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e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education  
2022 40(2): 189-206

## PUBLISHED:

08 June 2022

## RECEIVED:

27 December 2021

## ACCEPTED:

19 March 2022

# Insights into community engagement at a University of Technology in South Africa

## Abstract

*Community engagement (CE) has been identified as an important pillar alongside teaching and research in higher education. Despite this it has emerged slowly within the South African landscape due to a lack of understanding regarding engagement. Drawing on in-depth interviews, this study sought to explore how academics (N=14), at a University of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa understood CE and the processes involved in engagement. The study found that CE was a symbiotic relationship that involved collaboration with communities in order to understand community needs, nurture community partnerships, and ensure sustainable engagement initiatives. Finally, the data reflected that in order to enable social change, the community should be honoured as a source of knowledge and the university should recognise the benefits of engagement.*

**Keywords:** *higher education, community engagement, social change, partnerships, curriculum, students*

## 1. Introduction

Community engagement (CE) has been defined as the partnership of university knowledge and resources, with the partnership and knowledge of the public and private sector to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; strengthen curriculum, teaching and learning; produce educated and engaged citizens; enhance democratic values and civic responsibility; attend to critical societal issues and make a contribution that is in the best interests of society (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching provided a more comprehensive understanding of CE saying it 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” (Soria, Mitchell & Nobbe, 2016: 4). It is within this context that higher education organisations, such as the Association of American Colleges and Campus Compact, stated that if CE is to be embedded within the core of teaching, research and service missions of academic institutions, it must be distinguished by four foundational characteristics, namely:



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it must be scholarly; it must cut across the missions of teaching, research and service; it must be reciprocal and mutually beneficial; and it must embrace the processes and values of a civil democracy (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016).

In South Africa CE emerged within the context of the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) which led to the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative in 1999 (Lazarus *et al.*, 2008). This was intended to help South African universities conceptualise and implement CE as a core function of academic institutions (Lazarus *et al.*, 2008). Prior to this, pedagogical approaches to build relationships between universities and society (such as work camps, student volunteerism and community activities) were not as relevant, as academic service delivery in South Africa. Gradually shifts in conceptualising community service to CE to “a scholarship of engagement” began to mirror itself in local literature (Higher Education Quality Committee [HEQC], in Bhagwan, 2018: 33).

Local writers have emphasised that CE activities should have an intentional public purpose that undergirds the social responsiveness mandate of universities (Favish *et al.*, 2013). Favish, McMillan and Ngcelwane (2012) commented that there was some consensus amongst South African universities regarding the common elements that characterise CE. To this end Favish *et al.*, (2013) advocated strategies such as service learning, clinical service, continuing education courses, and the collaborative production of popular educational material as salient engagement activities.

Whilst South African scholars have affirmed that CE, alongside teaching and research, are one of the three core responsibilities of a university (Naidu, 2019; Preece, 2017), many have not yet discussed how it may be integrated into the academic programme. Some of the reasons for this are as Bidandi, Ambe and Mukong (2021: 5) have said, that CE, although productive, can be “complex, difficult and challenging”. These challenges appear to be linked to the conceptualisation and theorisation of CE in South Africa (Pienaar-Steyn, 2012; Bhagwan, 2017a), which has made it difficult to integrate into the academic landscape.

Johnson (2020) rightly affirmed that whilst there remains a substantive conceptualisation of CE, it has been exacerbated by the contradictory placement of CE within community and university structures. He argued the need to strengthen the efforts of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum to advance the CE mandate across local universities. The lack of a homogenous measurement tool to investigate the impact of CE, has further challenged understanding its impact in the local context (Hart, 2010; Nkoana & Dichaba, 2017). In this vein Daniels and Adonis (2020) commented that the quality assurance of engagement was a cause for concern in the last cycle of audits of South African universities by the HEQC.

