

AUTHOR:

Dr Joseph Besigye

Bazirake^{1,2} Dr Hashali Hamukuaya¹ Dr Tinyiko Chauke³ Anele Mngadi¹ Amy De Raedt¹ 

AFFILIATION:

¹Nelson Mandela University,
South Africa²Ubuntu Higher Education
Research Centre, Uganda³University of South Africa,
South AfricaDOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v41i1.6292>

e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2023 41(1): 3-17

PUBLISHED:

31 March 2023

RECEIVED:

18 May 2022

ACCEPTED:

13 March 2023



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie>

© Creative Commons

With Attribution (CC-BY)



Beckoning a new post-Covid higher education engagement agenda: Lessons from Nelson Mandela University Covid-19 responses

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic set higher education institutions on an unprecedented path requiring of them to identify alternative strategies and implement various initiatives to sustain their academic projects. With the widespread devastation of the pandemic, the purpose of universities within their communities were again in the spotlight. A sensibility of the intertwinement between the local university and the community was also re-emphasised in the pandemic's wake, with the recognition of COVID-19 as a crosscutting problem. This paper examines Nelson Mandela University's engagement initiatives during the pandemic to underline its fundamental strategic undertakings within its positioning as a "transformative, responsive university in service of society". Through an interpretive paradigm, the paper presents lessons from a qualitative, explorative case study inquiry of Nelson Mandela University reports during the pandemic. The findings indicate that the initiatives deployed by the university during the pandemic strengthened its overall community engagement strategy.

Keywords: COVID-19, engagement, hubs of convergence, Nelson Mandela University

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic set higher education institutions in South Africa, including Nelson Mandela University,¹ on an unprecedented path, requiring of them to identify and implement various initiatives to sustain the academic project (Landa, Zhou & Marongwe, 2021; Kamvalethu & Mzileni, 2021). These initiatives included leading convergences with communities through broad-based health, finance, food systems, and community recovery initiatives (Kamvalethu & Mzileni, 2021; Muthwa, 2021a; Schalkwyk, 2020). This, all while institutions grappled with the 'where to now?'

¹ Nelson Mandela University is located in the coastal city of Gqeberha in South Africa. It is a comprehensive university that offers both theoretical and vocational-orientated qualifications.

question after the #FeesMustFall movement and while considering the broader socioeconomic, politico-cultural and environmental South African challenges (Black, Speen & Vally, 2020; Habib, 2019; Muthwa, 2018; Jansen, 2017). Within this context, in auguring the purpose and future of higher education, these ‘emergencies’ do not bode well for higher education scholars and practitioners, for whom the question of ‘what are universities for?’ remains elusive. (Ohmer *et al.*, 2022; Benhayoun, 2020; Hedding *et al.*, 2020; Phakeng, Kupe & Habib, 2020; Schalkwyk, 2020; Witze, 2020; Muthwa, 2018).

This paper conceptualises Nelson Mandela University’s positioning as a “transformative, responsive university; in service of society” (HoC, 2022: 6). The paper follows with a background to the university’s commitment to community engagement through the creation of the Hubs of Convergence under the newly constituted Engagement and Transformation Portfolio (ETP) in 2019. The paper further reflects on the interruption of the university’s ‘physical’ engagement strategy owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and how new governing and intervention structures emerged to keep the university’s engagement strategy on track. The paper then discusses the lessons learned from this process. This paper’s qualitative methodology supported reflections on Nelson Mandela University’s COVID-19 responses. This sense-making approach, following from Yin (1984), aimed at responding to the question of how Nelson Mandela University’s community engagement relations were strengthened through the pandemic. For this purpose, the reports published by the university, accessible from its website, and the contents on its social media accounts were reviewed together with the reflections of the authors’ professional experiences within the university.²

