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Towards a conceptual understanding of community engagement in higher education in South Africa

Abstract

As attention to community engagement grows, it is critical that academics, students and community collaborators understand how it is conceptualised. This paper presents findings from a qualitative inquiry with academics and community engagement administrators nationally with regard to how they conceptualise community engagement. Six universities were included in the sample that was selected purposefully from the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) list. Four major themes emerged from the data and focussed on context, process, mutual beneficial relationship and knowledge production. The data reflected a diverse array of conceptualisations on a continuum that ranged from the university-community dyad to that of the co-production of knowledge.

Keywords: *conceptual, community, engagement, university*

1. Introduction

The South African higher education landscape is beset by a coalescence of academic, socio-political and economic challenges that has resulted in much turbulence. Engagement with local communities holds the potential to dispel some of these challenges, by shifting the discipline based boundaries of higher education to a deeper concern with societal issues. Moreover, community engagement has posited that its diverse partnerships with communities can exploit and nurture discovery, learning and innovation so that higher education can become further entrenched within society and seen as a partner with concern for societal wellbeing.

The birth of community engagement in South Africa created the opportunity to transform pedagogy, to usher in a more democratic and socially just higher education system that would refocus higher education towards public good. In response to this higher education, leaders initiated efforts to reclaim their civic mission (Hollander and Hartley, 2000) and as attention grew towards this, scholars began framing the civic responsibilities of communities in nuanced ways. This paper begins by offering a historical context for the growth of community engagement in South Africa and ways in

which the discovery and learning missions grew abroad. This is followed by a literature review that explores the conceptualisations of community engagement and the engaged university. An overview of the methodology used and a discussion of the findings are undertaken.

2. Historical context

Community engagement in South Africa evolved through the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (Perold, 1998). One of its key operational functions was to nurture the engagement mandate within the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997), which argued that universities restructure their teaching, learning and research practices to be more socially responsive to broader society and to democratise knowledge production. This was followed by the launch in 2009, of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF), which was mandated to

• Advocate, promote and strengthen community engagement at South African universities;

• Further community engagement at universities in partnership with all stakeholders

• Foster an understanding of community engagement as integral to the core business of higher education (Watson, Hollister, Stroud & Babcock, 2011).

The White Paper (Department of Education, 1997) reconceptualised community engagement not as a discreet entity, but integral to and embedded within teaching and research. This prompted a shift in the terminology used for community engagement from "community service," (Department of Education, 1997) to "knowledge based community service," (Higher Education Quality Committee, 2001), to "community engagement," (Higher Education Quality Committee, 2004) and then to a "scholarship of engagement" (HEQC/CHESP, 2006). Cooper (2011) supported the notion that engagement be conceptualised as engaged scholarship.

One of the key recommendations emanating from a conference on Community Engagement was the need for a rigorous conceptual framework for community engagement, which articulates the key concepts/issues related to community engagement that can guide its engagement practices in higher education (HEQC/Jet, 2007a; 2007b). The HEQC however provided a very basic definition of community engagement, as the initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address relevant community issues. Despite these initiatives, community engagement was still perceived as a nice-to-have philanthropic activity, whilst some institutions still resisted it as a core function in higher education (Bender 2008).

In the United States, Benson, Harkavy and Puckett (2000) argued the need for universities to devote themselves towards transforming into socially responsible civic institutions, by radically changing their institutional cultures. This argument coalesced into a range of activities that academics began engaging in. Through their teaching (e.g. service-learning), research (e.g. community-based participatory research), community-responsive clinical care (e.g. community-oriented primary care) and service (e.g. community service, outreach, advocacy) (Calleson, Jordan & Seifer, 2005). Scholars also began documenting their contributions towards improving student learning, innovative teaching practices and scholarship that had positive benefits for communities (Peters, Jordan, Adamek & Alter, 2005). Community engagement was therefore conceived to benefit and enhance the place of higher education,

by bringing forth new knowledge (Hudson, Craig & Hudson, 2007), through research and to improve teaching and learning (Wynsberghe & Andruske, 2007; Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004).