Despite the challenges related to understanding CE, empirical work has grown related to this third pillar of higher education. Bhagwan (2017a) reported that the core values underpinning engagement at South African universities included social justice, integrity, inclusivity, trust, respect, and care. Although Musesengwa, Chimbari and Mukaratirwa (2017) indicated that there has been no published study that demonstrates what CE strategy is most effective, Bhagwan's (2017b) study found that engagement should focus on engaging for change, mutuality and reciprocity, co-designing solutions with communities, co-creation of knowledge and understanding indigenous knowledge. It is against this backdrop of research that this exploratory study was undertaken to gain further insight into how academics understand CE, the processes involved, and the role of the university in catalysing change.

## 2. Literature review

Boyer's (1996) model of community engagement was the theoretical framework that guided this study. The four key dimensions that underpin his model, namely discovery, integration, application and teaching, are seen as interdependent and interrelated aspects of advancing knowledge and wisdom (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Discovery aims to discern and share new knowledge or extend existing knowledge in novel ways through traditional research (Wilson, 2014). This allows for the transformation of societal problems and questions into useable knowledge using scientific methods (Steinert, 2017). In health science education, the scholarship of discovery includes original research that can create a deeper understanding of community health problems and community-based solutions to such problems. The scholarship of discovery promotes collaborative research between communities and universities in novel ways that elevate research to produce new knowledge for the community and the university (Mtawa, Fongwa & Wangenge-Ouma, 2016). Scholarship of discovery is closely related to the scholarship of integration (Boyer, 1990).

The scholarship of integration interprets and engages knowledge across disciplines in health education which includes knowledge syntheses or integrating concepts from other fields as well as allied health science education (Steinert, 2017). Transdisciplinary integration allows for collective intelligence to approach and solve problems thereby addressing contextual issues of concern for the scholarship of integration capacity building, creating sustainable systems (Steinert, 2017). The rapid pace of societal change with the increasing burden of disease together with a global pandemic has elevated the importance of this form of scholarship to involve members from different disciplinary homes, to form collaborations to address social and health challenges and encompasses a wide variety of activities and strategies (Adhikari, Pell d Centre for Social Science and Global Health, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; e Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development, Amsterdam, The Netherlands & Cheah, 2020). These strategies include meetings with community members, working with community boards or involving members of the community in designing and implementing research activities (Adhikari, *et al.*, 2020).

The third element of Boyer's model, namely the scholarship of application, explores ways in which knowledge can solve health issues and serve the community and academia (Adhikari, *et al.*, 2020). This form of scholarship has gained momentum, as greater priority has been given to creating contextually relevant knowledge that is useful to society. Boyer's (1996) theoretical framework is relevant to community engagement, as it enables creativity to generate new contextual knowledge that is relevant in the day-to-day lives of communities. Holland (2005) argued that universities must become participants where discovery, learning and engagement are integrated activities that involve many sources of knowledge generated in diverse settings by a variety of contributors of CE activities. This will lead students to become reflective practitioners by integrating theory with practice. Furthermore, students should be placed and have lived experiences in communities to enhance in-person interactions where they can apply academic knowledge and learn from communities with diverse patient populations (Mtawa, Fongwa & Wangenge-Ouma, 2016).

The scholarship of teaching is regarded as the fourth pillar of Boyer's model. The emphasis on teaching culminates into a learning community that includes community members, students, academics and service providers (McCaslin & Scott, 2012). In an engaged context teaching enables the creation of environments within which students, staff and community members

equally engage in teaching and learning processes. Teaching with an engaged focus allows all parties involved in CE to be more active, encouraging critical thinking and lifelong learners (Boyer, 1990). The scholarship of teaching provides students with skills to meet the needs of society (McCaslin & Scott, 2012).

In summary, Boyer's model guides CE practice in a context of knowledge exchange. Academic collaboration with communities should enrich the HEI's core functions whilst addressing challenges of communities (Geffer *et al.*, 2019; Steinert, 2017). This consequently promotes community development and civic responsibility (Steinert, 2017), making his model relevant to the objective of this study.