2. Literature Review

2.1 Community engagement at South African Universities

Higher education institutions have a community engagement mandate derived from national policy documents that set broad national objectives for higher education. These policy documents include the Green Paper on Higher Education and Transformation (DHE, 1996), the White Paper for the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE, 1997), the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001), the Founding Document of the Higher Education Quality Committee (2001), the Higher Education Quality Committee Criteria for Institutional Audits (2004), the Higher Education Quality Committee Criteria for Programme Accreditation (2004), and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DoE, 2013). The White Paper reconceptualises community engagement not as a discrete entity, but as a core concept that must be rooted within the structures of the university when facilitating teaching and research activities. It further notes that while community engagement is a core mission of institutions and is part of the work of universities in South Africa, it remains fragmented and not linked to the universities’ academic projects (Wood, 2016). An observation is that there has been a paucity of policy developments on community engagement since 2013. We contend that this privation in policy developments aggregates the non-linkage of community engagements by institutions to measurable outcomes. This results in multiple approaches to community engagement by different universities and by different entities within each university. The fragmented approach to community engagement was acknowledged at Nelson Mandela University, which is explained later in the article.

² The authors were employed at Nelson Mandela University during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Situating the community engagement dilemma for universities in South Africa

Despite the national call for community engagement within the above-mentioned policy documents, the Department of Higher Education and Training does not clarify its meaning and how it is to be achieved (Van Schalkwyk & De Lange, 2015). The existing scholarship does not do any better (Albertyn & Daniels, 2009; Maistry, 2012). Hall (2010) suggests that this could be due to the term 'community' having multiple meanings, depending on the context. As such, Starke, Shenouda and Smith-Howell (2017) correctly point out that the development of community engagement in South Africa is hampered by the absence of a precise definition and frameworks that provide a universally accepted standard to measure its impact.

From our observations, even though it is apparent that higher education institutions are mandated to engage communities, the government does not provide funding to implement community engagement activities (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016; Van Schalkwyk & De Lange, 2015; Erasmus, 2014). Therefore, academics have often led community engagement initiatives with limited institutional and financial support. This suggests that there is a need for community engagement to be rigorously interwoven into the core business of teaching and learning and, more importantly, integrated into the culture of the university (Bhagwan, 2020; Mtawa, Fongwa & Wangenge-Ouma, 2016; Favish, 2010; Boyer, 1996). Regardless of the challenges, Paphitis and Kelland (2015) suggest that it is essential to advance a genuine engagement with the local context to contribute to developing a uniquely South African philosophical identity. Community engagement denotes interactions with the world outside the academy (Sachs & Clark, 2017; Schuetze, 2010; Hall, 2010), in a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources, within a context of partnership and reciprocity (Benhayoun, 2020; Kliwer, 2013). We concur with O'Meara (2005) that universities must move past the 'expert model', as it often hinders constructive university-community engagement and calls on faculty to concentrate more on 'outreach' and for scholars to go beyond service. This is because the participation of community members in their advancement is critical in sustainable social change as they are 'experts' in their lives and what works in their environments (Francis *et al.*, 2010; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Within the above context, we propose that community engagement should encompass meaningful partnerships between higher education institutions and its community considering shared interests and geographical locations for the mutual exchange of knowledge and resources. This is similar to Hall's (2010) description that community engagement should involve a shared vision among stakeholders such as local, provincial, and national government, NGOs, higher education institutions, businesses, and donors, including the local community the university aims to serve.

2.3 COVID-19 and emergency community engagement responses

COVID-19 has been described as a novel, invisible enemy (Shaw, 2020). The first reported case in South Africa occurred on 5 March 2020 (National Institute for Communicable Diseases, 2020). Since then, over four million people have tested positive, with over 100 000 deaths (Department of Health, 2022). During these trialling times, various initiatives were instituted by the government to curb the effects of the virus. Owing to the high infection rate in the country, the government implemented a national lockdown, hampering communities and institutions already experiencing resource constraints. The consequences of the pandemic and the initiatives to 'defeat' the invisible enemy radically impeded societies' ways of life,

as individuals and institutions had to change their *modus operandi*. While some universities in South Africa initially suspended all academic programs when the government declared a national state of disaster in March 2020, all campuses were eventually closed to students and staff when the declaration of a national lockdown took effect on 27 March 2020 (Van Schalkwyk, 2021; CCC, 2021).