Whilst forms of community engagement have become embedded in South Africa, discourse and empirical research related to engagement has only begun emerging. Muller (2010) made a case for engagement saying that universities should contribute to social development, whilst (2010) focussed on the forms community engagement does and should take. Kruss, Visser, Aphane and Haupt (2012) deconstructed the complexity and diversity of current practices of engagement among South African academics.

The current study, funded by the NRF, sought to understand how community engagement was conceptualised amongst academics and community engagement administrators at selected universities across South Africa. Its aim was to define and characterise the concept of community engagement through the lens of this national inquiry and from the scholarly literature. The rationale for the paper stems from the fact that the agenda and goals of community engagement in higher education have been somewhat ambiguous as the terms and concepts related to engagement are used interchangeably and are interpreted in diverse ways by different institutions. Institutionalising community engagement will continue to be challenging until the constructs and scholars and institutions understand concepts used to guide its implementation. This paper presents the key terms used to define community engagement at several universities and attempts to deconstruct its meaning through the activities and relationships that underpin contemporary community engagement in South Africa.

3. Literature review

In order for academics to engage in a critical way with the emerging philosophies and practices of community engagement, they should undertake their activities with conceptual, theoretical and lived understandings of and reflections on the socio-political and ethical aspects of community engagement (Bender 2008). Hall (2010) highlighted that the term community was challenging and could have multiple meanings depending on the context. Pienaar-Steyn (2012) points out those conceptual frameworks were lacking in South Africa, with little universally accepted standards to measure the impact of community engagement. Scholars also noted the lack of a clear and precise definition of community engagement in South Africa, (Pienaar-Steyn, 2012; Nongxa, 2010) with a few attempting to define community engagement (Hall, 2010; Muller, 2010). Favish (2005:4) endeavoured to develop a conceptual framework and acknowledged the "interconnectedness between social engagement and the other core activities of the university". More recently, Paphitis and Kelland (2015) argued for the South African philosophical community to embrace an epistemic shift that will enable higher education to enhance philosophical knowledge generation and to use community engagement to advance which would allow a unique South African philosophical identity to emerge.

The literature reflects two primary challenges facing community engagement viz. the lack of a consensual definition of community engagement (Perry, Farmer, Onder, Tanner & Burton, 2015; Starke, Shenouda & Smith-Howell, 2017) and difficulties in capturing its multidimensional nature (Stanton-Nicholas, Hatcher & Cecil, 2015; Kolek, 2016). It also reflects an array of terms related to engagement and the engaged university. Most terms related to community engagement are linked to "engaged scholarship" or the "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer, 1996); civic engagement (Campus Engage, 2010); academic citizenship

(MacFarlane, 2007); community engagement (Carnegie Foundation, 2011 cited in Kliewer, 2013) and the engaged university (Watson *et al*., 2011).

One possible reason for the lack of a consensual definition is that university-community engagement assumes many forms, is implemented within different models and has multiple benefits for the community, the university and its external collaborators. The term community engagement has been used interchangeably, with civic or public engagement, with the unifying feature being interaction and engagement with the world outside the academy (Sachs & Clark, 2017). Furthermore definitions of community engagement scholarship, embraces the realm of teaching/ research and is expressed across a spectrum of disciplines at most contemporary research universities. Before exploring the definitions of community engagement, some attention is devoted to how the engaged university is conceptualised.

The notion of an "engaged" university has started to receive considerable attention in literature over the past two decades. A review undertaken by Cuthill (2012) indicated that there are fifty-eight terms, used to describe the civic university. Holland (2001: 7) asserted that the engaged institution is "committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration and application of knowledge, expertise and information". In a similar vein, Goddard (2009: 5) described the engaged civic university as "one which provides opportunities for the society of which it forms, it engages as a whole with its surroundings, not piecemeal".