While higher education has traditionally focused on research and teaching, a third function that has emerged is community development and civic responsibility (Bowers, 2018). Scholars have advocated that universities must engage with their communities by being responsive to community needs, by being willing to increase community accessibility, and by integrating their service mission with other responsibilities (Adamuti-Trache & Hyle, 2015).

Engagement brings together community, industry and public service inputs, and solidifies them with the intellectual horsepower of the university (Bartkowiak-Theron & Anderson, 2014). CE nurtures the development of a symbiotic relationship where communities form the human resources needed by universities to enable their purpose (Bowers, 2018). In this way, universities are not seen as isolated agents of knowledge generating and transforming information, but as co-agents working in collaboration with their community partners toward economic and social development (Lozano *et al.*, 2017). Engagement occurs through various teaching and learning initiatives such as student placements or workplace internships (Lozano *et al.*, 2017). These initiatives are envisioned to assist students with obtaining future employment, developing a sense of social responsibility, becoming knowledgeable and more active citizens of their local environment, their nation, and the global world (Bartkowiak-Theron & Anderson, 2014). Such engagement and community service learning initiatives reflect an inclusive educational paradigm that marries thought and action, reason and emotion, education and life; and does not separate students from their social and natural context (Barry, 2014).

A qualitative study by Bidandi *et al.*, (2021: 09) at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, explored how twelve academics understood community engagement using semi-structured interviews. These participants believed that the university benefits tremendously through its engagement with the community, as the community provides a platform for academics and students to conduct research and outreach, which not only benefits academia but the community as a whole (Bidandi *et al.*, 2021: 10). Academics further expressed that working with the communities, allowed universities to strengthen their dedication and mission to community engagement (Bidandi, *et al.*, 2021: 9). Moreover, indigenous knowledge is distilled through such engagement and students are given the opportunity to practise clinical skills training and gain relevant experience (Bidandi, *et al.*, 2021: 9). This consequently benefits the university and enables the learning outcomes of students, whilst enriching curricula that are relevant to community issues.

Bhagwan (2017: 171a), in her study, sought to understand how community engagement was understood by academics and community engagement administrators, at six selected South African universities. This was also done through interviews and focus group discussions with thirty-three academics and administrative officials who were directly involved with community engagement projects (Bhagwan, 2017a). These participants expressed that

academics were of the view that community engagement is about engaging for change, mutuality and reciprocity, co-designing solutions with communities, the co-creation of knowledge and strengthening an understanding of indigenous knowledge (Bhagwan, 2017a).

One of the easiest pathways to promoting engagement is through service learning. Beere, Votruba and Wells (2011) described service learning as a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets needs identified by the community and provides reflection on the service activity, in order to gain a better understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an elevated sense of personal value and civic responsibility. It has been defined as a “teaching and learning pedagogy that engages faculty, students and community members in a partnership to achieve academic learning objectives, meet community needs, and promote civic responsibility” (Barry, 2014: 5). Barry (2014: 5) added that it was “a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves”. This process enables students to link personal and social development with academic and cognitive development experiences, which enhance their understanding (Barry, 2014). As university-society relationships strengthen, so does service learning as it links students and communities with specific educational and civic goals for both (Singh, 2020).

Internationally, Jacob *et al.* (2015) noted that Asia’s university programmes include the Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education Projects, which were developed for knowledge generation and sharing. A study conducted by Nicholas at the New Zealand Institute of Technology in 2017, explored the perceptions of academics that utilised CE and work-integrated learning (WIL). The study found that the academics all advocated greater access to such networks and expertise, which they believed would further enhance student development and community empowerment WIL.