The lockdowns created new impeding 'emergencies' with domino repercussions while exacerbating existing social ills and inequalities for universities worldwide (López-Valenciano *et al.*, 2021; Martínez-Juarez *et al.*, 2020). The panic that resulted from the pandemic compelled many institutions to focus primarily on identifying and implementing strategies to sustain their academic projects through remote learning, working and finding alternative ways for student support (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2022). There was an increased focus on pedagogical interventions through concerted efforts towards digitalisation and e-learning to continue with academic programs (Motala & Menon, 2020). There is little evidence of community engagement in the context of COVID-19 due to universities' inward-looking strategy centred on redeeming their academic projects. In some cases, however, community engagement surfaced within student programs that would initially have required completing a community project, providing an example of how community engagement can be integrated into the academic project (Jordaan & Mennega, 2021).

The following sections discuss the metamorphosis of Nelson Mandela University's structures to respond to COVID-19 within its positioning as a transformative responsive university.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Nurturing a transformative, responsive university

Nelson Mandela University's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa, acknowledged the impeding factors of universities' engagement activities with the community similar to those provided for in the above literature. At her inaugural address, Professor Muthwa proposed the establishment of a Hubs of Convergence (HoC) (Keet & Muthwa, 2021; Muthwa, 2018). The HoC was established to create a dedicated 'physical' space promoting meaningful community engagement linked with academic, teaching, research, and engagement projects. Therefore, the HoC was to act as the platform and programme/project that ensure active, meaningful engagement with communities, thus, mining new knowledge and practices to understand the complexities of transformative engagement and what it means to be a transformative responsive university.

The place of the HoC was affirmed by creating the office of a Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Engagement and Transformation Portfolio (ETP) in 2019. This office was tasked with transforming the university's institutional culture and, among other things, supporting community engagement for its commitment to actualising its vision to become a transformative responsive university inclusive of the community (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021). The ETP interweaves community engagement within the core activities of Nelson Mandela University, which aligns with Bhagwan's (2020) approach to strengthening community engagement by rigorously interweaving it into the university's culture and its core business activities. Muthwa (2021b) suggests that the transformative, responsive university would need to emerge at the interface of engagement and transformation and would entail undoing the university as we know it. As such, she suggests that an engaged, transformative university would be

driven by the pursuit of social justice and the deliberate receptiveness and openness to the education contributions offered by community knowledge. Muthwa (2021a) further argues that an engaged university seeks to encourage and liberate human agency, and as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, the broader societal challenges cannot be solved without the ability to co-create, cooperate and collaborate.

3.2 The Hubs of Convergence in the pre-COVID-19 period

Prior to the pandemic, the HoC initiative endeavoured to co-create 'physical spaces' where 'the university' met 'the community' to engage on common platforms to find solutions to problems that affect its communities by leveraging the university's assets as a transformative and responsive institution (Muthwa, 2018; Keet & Muthwa, 2021). The 'physical space' idea was launched as the *Indibano Ngezimvo* in May 2019 at the Missionvale Community Hall in Gqeberha as the first meeting between the university and the community. The HoC embarked on its community engagement journey with various iterative engagement initiatives with internal and external stakeholders to assess the community needs and expectations of the university (HoC, 2022). This initiative helped to form and solidify a partnership with the community built on trust.

The precariousness of the approach of the HoC as an ongoing discovery and reimagining of itself is worth noting. The exploratory work done in 2019 resulted in the conceptualisation of the *Beehive model 1.0*, which exhibited how the HoC could find expression in the Nelson Mandela University Vision 2030 strategic framework. The *Beehive model 1.0* was fluid, with no clear structure. It then organically evolved as a transformative process to create a programmatic approach to community engagement.