One reason for a lack of conceptual clarity relates to the breadth of activities that fall under the realm of engagement. The literature reflects the benefits of engaged research and teaching, particularly community-based research and teaching which are grounded in engagement scholarship to enrich student's educational experience, deepen the authenticity of faculty research, create sustainable research opportunities through partnerships, spur innovations in trans-disciplinary research, and strengthen institutional stewardship (Fitzgerald, Van Egeren, Bargerstock & Zientek, 2017). The Association of Commonwealth Universities defined engagement as both a core value, and as a thoughtful interaction, with the non-university world in four spheres viz. steering the aims, purposes and priorities of the university, connecting teaching and learning to the wider world; continual dialogue between researchers and practitioners and assuming wider responsibilities towards neighbours and citizens (Gibbons 2001: 22). Civic engagement has also been used synonymously with community engagement. (Lyons & McIlrath, 2011: 6) defined civic engagement as a "mutually beneficial knowledge based collaboration between the higher education institutions, its staff and students, with the wider community, through community-campus partnerships and including the activities of service learning/community based learning, community engaged research, volunteering, community/economic regeneration, capacity building and access/ widening participation".

Simmons (2010: 644) described community engagement as "everything from involvement in public issues, concerns, and debates to more activist praxis that dissolves the theory-practice divide, to participatory-action research (PAR), built on co-operative co-citizenship, co-activism, and co-understandings of co-operative projects rooted in local contexts". The Carnegie Foundation conceived the most comprehensive definition available for the Advancement of Teaching (Kliewer, 2013: 72). It stated that community engagement was "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and

resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, creative, activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues and contribute to the public good".

It was Boyer (1996:32) who coined the term the "scholarship of engagement" as "connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems". He proposed four inter-related functions of scholarship viz. discovery, integration, and engagement teaching and suggested that the ethos and practice of engagement transcend all dimensions of academic life. O'Meara and Rice (2005) extended this notion stating that engagement necessitates moving beyond "the expert model that often gets in the way of constructive university community collaboration (and)…calls on faculty to move beyond "outreach"," ….asks scholars to go beyond "service". Similarly, writers have argued about the importance of both academic and local knowledge and ways to shift the lens from traditional knowledge creation and dissemination from the expert academy (Strier, 2010; Kruss, Haupt & Visser, 2016). A related form of scholarship has also emerged viz. scholarship of engagement. McNall, Sturdevant-Reed, Brown and Allen (2009:318), asserted that whilst engaged scholarship is related to scholarly engagement, activities that "reflect a knowledge-based approach to teaching, research, and service for the direct benefit of external audiences", the scholarship of engagement is when faculty "study, write about, and disseminate scholarship about their activities".

4. Methodology

This paper is based on analysis of data drawn from a national inquiry that focussed on how community engagement is conceptualised across selected universities in South Africa. The study employed a multi-case study design (Yin, 2001). Two criteria were used to select the case study sites for this inquiry. SAHECEF's list of best practice institutions was used and those universities with best practice community engagement activities were noted. The second criteria focussed on institutions with different missions and stakeholder partnerships to improve how community engagement is conceptualised in different contexts. Hence, urban and rural based universities were included to ascertain if there was diversity in community engagement practices between these institutions. The six universities examined through this inquiry were located in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Limpopo Province and Gauteng. In total 33 academics involved in community engagement and administrative members who were part of community engagement offices were interviewed. In addition, five focus group discussions were held. All data collection occurred at the university sites. The process of data coding was guided by Bogdan and Bicklen (1992) and enabled a search through the voluminous transcripts to be reduced to regularities, patterns and similar themes. Words and phrases to represent these topics and themes were generated and were further guided by those that emerged during data collection.

•   What are the conceptual frameworks that guide community engagement in SA?

•   What are the values and principles that guide community engagement?

•   How has community engagement become embedded within the institution?

Although the interviews and focus group discussions were the primary source of data for analysis, the researcher also examined the university's mission statement. Collectively

these responses provided a rich text for qualitative analysis. Themes were identified based on words and phrases found within the text of each interview or focus group discussion. Themes were text- based on the frequency of use and relationship to other texts. Multiple sources of data were used to ensure trustworthiness and the triangulation technique of "using different methods as a check on one another" (Maxwell, 2013: 102), viz. Multiple interviews and document analysis mitigated the limitations.