Another study by Fisher *et al.*, at Newcastle University in 2018, investigated the impact of CE on students’ rural health placement experiences. Forty-seven per cent of the students “strongly agreed” that they obtained valuable professional experience, and 65% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that these placements positively influenced their professional practice. Seventy per cent of the students reported an improved ability to communicate and sixty-two per cent stated experiencing an improvement regarding improving vulnerable community groups which contributed to augmenting their knowledge and skills concerning health issues. A total of 75% of students either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their participation in CE programmes had increased their knowledge of the social determinants of health. The researchers concluded that students gained an appreciation of the health care needs and priorities of the community; and their perspectives concerning how they could contribute to the health and well-being of the community was broadened (Fisher *et al.*, 2018). In addition, academics from this study reported that their students gained generic knowledge about the context in which health care is delivered to specific societal groups. They also reported that half of the student sample found that engagement had contributed to them becoming more confident in their health professional roles, expanding their new professional practice capabilities and by enhancing their understanding of the nature of rural practice (Fisher *et al.*, 2018).

Student volunteerism is recognised as part of service learning but does not necessarily involve academic learning (Sherraden, Lough & Bopp, 2013). A study by Ling and Chui (2016) found that students who participate in volunteer projects develop civil responsibility, life skills and academic skills. Johnston, Acker and MacQuarrie (2018) argued that exposing students to real people in real life settings, offers students opportunities to interact with community members in an authentic setting. Holsapple (2012) researched the effects of volunteerism by reviewing 55 studies in the United States that explored the effects of volunteerism on students. He found that it led to students volunteering to serve communities after they graduated. It also enabled them to socialise with persons from different racial or ethnic groups. Johnston *et al.* (2018) also explored the effect of volunteerism on paramedic students who were working in an underprivileged rural community. They were found to demonstrate improved social and communication skills post volunteering. In another study of 191 emergency care students from Charles Sturt University, participants had to complete 50 hours of health screening volunteering and WIL with local communities (Johnston *et al.*, 2018: 6). A total of 77.3% who participated in the study expressed that they developed a sense of civic duty and felt that they had made a positive contribution to the community.

CE has thus become a key element in the strategic direction of many universities, providing a bridge between students' academic work and their professional future (Singh, 2020). Moreover, it engenders in students a sense of community connection and consciousness (Johnston *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, students gain in aspects of commitment to their communities, leadership skills and social values (Allen, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to explore how CE was understood, what processes underpinned engagement and the role of the university in catalysing change.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Study design and setting

The study used a qualitative research approach as it endeavoured to place the researcher in a real-world context by focusing on the whole human experience, and the meanings ascribed by individuals living the experience (Polit & Beck, 2012). Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Elmusharaf, 2012). In this study the views and experiences of academics from a University of Technology, in eThekweni, KwaZulu-Natal, were sought to understand how they understood CE and what processes underpinned their engagement activities. The research questions were: how do academics in the Faculty of Health Sciences conceptualise CE? and, what were the processes underpinning CE and its benefits? Interviews with academics took place at the university, in all instances, in the office of each of the academics. Focus group interviews with Health Science students were held at the university, in the faculty board room.

#### 3.2 Sample

Following qualitative inquiries, a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling, was used to recruit the participants. Purposive sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Polit & Beck, 2012). There were two samples, namely academics and students. Both samples were purposefully selected from the Departments of

Nursing, Environmental Health, and Homeopathy in the Faculty of Health Sciences. These departments were chosen because their courses had extensive community placements, which required them to work within local communities. These academics from these departments were chosen because of their knowledge regarding community health and their experience in clinical and theoretical teaching and facilitation of service learning or other community engagement projects. In total, 14 academics participated in the study and 24 students participated in the focus group discussions. Students who were recruited were also those who had been involved in CE projects.

The academics can be identified as “A” for academics, followed by the corresponding interview number e.g. (*A 1 interview*). Students can be identified as “S” followed by the student number and the focus group discussion number e.g. (*S3 FGD 1*). Given that there were two focus groups, they were identified as “*FGD 1*” or “*FGD 2*.”

### 3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Technology where the study was conducted (IREC 013/18). Written permission from the gatekeepers at the university was obtained prior to accessing any participants. Additionally, permission from heads of departments was sought prior to any interviews or focus group discussions. All participants were required to complete an informed consent form prior to the commencement of any interview or focus group discussion.