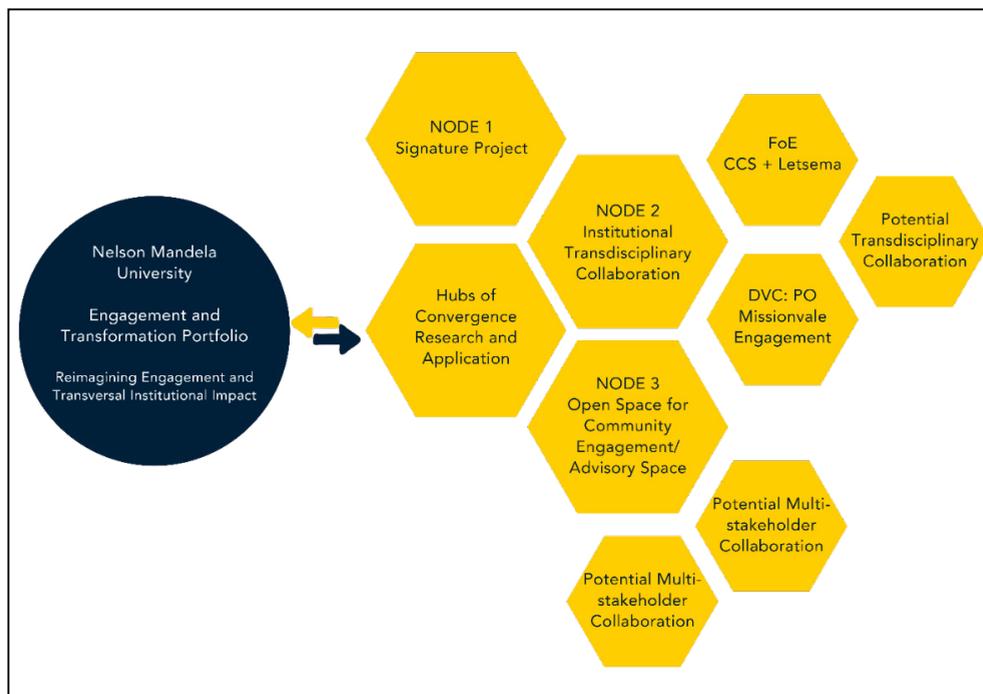


Figure 1: The HoC *Beehive model 1.0*

The intention behind the 'convergences' described in the *Beehive model 1.0* above was to draw internal and external stakeholders together in strengthening community engagement on grander issues that affect society, such as poverty, hunger and deprivation. The assemblage of these stakeholders recognised "the voice and agency of all those involved in the engagement, which forms a vital element of a Humanising Pedagogy" (HoC, 2022: 13).

Muthwa's (2021a; 2021b) aspirations for modes of engagement through the creation of physical hubs of convergence are consistent with Hall's (2010) description of community engagement within the South African context that seeks a shared vision among stakeholders, including the local, provincial, and national government, NGOs, higher education institutions, businesses, and donors as well as the local community. Nelson Mandela University's earlier community engagement initiatives through the HoC underpinned the core values of engagement, including social justice, integrity, inclusivity, trust, respect, and care, as Bhagwan (2017) identified. Similarly, the university's aspirations for the community and various stakeholders that focused on change, mutuality and reciprocity, co-designing solutions with communities, co-creation of knowledge and understanding indigenous knowledge were also in line with Bhagwan's classification of community engagement qualities. Steadfast to say that the aim of the HoC "is to strengthen the positioning of engagement and transformation as a strategic priority for the university to respond to the grand challenges of society by complementing, facilitating, supporting, and developing engagement-related work, research and learning and teaching" (HoC, 2022: 3).

Therefore, the approach adopted by Nelson Mandela University demonstrates progressiveness regarding strengthening community engagement initiatives by higher education institutions. It counters the general perception that institutions only want to use communities in the guise of community engagement to mine knowledge which seldom benefits these communities. This perverse trend is noted by Sathorar and Geduld (2021), who argue that higher education institutions have traditionally positioned themselves in engagement projects as the only partner with the knowledge to offer, and with the community as a receiving partner with very little input, as O'Meara (2005) also argues. The HoC provides space for "inter and transdisciplinary collaboration, enabling the university to give effect to its vision, mission, and strategic priorities and re-create itself in service of society" (HoC, 2022: 5). Considering our observation that there is no clear national or institutional framework for community engagement, it is our understanding that Nelson Mandela University followed an experimental approach to converge the university and various communities.

While this was a progressive initiation of a community–university convergence through the HoC, it could not have been predicted that the idea of 'physical spaces' for engagement would be soon interrupted by COVID-19's physical isolation requirements. In this context, the vision of the HoC and 'transformative [community] engagement' were tested before it had gained substantial traction. This is discussed in the following section, which introduces COVID-19 in the South African context and the new ways that Nelson Mandela University's community engagement strategy was transfigured.