5. Discussion

Data reflected that different institutions conceptualise community engagement differently. The analysis that follows provides a typology of the major themes and sub-themes presented in the conceptualisation of community engagement. The typology included 4 themes and 8 frequently occurring sub themes. The themes were emphasised by participants when they were asked how they conceptualise community engagement. The sub-themes are not mutually exclusive and hence some participants used several of them to describe community engagement. Slamat (2010) acknowledged that there was a diverse array of definitions at different institutions locally and asserted the need for an inquiry into the changing role and meaning underpinning community engagement in the practice of scholarship, as opposed to defining community engagement from scratch. It is herein that the current paper has positioned itself.

6. Themes

Four major themes emerged from the analysis. Under each sub-theme, the participants' excerpts are presented followed by a discussion. The first major theme derived from the data was context.

7. Context

The two sub-themes that flowed from context pertained to the community context and the university context.

7.1 Community context

> *How do we interact with the communities, however we define the communities. And for us, it's mainly rural communities, mainly disadvantaged groups, mainly poor communities.*

> *Our engagement is very much place related.*

Aslin and Brown (2004) stated that a community does not only refer to a specific geographic area, but may also be a community of interest. Some participants also emphasised "place" within their definition. Scholars similarly defined community engagement as "a responsive relationship bringing the university into mutually beneficial partnerships with place-based or area-of-interest based communities" (Furco & Miller, 2009:51). Moore (2014:13) argued that community-university relationships are place-based, because they occur in a specific geographic location and reflect the history, culture, and socio-economics of a particular location. She asserted that understanding the way "places are conceptualised by those who inhabit them, acknowledges that how people think about or conceptualise communities, influences the objectives that will be pursued through those relationships".

7.2 University context

Definitions linked to the university context were as follows:

> *I think conceptualisation differs from institution to institution because of the history of the institution, the type of institution".*

> *We all have a common understanding about what we mean by engagement, which is a big plus for the institution… what I can pick up with other institutions, all academics have different interpretations. There's a common interpretation but each discipline can still have its own interpretation.*

Muller (2010: 69) posited that community engagement was a contextual activity that depended on the mission and strengths of the university, the state of regional development in the area and the surrounding local communities. Furco and Muller (2009:51) added that most universities define community engagement within the context of the institutional plan, saying that it was a core priority. Priority was defined as being "fully engaged in the economic, cultural, and civic life of communities the institution serves" and more importantly the importance of its context in terms of "serving as a setting for public discourse, a venue for artistic expressions and a partner in community endeavours" (Furco & Miller, 2009: 51).

However, Holland (2005) noted however that institutional approaches to engagement vary according to their unique missions and regional settings such as rural or urban campuses. Moreover, such factors are crucial to understanding how engagement is understood and expressed within a state's larger cultural, demographic, political, economic and historical context (Weerts, 2014). Hence, those institutions aspiring to develop definitions or enrich their conceptual lens should consider these multiple contextual factors.

Several participants also offered definitions that focussed on institutional activities as follows:

> *Community engagement is to try and fit into kind of teaching and learning and research in the university.*

> *We see engagement in four categories. We talk about engagement through community interaction, service and outreach, engagement through teaching and learning or other forms of engaged teaching, education, service learning and all those things.*

These definitions reflect the core functions of teaching, research and service. Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead (2008) reinforced this viewpoint that engagement comprised of engagement through teaching and learning, curriculum design, policies, research, external relations, social and cultural engagement, partnerships with school and educational providers, economic engagement and organization and participation of students.

Community engagement is characterised by its twin operational contexts i.e. the community and the university. The central premise of these contextual differences rests in that they are "varying worlds with different realities which are often in contrast with one another". Whilst universities exist in a physical environment with structures and ethos, communities are often characterised by a lack of structure, order, resources and direction, the challenge being to bind both these worlds to facilitate transformation (Bernardo, Butcher and Howard, 2014: 111). Communities perceive academics as part of the elite who produce and transmit knowledge, whilst communities are identified by conditions of disadvantage and social isolation. Bernardo *et al.*, (2014:117) concluded that there was a need for "the convergence of two unique milieus is the nucleus of community engagement".