### 3.4 Data collection process

Data collection commenced in October 2018 and was completed in March 2019. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, using an interview schedule with predetermined questions were used to collect the data from the academics (Greeff, 2011). Data were collected as follows:

- Interviews with academics (sample one)

Phase one began with interviews that lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. Fourteen academics were interviewed. Questions focused on how they conceptualise community engagement, the role of the university in promoting community engagement and how faculty members from Health Sciences could advance the community engagement mandate.

- Focus group discussions with students (sample two)

A total of 10 and 14 undergraduate students were included in each of the two group discussions respectively. The focus group discussions were guided by a focus group schedule and lasted approximately 90 minutes. These focus group discussions were conducted in February 2019 and July 2019. The participants were asked about their understanding of community engagement, its processes and what they thought the university’s role was in promoting community engagement.

### 3.5 Data analysis

The data were analysed using the six phases of thematic data analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (in Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Phase 1, which involved familiarisation with the data, was implemented by digitally recording and transcribing the interviews and group discussion verbatim. This was followed by reading and re-reading the data to obtain a richer understanding of the data. Phase 2, focused on coding and the generation of a preliminary

coding scheme that served as a template for the data analysis. All the data were then coded, collated and the relevant data extracted. It was then organised into significant groups and given labels. Phase 3 entailed a search for themes, related to community engagement from the codes/labels that were identified. Similar themes and recurring patterns in the data were linked together and the contrasts and differences identified. Phase 4 focused on reviewing themes, which meant that each theme was checked to determine that the data reflected a correct narrative, and that the themes answered the research questions correctly. Phase 5 led to defining and naming themes, where the researcher summarised the scope and contents of each theme and then gave each theme a name that was clear and accurate. In the final phase, the themes created were written up and used to develop insights into community engagement. The literature reviewed on community engagement was used to substantiate the findings made. More importantly the findings were appraised by an expert committee that validated them.

### 3.6 Trustworthiness

The four criteria of Guba's model related to trustworthiness, namely, credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability, were used to ensure the rigour of the study (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014). Credibility or confidence in the truth involves conducting the study in a way that enhances the believability of its findings, and, taking steps to demonstrate credibility in the research report (Polit & Beck, 2012; Fouche & Schurink, 2011). The researcher read and re-read the transcriptions to ensure they were accurately transcribed. There was also prolonged engagement to ensure authenticity coupled with data triangulation. The latter occurred by using academics and students. An expert validation committee was set up to validate findings made.

Transferability, according to Polit and Beck (2012), indicates the degree to which findings can be transferred to or be applied in other settings or groups. The researcher provided sufficient thick descriptive data and used the expressions or voices of the participants to get a sense of "being there" and decide whether the study findings could be transferred to another setting (Fouche & Schurink, 2011). The researcher was also able to provide a thick description of the study context, the selection and characteristics of participants, the data collection process and the process of analysis to enable transferability of the study to another context.

Confirmability refers to how well the collected data can support the research findings (Fouche & Schurink, 2011). The collected data will need to be representative of what the participants actually stated without manipulation; thus, maintaining accuracy and objectivity (Polit & Beck, 2012). Data in this study was recorded and transcribed verbatim with no adjustments or omissions. The researcher recorded the participants' actual words and noted the participant's emotions without bias and the interpretation. Hence, the data was honest and not invented or swayed. A cross-check of quotations in the study allowed for checking of the accuracy and context of the quotes in their original context (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014).

## 4. Discussion of findings

Three broad themes and eight subthemes emerged from the data. They focused on conceptualising CE (Theme 1); the process of CE (Theme 2) and the university as a catalyst for effecting societal change (Theme 3).

## 4.1 Theme 1: Conceptualising CE

There were two sub-themes that emerged under Theme 1, namely: CE as a symbiotic partnership and engagement as a collaborative partnership.