3.3 COVID-19 and redefining community engagement as an emergency response

In response to the pandemic, the initial mandate and engagement strategy of the HoC was expanded. The extended mandate included leading and managing the work of the Community Convergence Workstream (CCW) as an institutional response to COVID-19 while, at the same time, prioritising research on how the university's community engagement mandate would be taken forward (ETP, 2022). The CCW was established to draw on the expertise of those within the ETP to spearhead work in service to society (CCC, 2021).

During the nationwide lockdown, Nelson Mandela University was compelled to reconfigure the concepts of "community" and "engagement" and the modes of its community engagement. As a result, it contextualised engagement according to the urgent needs that required rapid responses at the time. Information sourced by the CCW team from local NGOs active in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality of the Eastern Cape identified the need for immediate responses to cater for individuals and groups considered adversely affected by the pandemic and those identified as susceptible to COVID-19. These groups mainly included black South Africans living in under-resourced areas and women and children in abusive homes. This category also included individuals that reported experiencing food insecurity and a lack of access to clean water to practise handwashing as a preventative measure.

The university further set up a Convergence Fund to allow staff and students to make voluntary monetary contributions to COVID-19 response initiatives. The CCW was used to distribute these and externally sourced funds through food parcels and other material relief to the university's community. By 2022, the Fund was being reconceptualised in relation to the university's broader mandate to serve society through its other projects such as its food systems initiative. Additionally, funds that were earmarked for engagement/convergence activities were diverted to support the work of the CCW and HoC (CCC, 2021).

To further augment the university's emergency community responses during the pandemic, the Management Committee of Nelson Mandela University established a COVID-19 Coordinating Committee (CCC) on 31 March 2020. The CCC was set up to coordinate community responses from Nelson Mandela University within the context of requirements for rapid responses in the face of the pandemic. The CCC's role was to oversee the university's COVID-19 community response to support the government and other local, provincial and national efforts. The CCC sought "to re-position and reimagine engagement in co-creative and socially just ways to make a meaningful contribution to overcoming societal challenges" (CCC, 2021).

The establishment of the CCC also demonstrated the university's effort towards upholding its engagement work to remain on track for its Vision 2030. Their work was informed by its community needs and the socio-demographics of the Eastern Cape province and Gqeberha. It aimed to direct the university's interventions to respond to the communities' socioeconomic realities and limited access to healthcare services. The projects that emerged included tele-counselling, sustainable food systems, food and material relief, archiving and citizen journalism, and anti-gender-based violence training for first responders, as well as drawing together a webinar series and research projects related to COVID-19 from the portfolio (CCC, 2021). These projects transitioned into the thematic hubs of the HoC by the CCW. They created spaces where the HoC could participate in "co-constructing programmes in collaboration with communities, centres, and faculties across the university, as well as stakeholders across civil society at large" (HoC, 2022: 14).

The HoC's expanded mandate was reconfigured in the *HoC Beehive model 2.0* shown below.

