11) argue that this aspect remains “a strand of engagement with largely unrealised potential”.

In a recent study of SL and CE across five universities in South Africa, Kruss *et al.* (2011) summarise many of the above concerns. They highlight the ‘thin’ resource of theoretical frameworks for CE and SL, the ongoing conceptual confusion in relation to current discourses of engagement, the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality in relation to the claims for SL, and community benefit. These issues were reinforced in a recent conference held at Stellenbosch University (Smith-Tolken & Williams, 2011) where the possibility of more comparative consideration in relation to African contexts was raised.

There is a tendency among South African universities to look inward, or communicate primarily with the USA, the originator of the SL concept, for their deliberations. Of particular interest for this article is the way in which some writers in South Africa raise the issue of Africanising the SL-CE debate (Lazarus, 2007), but there is little evidence of linking with other African countries in this respect.

Kruss *et al.* (2011) highlight a number of issues that, it is argued, would benefit from more pan-African interactions. They include concerns that there is a need for a wider range of partners, and more links to Africa and global development imperatives. Regional development is underdeveloped and interdisciplinarity is still new for South African contexts. Finally, they ask what are the community gains, especially with regard to knowledge development.

There is evidence that these aspects are being addressed differently in other parts of the continent.

Community engagement in other parts of Africa

University mission statements and strategic goals across African universities generally tend to refer to ‘service’ rather than ‘engagement’, but often within wider policy contexts of commitment to national development (e.g. the National University of Lesotho, 2007).

In comparison with South Africa, however, the majority of these countries have a weaker civil society sector (Carbone, 2005). This means that universities are more likely to link directly with community residents and act as mediators for the involvement of other parties such as NGOs, health authorities, police, and so on. This contrasts with Erasmus’ (2011) observation that many South African universities are more likely to access communities through other agencies, rather than directly link with communities themselves. In addition, the lack of national imperative in other African countries to include an SL component in engagement activities has meant that this has been a secondary focus for their universities (Nampota, 2011). These differences create new relationship dynamics that need to be factored in when considering engagement partnerships.

A further consideration is that the research base in most African countries is much weaker than that of South Africa, and this factor is a stimulus for cross-country partnerships. Publications are often still speculative in their analyses (Ishuma & Mwaikokesya, 2011), or descriptive – for example, Openjuru and Odongo’s (2011) model village that bears similarities to the project discussed by Erasmus (2011) – rather than reporting on empirical studies or analysing theoretical positions.

Nevertheless, there are indications in recent literature that universities, which are less constrained by national policy frameworks for curriculum design, have access to opportunities for experimentation that can open up new avenues of thinking. Two examples are cited in this instance.

The first example is a pan-African action research project, funded by the Association of African Universities (AAU), which consisted of a partnership between four universities from Nigeria, Lesotho, Malawi and Botswana, respectively. Two projects in each university involved a range of partner agencies where the university coordinated multidisciplinary responses to community-identified concerns. The outcomes highlighted mutual and reciprocal learning benefits among all participants – community residents, staff, students and other contributing agencies such as police and health officers (Preece, 2011). Some projects involved service learning components while others contributed to developing indigenous knowledge systems, such as the improvement of organic fertilizer for impoverished farmers (Biao, Akpama, Tawo & Inyang, 2011).

The second example is a learning city initiative in Botswana which resulted in a memorandum of understanding between the University of Botswana and its host city of Gaborone. Extensive consultation across university departments and city stakeholders (council departments, businesses and civil society) resulted in a partnership approach to addressing specific themes related to culture, enterprise, urban planning and environmental sustainability (Ntseane, 2010). Although in its early stages of development, this initiative is producing conceptual considerations regarding collaboration and recognition of indigenous knowledge as a contribution to sustainable development (Dube, 2012).

Dube, for instance, discusses the dynamics and tension between modernisation demands for commercialising resources with resultant over-exploitation of those resources in the face of competitive Western demands to produce at undervalued rates. She cites examples of weaving and basketry enterprises in this respect. She positions universities as potential think tanks with resources for research that can address sustainability issues in context. However, Dube elaborates on this notion, emphasising the co-production of knowledge through collaborative learning that uses the social capital of traditional community ties. She also highlights the challenges to environmental awareness when we fail to interface conventional and local knowledge systems.

Such recent observations and experiences talk directly to wider debates on the Africanisation of universities.

Africanising knowledge and scholarship

The notion of 'Africanisation' in the 1960s and 1970s essentially embraced two concepts – the transfer of ownership of curriculum and management of higher education institutions, and the re-direction of mission to address national and regional development needs (Ade-Ajayi *et al.*, 1996). However, the Africanisation process is an ongoing project, mainly because African nations have never really been in charge of their own development mission.

As mentioned earlier, government initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s attempted to steer universities towards nation-building. One of the most famous examples is that of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania whose socialist approach insisted on direct links between the university and village communities. Students contributed to community service during long vacations, and village leaders would contribute to their academic assessment.