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8. Process

The second major theme emerging from the data was process. The two sub-themes emerging from this are as follows:

8.1 Connecting with communities

So my understanding of community engagement is basically getting in touch with the community, in the academic environment we are very isolated from communities.

It's about universities looking for needs in communities and linking/developing solutions to those challenges/problems that link into different faculties.

My understanding of community engagement is it's about connecting the university with community, not just in a superficial way, but quite profoundly.

Community engagement is therefore the "interactions between faculty, students, administrators … and the geographically-delineated communities primarily located external to the university" (Moore and Ward, 2010: 39). This definition together with the data, suggests that not all higher education institutions have evolved towards the mutuality and reciprocity, emphasized within other definitions. Moore (2014) cautioned academics to be aware of the power they wield and the way they use this power to influence change. Hence, merely identifying needs and addressing same, is not the same as a relationship which is framed by mutuality of outcomes, goals, trust and respect (Bernardo, Butcher and Howard, 2011).

8.2 Engaging for change

It is really about breaking down the boundaries between the academy and the wider context in which the academy is situated. So it's about reframing knowledge, construction project and ….it's about promoting social justice through doing this.

Community engagement ...has a very strong transformative emancipatory element.

It must generate opportunities for lifelong learning for all partners.

It culminates in citizenship and citizenry.

The definitions offered here illuminates several important terms that need to be embedded within definitions of community engagement. These include social justice, transformation and citizenship. Bender (2008) supported this view by maintaining that not only does the engaged university place greater emphasis on co-operative, collaborative development and mutual benefit, but it prepares students to be socially responsible citizens through civic engagement and social responsibility. Therefore, fostering social responsibility is important amongst students and should form part of engagement. Hartley, Saltmarsh and Clayton (2010: 401) asserted that, "community engagement focuses on social change and social justice and the building of social, economic and cultural capital within and between communities and the academy". Social justice is another important concept in the conceptualization of engagement. It is an individual rights issue, categorised by basic human needs, diversity, non-discrimination, equality, and a group or community issue characterised by discrimination, oppression or , marginalization. Community engagement enables the pursuit of social justice through its interaction and concern with societal issues, social justice and empowerment, and students should be taught what social justice and social responsibility are (Pelton, 2001).

9. Mutually beneficial relationship

9.1 Partnerships and reciprocity

The first sub-theme is reflected as follows:

> *Community engagement … is understood as mutually beneficial partnerships between communities and the university.*

> *We promote partnerships … and evolve to have other components of development and empowerment, emancipation.*

These definitions emphasise notions of mutuality and reciprocity. There are also calls from the higher education community to uphold the principle of reciprocity and a commitment to mutually beneficial learning and engagement (Hammersley, 2017: 115). Whilst traditional models of community service and development have focussed on single-directional intervention as reflected in the data, community engagement posits to be cognizant of the two-way reciprocal relationship (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). The concepts of service and mutually beneficial are also seen as being interchangeable with reciprocity (Hammersley, 2017: 23). Two way mutually beneficial relationships which are underpinned by strength, resilience and existing knowledge of community partners and participants, differs from a service model which is based on deficits, needs and dysfunction (Kiely, 2004). This is important to consider given that some institutions locally still premise their work on the latter model.

9.2 Co-designing solutions

> *It's, understanding the community needs, discussing, co-designing, coming to the solution which is no longer like you are imposing a solution.*

> *To arrive at a solution which at the end, is not like you have given them a solution, you've actually developed it together, that solution.*

Several participants emphasised the importance of co-designing solutions with the community. Wright, Suchet-Pearson and Lloyd (2007) recognised however the complex web of power relations that exist within these partnerships and argued that only through recognizing and reconfiguring power relationships can academics together with community as co-learners, reconsider academic processes and outputs. Hence shifting the power is critical to ensuring that the voice of the community is heard within the process of finding solutions to their problems. Very often two –way partnership with communities is thwarted because university research activities are narrowly designed with community partners, who are viewed as passive participants, not partners in discovery (Corrigan, 2000).