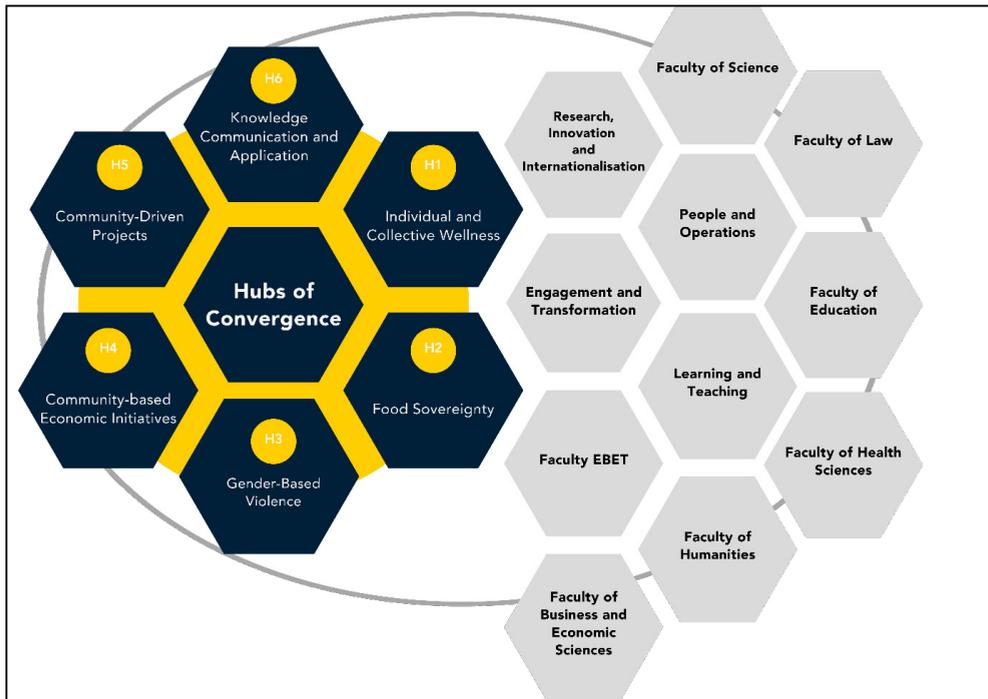


Figure 2: The HoC *Beehive model 2.0*

Within the *Beehive model 2.0* configurations, the CCW played an essential role in securing funds developing project proposals, deepening conceptual design, and exposing projects to other organisations. Meetings and workshops were conducted to report to the Thematic Hubs (dark blue areas) through the CCC (HoC, 2022). The sustainability of these efforts is demonstrated by ongoing relationships arising from the projects initiated during the pandemic. For example, as of 2022, the Mandela University Food Systems Programme had become a fully-fledged partnership with the Nelson Mandela Foundation that focused on upscaling and coordinating interventions on food and food systems-related issues with stakeholder communities. The engagement work demonstrates how the university's key strategic focus areas (Vision 2030) can interface with the HoC in service of society (NMU, 2021; HoC, 2022).

The approach adopted by Nelson Mandela University during the pandemic is consistent with Schuetze's (2010) understanding of community engagement as a partnership with national and global players. The CCC, in the wake of the pandemic, brought together various communities of experts in academia, local NGOs, the local government, local businesses and the Eastern Cape Department of Health. This community shared a common goal and interest in mitigating the devastating effects of COVID-19 in their province. The university entered into various Memoranda of Agreement with multiple stakeholders, including the Office of the Premier of the Eastern Cape, "the private sector, through the Business Chamber; and civil society, through community organisations, NPOs and NGOs, and civil society forums" (CCC, 2021: 1). The rationale of the Agreements was to ensure a well-coordinated collaboration to

combat the pandemic. To implement the Agreements, teams were constituted that included the top management of the university and the Deputy Vice-chancellor for Engagement and Transformation as the Chairperson of CCC. These teams were supported by relevant university associates and members of provincial government structures (CCC, 2021).

However, the emergency nature of COVID-19 and the response it required rendered it difficult for the university-community partnerships to proceed as had been envisioned toward sustainable and long-term outcomes. The disadvantaged communities were especially unable to partner with the university on their terms, owing to the limitations of the pandemic. The HoC's aspiration of reciprocity in their partnerships with the local communities in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan area through physical hubs was intended to challenge the notion that engaging with communities only occurs with disadvantaged groups where the university is the dominant partner, with the perception of communities being the beneficiaries. However, COVID-19 forced the university, through the HoC, to reconfigure its vision to serve the communities' urgent needs at the cost of mutual knowledge exchange.

4. Lessons from Nelson Mandela University's COVID-19 responses

Nelson Mandela University's continuous commitment to community engagement and openness to learning and readjustment, even in times of crisis, attests to its effort to stay connected with its communities even in emergencies. The shift between HoC *Beehive models 1.0* and *2.0* demonstrates that while the structures in place may not be perfect, they need to be capable of adjusting in response to the community's needs. Key to the university's engagement strategy during the pandemic can be interpreted as an attempt towards a holistic engagement approach with a view of serving the community. This was ensured by creating structures comprising community members, including experts, members outside of academia, and members from various faculties, fields and disciplines. We observe that the university followed a transdisciplinary approach, strengthening its overall community engagement initiatives.