Further international efforts within Africa promoted a home-grown version of the African university. Yesufu, for instance, published the AAU's conference proceedings in 1973 on creating the African university. He formulated what came to be known as the 'Yesufu model' mission for the African university:

It follows that an emergent African university must henceforth, be much more than an institution for teaching, research and dissemination of higher learning. It must be accountable to, and serve, the vast majority of the people who live in the rural areas. The African university must be committed to active participation in social transformation, economic modernization, and the training and upgrading of the total human resources of the nation, not just of a small elite (Yesufu 1973:41, cited in Ade Ajayi et al., 1996:112).

Not much has changed with this aspirational mission. The Africanisation of CE now reflects two aspects of concern. On the one hand, there is a need to recognise the positioning of African universities in their specific development contexts. Kruss *et al.* (2011:8), for example, stress that the resource base of African environments is distinct and affects the university focus for development:

A key difference is that the economies in many low and middle income countries remain strongly resource based, particularly focused on small-scale and peasant-based agriculture. This means that there is a relatively small industrial base, and that the significance of university interaction with firms differs from developed economies. In a middle income country like South Africa, with a great socioeconomic divide and high rates of unemployment, the large informal and 'survivalist' sector; and community development initiatives, are significant features of the conditions within which universities interact. That is, the range of social partners with which universities should engage

to play a role in development is wider than, and not restricted to, firms in industrial sectors ... [A] holistic focus on the university's role in social and economic development ... is required.

These sentiments echo earlier concerns regarding the Africanisation of universities:

An African university must not only pursue knowledge for its own sake, but also for the ... amelioration of conditions of life and work of the ordinary man and woman. It must be fully committed to active participation in the social transformation, economic modernization, and the ... upgrading of the total human resources of the nation (Wandira, 1977:22, cited in Seepe, 2004:21).

This statement reflects the ongoing thread of CE philosophies – that of the need for universities to be relevant and connected to their societies, albeit recognising that connection must also include connecting to an increasingly complex world. Seepe highlights the need for scholarship to address, among others, issues of hunger, disease, poverty, crime and racial divisions. The pursuit of truth, he argues (Seepe, 2004:27), must be “imbued with a sense of social responsibility”. He also stresses that this pursuit must be from African perspectives grounded in African experiences “so that the African experience should be a source of ideas leading to public policy” (Seepe, 2004:31).

On the other hand, the extent to which CE can be Africanised, as Seepe (2004) highlights, depends partly on its relationship to knowledge production and the concept of knowledge itself.

Waghid (2002) draws extensively on Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotney, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow (1994) to distinguish between the more conventional notion of mode 1 knowledge as scientific, discipline-based knowledge, which is more commonly associated with university knowledge production, and that of mode 2 knowledge. Mode 2 knowledge is differentiated by its context-specific, rather than disciplinary framework. It is associated with transdisciplinary production – or socially distributed knowledge. That is, the knowledge is problem-based, and develops as a result of reflexivity and interaction with real-life situations. The knowledge producers may be teams of actors across a variety of social groups and organisations to focus on addressing a specific problem and whose solutions or products are accountable to the broader range of actors. Mode 2 knowledge thus steps out of its discipline and is socially produced as an outcome of dialogue and meaning making. It is presented, in African contexts, as a more culturally sensitive route to knowledge production.

Brock-Utne (2003:49) draws attention to some local knowledge that could broaden university teaching:

Village women are great science teachers in the fields of agriculture, medicine and food technology ... [they] will even explain about the different soils suitable for different crops. [They] will also talk about food processing and food preservation, for instance, through drying or smoking meat.

O’Brien (2008) associates these activities with a ‘scholarship of engagement’. This means that all partners collaborate to produce increased access to indigenous and/or mode 2 knowledge. At the same time, she argues that such scholarship increases human capital and the community voice in knowledge construction.

Dube’s (2012) earlier references to the co-production of knowledge in the context of Botswana and sustainable development are relevant to these discussions. These debates deserve wider, comparative analysis.

Conclusion

Research has shown that the nature and practice of CE and SL across South Africa is uneven. Although research into CE and SL is increasing globally, there are still limited examples of in-depth research within the African continent, particularly on a pan-African, comparative basis. In addition, the contextual nature of such work remains a challenge for the Africanisation of the scholarship of engagement. Nevertheless, examples are emerging in different African contexts of experiments that may inform debate within South Africa.

However, in order to maximise this potential, there is a need for comparative research and South-South exchanges to explore what works where, how and why. Such studies would help us explore some of the concerns raised by Kruss *et al.* (2011), among other authors. They would, for example, facilitate greater

access to the scholarship of engagement in terms of African knowledge bases, and closer examination of sustainability issues. The comparative element would give credibility to such knowledge by enhancing understanding of the relationship between context, process and outcomes, in a variety of contexts that reflect African solutions to African problems.

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