10. Knowledge production

10.1 Co-creation of knowledge

To work with co-researchers to produce knowledge that's applicable to community.

> *Community engagement through the trans-disciplinary lens has to be how we bring ordinary people into the research process. How do we bring their practical, tacit and experiential knowledge of a particular situation into the research process?*

Whilst the previous sub-theme emphasized coming up with joint solutions, this sub theme focused on the co-production of knowledge. Successful university-community partnerships involve all participants (including community), as learners and teachers to seek solutions to societal problems. Collaborative scholarship however, requires a counterbalancing of traditional academic knowledge which is pure, disciplinary, homogenous, expert- led hierarchical and primarily university- based, with engaged knowledge generation which is problem-centred, trans-disciplinary, heterogeneous, entrepreneurial and network embedded (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow, 1994). This re-conceptualization of knowledge that moves across porous boundaries is linked to university-community partnerships that are underpinned by "participatory, collaborative, and democratic processes" (Bringle, Hatcher & Clayton, 2006: 258).

Saltmarsh *et al*. (2009) expressed that whilst in the dominant civic, each party in the relationship benefits from its involvement, the democratic civic framework views engagement as an epistemological position that intentionally seeks to address unequal power relations by recognising diverse expertise and multiple knowledge in collaboration with, rather than for communities as co-educators, co-learners and co-creators of knowledge. This heralds a paradigmatic shift from knowledge transfer to communities to knowledge creation with communities (Scull & Cuthill, 2010). Trans-disciplinary work as articulated in the data reinforces the process of knowledge transcending the disciplines and the university by a merging of intellect from the university, together with that of community voices as part of engagement (Stokols, 2006).

10.2 Indigenous knowledge

> *The community has indigenous knowledge which… in partnerships are not being recognised.*

> *Instilling indigenous knowledge and involving the community, and also, using the local thing.*

Distilling indigenous knowledge through community engagement also emerged in the data. These deeper conceptualisations of community engagement will compel academics to recognise that not all forms of knowledge and expertise reside in academic institutions and that knowledge produced within the confines of higher education will fail to address contemporary social issues. A deeper level of engagement that moves from the superficiality of connecting with communities to address their needs to a more deeper respect for community as co-producers of relevant knowledge is critical to shaping the face of community engagement in South Africa.

11. Conclusions and implications for practice

The study has contributed to a clearer understanding of how community engagement is conceptualised in South Africa and points to how engagement activities are enacted through these definitions. Practically speaking, this knowledge may assist other institutions to re-consider how they conceptualise and operationalise community engagement. The study revealed that academics define and conceptualise community engagement in diverse ways across different higher education institutions. A holistic analysis of the data reflects a continuum that embraces the four broad themes from the community-university nexus at one end, to how it progresses towards knowledge production at the end. Most definitions referred to activities that are embedded within SAHECEF's mandate. Although there is great value to the diverse range of activities that coalesce to form engagement, not all participants have recognised the

importance of knowledge production and a deeper form of engaged scholarship. What was important to find was that some engaged academics had likened their conceptualisations of community engagement to that of Fear, Rosaen, Bawden and Foster-Fishman's (2006:xiii) definition of critical engagement as "opportunities to share knowledge and learn with those who struggle for social justice; and to collaborate…respectfully and responsibly for the purpose of improving life". This focus on learning from those who struggle for social justice is an important step towards the engaged scholarship that Boyer (1996) sought to advance and should reflect the viewpoint that institutions must aspire to. To conclude community engagement is "more than a structural manifestation, essentially it is a philosophical belief that can help evolve, shape, and progress higher education …in the transformation for both the societies and communities" (Bernardo *et al.,* 2011: 5).

12. Funding

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