### 4.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: CE as a symbiotic partnership

CE was conceptualised as a symbiotic relationship between the community and the university. Participants described it as a “*shared partnership*” (A12) that was “*interactive, a two-way process as both entities should benefit*” (A4). The most important aspect emphasised however was that “*it should not be unequally balanced. The community should get out as much as the university person actually doing it*” (A10). Another academic said that “*CE should be symbiotic; it should work for the community*” (A1).

The notion of it being a symbiotic relationship was exemplified further as

engaging with the community to solve the problems facing the community; passing knowledge to the community about ways of improving the health and well-being of the community; getting knowledge from the community about what they need and ways to solve them; and providing resources to the community that will help improve their health (A5).

Another participant described it as “*a relationship between the educational institution and communities. It is founded on a notion of partnership and service*” (A9).

Jacob *et al.* (2015) support this notion of CE as a process that brings together academic institutions and stakeholders to build symbiotic relationships with the goal of improving their collective well-being. It was Ahmed and Palermo (2010: 1383) who described this symbiotic partnership as “*a process of inclusive participation that supports mutual respect of values, strategies and actions for authentic partnership*”.

### 4.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: A collaborative partnership

Building a collaborative partnership was also emphasised in the data as a key element of CE. One participant emphasised the importance of the university “*working together, [saying] we cannot work in isolation; we have to work in collaboration with each other*” (A1). Another said, “*You got to work with key leaders first. It is a principle of working together*” (A12). Another affirmed that “*all leaders and stakeholders must be involved right from the outset. They must be involved in decision making*” (A13). Groark and McCall (2018) also emphasised the importance of collaborative processes that bring the university together with stakeholders such as religious organisations, businesses and community institutions, in order to build relationships and work together with the goal of improving community well-being and health. Musesengwa *et al.* (2017) added that such partnerships can contribute to developing and sustaining successful CE projects that ultimately uplift communities.

## 4.2 Theme 2: Process of CE

Three subthemes emerged under the process of engagement, namely focusing on community needs, nurturing community partnerships and salience of sustainable engagement initiatives.

### 4.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Focusing on community needs

Participants indicated that CE should focus on community needs. This process was described as “*consultation with the people, and to identify the needs of the people around*

*specific issues and they also need to contribute and be part of that process*" (A13). Another participant clarified that *"once needs are identified we are better able to understand the needs of the community, the gaps, the deficits and then able to structure health care models that will cover those particular needs"* (A3). Hewitt and colleagues (2017: 586) similarly described CE as "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people". While Miller *et al.* (2019) suggested it is important that each community be assessed for its own unique culture, social structure, needs and assets. An assessment of community needs is paramount to helping the university gain a deeper understanding of the community and to prioritising engagement initiatives relevant to that community (Miller *et al.*, 2019).

Sachs and Clark (2017) also emphasised that by engaging with the community, academics can develop a better understanding of community problems and can enable community members to develop skills and capabilities that can be used for the improvement of their community. This engagement enables community needs, resources and strengths to be uncovered and utilised (Miller *et al.*, 2019). The data also mirrors Sandmann and Jones' (2019: 8) description of CE as "engagement processes and practices in which a wide range of people work together to achieve a shared goal by a commitment to a common set of values, principles and criteria".

Open and transparent communication between academic and community members also emerged as being important. Although Kelly *et al.* (2017) noted that meaningful collaboration between universities and communities could be difficult, it would be helpful to involve communities in advisory committees and participatory research in order to achieve meaningful engagement through good facilitation and communication skills.

Another participant said that

CE encompasses the involvement of health care professionals in a community of marginalised individuals who previously did not have access to health care, medication or other services; and there is an exchange and a transfer of information that takes place by way of consultation with members of the community (A3).

Higher education experts and social activists have also begun to challenge universities to assume leadership roles in addressing the problems that face societies globally (Jacob *et al.*, 2015).

Muhammad, Wallerstein and Sussman (2014) asserted that community-based research is the systematic creation of knowledge that is done with the purpose of addressing identified community needs. This means that community organisations will gain information as part of their efforts to make the necessary changes, improve their programmes, promote their interests, attract new resources, understand their target populations, or in other ways contribute to a social action agenda aimed at improving the lives of people in their communities (MacQueen *et al.*, 2015). As eminent scholars Beere *et al.* (2011) and Sachs and Clark (2017) asserted, for engagement to benefit the community, it should lead to positive social change, social justice and civic agency.

#### **4.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Nurturing university-community partnerships**

The second sub-theme related to building university-community partnerships as a core process of engagement. One participant said that *"universities should have affiliations with community development organisations so students can do community work with these organisations to*

*gain experience*" (A5). This is tied up with Singh's (2020) argument that professionals need to develop civic responsibility, and by enabling an understanding of community needs, students can understand real world problems and develop competencies to address complex social problems. Another participant said that

community connection is a major thread ... engagement means really going out there and not just talking, but really engaging with them and understanding what their problem is, their needs and strengths (A7).

Townson (2018) lamented that academic institutions have distanced themselves from society, which has consequently resulted in a failure to respond to the knowledge needs of developing communities. Research universities are resource rich as they have a large amount of intellectual and human capital; structural support mechanisms; laboratories; academic support facilities and the capital to generate more resources with their prestige (Soria *et al.*, 2016). Jacquez, Ward and Goguen (2016) believed that community relationships are built when time is invested in communities and when communities participate in research or community projects. Engaged relationships however should achieve equitable and meaningful community participation and should acknowledge and utilise community strengths to accelerate health promotion (Matthews *et al.*, 2018: 8).

#### 4.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Salience of sustainable engagement initiatives

Participants agreed on the importance of sustainable engagement initiatives, saying "*it must be that the community is left better off after a CE project*" (A11). Another participant said, "*It needs to have continuity*" (A4), whilst another affirmed "*under no circumstances would we go into a community and establish a facility if we could not guarantee that that facility would be able to continue into the foreseeable future*" (A12).

Trust and genuineness were seen as important to sustainable partnerships. One participant said, when

you are offering a service and you are building a relationship on trust ... you do not have the right to break that trust, to withdraw the service. Yes, it is a learning opportunity, but you cannot use the learning opportunity as such; it must ultimately be an act of service (A1).

Rooney (2018) concurred, saying that the ongoing participation and empowerment of community members through progressive community development strategies will enable systems, structures, culture and traditions to be sustained for generations to come.

### 4.3 Theme 3: The university as a catalyst for effecting societal change

The third theme focused on the university as a catalyst for effecting societal change. The three sub-themes that emerged under this theme included: the community as a source of knowledge; catalysing change and benefits of CE in a university context.

#### 4.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: The community as a source of knowledge

The participants believed that communities were a source of knowledge and consequently a context for education. Referring to the community as a source of indigenous knowledge, a participant said,

a rural community ... they know so much about vegetation planting and things like that ... they have the knowledge. If we go to them, we can learn from each other (A5).

Similarly, writers have said that the knowledge that is obtained from communities can inform many academic programmes and curricula (Luescher-Mamashela, Favish & Ngcelwane, 2015).

Beere *et al.* (2011) asserted that whilst academics must accept that their own knowledge is valuable, it is not the only source. This is antithetical to traditional norms, that scientific knowledge can only be generated by specialist scientists or theorists (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) and resides solely within the elite spaces of academia (Bhagwan, 2018: 9). Beere *et al.* (2011) added that the community wants us to recognise that “they have the capacity to teach us as well as learn from us and should therefore be seen in terms of their strengths, wisdom, and knowledge and experience assets”. This is tied up with engaged scholarship, which refocuses the traditional norms of academic life towards participatory epistemology and the co-creation of knowledge that changes academic roles to knowledge producer and shifts community members from being research participants to active collaborators in knowledge generation and problem-solving (Rendon, 2012).

#### 4.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Catalysing change

The participants also believed that academic institutions should act as catalysts for positive change within communities. They said, “*We have a purpose in that we serve the community in an attempt to transform our society*” (A1). Hartley, Saltmarsh and Clayton (2010: 4) added that “CE focuses on social change and social justice and the building of social, economic and cultural capital within and between communities and the academy”. Other participants said that “*CE means universities should be involved, or mobilise communities to participate in community issues that are affecting their rights*” (A13). Correspondingly, another participant remarked: “*The university is a facilitator, to mobilise community, to be a catalyst to bring about change*” (A12).

The Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) similarly defined CE as “a systematic relationship between Higher Education and [their] environment [communities] that is characterised by mutually beneficial interaction in the sense that it enriches learning, teaching and research and simultaneously addresses societal problems, issues and challenges” (CHET, 2003: 4). This definition views CE as being embedded within the knowledge exchange between universities and communities through co-inquiry, joint research initiatives, co-learning, interdisciplinary and use of knowledge that benefits academia whilst endeavouring to solve real world problems (Bender, 2008). Social justice change initiatives, which are driven through CE, not only result in increasing academics and students’ empathy towards vulnerable and marginalised communities, but also creates the chance to catalyse social change through a collective and mutually empowering experience (Plummer, Allen & Lemieux, 2011).

#### 4.3.3 Sub-theme 3.3: Benefits of CE in a university context

The participants reported that community-university partnerships should not only benefit the community but should also strengthen the academic agenda. Participants emphasised the importance of strengthening the mutually beneficial relationships between universities and communities, saying that

the more the university engages with the communities we can have a reciprocal system, where we give to the community and the community gives back to us in terms of teaching, learning, research and experience (A1).

Other participants emphasised that CE creates the opportunity for students and academics to acquire important knowledge, practical skills, and experience. Daniels (2020) referred to this as the opportunity for both the university and community to actively discover knowledge, as well as teach and learn from one another in a mutually beneficial way. Community-based teaching has been defined as the use of a variety of institutional methods and programmes that academics can use to connect what is taught at universities to local communities, and to share such knowledge with communities (Guerrero, 2018). Jacob *et al.* (2015) affirm that engagement provides community members with the opportunity to work collaboratively with universities to develop community-managed projects, such as community gardens, and to facilitate research and steer health promotion activity.

Another participant reported that

there is a training component, that students have the opportunity to exercise their skills within communities; there is a service that is provided that communities have access to knowledge, skills and facilities that they might otherwise not have had access to (A9).

This suggests that the community context acts as a space for learning that can benefit teaching and learning. An engagement initiative by an Irish university who began sharing knowledge, skills and resources with local communities found that not only had students gained skills and knowledge, but the community was empowered and developed as a result of this initiative (Wynne, 2014). Woolf *et al.* (2016) argued that universities should work collaboratively with the community so that there is a felt sense of ownership and commitment when moving from research to action. In this way there was shared power and members could provide input into the process. This shifts the university as expert creator and transmitter of knowledge to a co-creator of knowledge with the community.

## 5. Conclusion

This study added to the growing body of local literature on the conceptualisations of CE by highlighting the importance of a mutually beneficial symbiotic and collaborative partnership between universities and communities. It highlighted the processes involved in engagement, namely: prioritising the needs of the community; nurturing university community partnerships and ensuring the sustainability of engagement initiatives. The notion of the university as a catalyst for social change and the importance of honouring the community as a source of knowledge also emerged in the data. To conclude, the value of community-based teaching and research was recognised by academics as an important pedagogic tool that enhances academic learning and fosters social responsibility. CE brings with it the opportunity to educate graduates to become more socially responsive and to be able to critically analyse societal problems and partner with communities to develop solutions to the problems they face. To achieve this requires sustainable partnerships between universities and community members that are based on reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority and the co-creation of goals and outcomes (Tieken, 2017).

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