The questions posed by the COVID-19 period point to the absence of appropriate models of community engagement at institutions of higher learning to support mutually beneficial and inclusive university-community partnerships. This predicament is compounded by the absence of a clear definition of community engagement, what it entails and its measurables. Therefore, we propose that institutions explore defining community engagement within their respective contexts, considering factors such as location and what it should entail. Further, creating key performance indicators to ensure accountability and enhance transparency would streamline community engagement activities. In doing so, organisational structures can be developed to strengthen meaningful community engagement.

Herein lie the lessons from Nelson Mandela University's approach through reconfiguring the HoC and creating ad hoc structures such as the CCW and CCC to facilitate its COVID-19 emergency community responses. The CCC played an essential role in providing, *inter alia*, effective strategic leadership to implement Nelson Mandela University's community responses during the pandemic. We observe that relations between the university and various stakeholders post-COVID-19 continue to be strengthened. For example, the Provincial Government Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation sectors sought to find synergies in post-COVID-19 sector priorities where the government could explore utilising the university's capabilities. A workstream group was created to use a hybrid of short-term interventions in

vulnerable communities alongside a post-COVID-19 innovative strategy in informal settlements to upgrade infrastructure and sustainably provide clean water and sanitation services in the Eastern Cape province. Community engagement strategies can thus be implemented more effectively when a university's top management is involved at the core of planning and implementation, as learned from the Nelson Mandela University case.

Nelson Mandela University was proactive during the pandemic in coordinating support for its community alongside its vision as a transformative, responsive university. The university emerged as a focal point for community support through coordinating resources from community entities and university contributions for a more holistic support framework. Noting that the university's expanded understanding of the community during the pandemic extended to NGOs, CBOs, Hospitals and schools and private businesses, it was possible to coordinate support more effectively. Through partnerships with Sasol, for instance, it was possible to produce and distribute hand sanitiser throughout the community to minimise the spread of COVID-19 infections and improve community health and safety. The positionality of the university during the pandemic demonstrates the essential role that higher education institutions can occupy as rallying points for communities, not only during emergencies.

In addition, the already existing community partnerships that the university had before the pandemic provided entry points for its emergency COVID-19 response. For instance, the establishment of the Mandela University Food Systems programme aligned with the university's vision regarding food security, climate change, and community service. With a vision that explicitly focuses on the university's community, it can be seen that the university was better prepared to respond to the pandemic without leaving the community behind. This demonstrates the need for community engagement to be reflected in the institutional cultures of universities and within their strategic goals to remain a priority even in emergencies.

Nelson Mandela University leveraged the skills available within its space by providing free mental health support for those infected and affected by COVID-19 through its School of Behavioural and Lifestyle Sciences. In addition, Bachelor and Master of Psychology students were deployed to offer online counselling for distressed members of the Gqeberha communities. Similarly, social work students were placed at rural area schools to counsel learners. With the community access that the university enjoyed during the pandemic, it conducted a needs analysis to determine the mental health interventions required by the community. This resulted in numerous workshops on equipping the community with the skills to cope with the pandemic. Through these actions, the university demonstrated its strength in identifying with the community, despite the extra hardships and internal challenges that the pandemic posed. The university, therefore, prepared the ground for mutually beneficial relationships built on trust and reliability during the pandemic that could further strengthen its community engagement initiatives in the post-pandemic period.

Community funding is an effective way of supporting innovation within the university. Nelson Mandela University's engineering team received funding from the Mandela Bay Development Agency to produce face shields, design and develop incubation units, and scale production. These were distributed through the HoC to the community to create a loop of community funding utilised by the university to produce community consumables. Innovativeness directed towards the community was also fostered through the university's Centre for Community Technologies and partnership with industry players. The university developed technological solutions to assist with accurate records and reliable data for emergency requirements, such

as contact tracing and information monitoring. The Centre further played a crucial role in developing and rolling out a digitised screening tool, *Carebuddy*, for use at 5 142 schools in the Eastern Cape province. The data for 1.8 million learners were uploaded into the database, and all learners were screened daily using the tool. As such, using community funding to drive innovation and create a cycle of community benefits is a lesson from Nelson Mandela's pandemic response.

5. Conclusion

This paper reflects on Nelson Mandela University's response to COVID-19 with a focus on community engagement. We have advanced an understanding of community engagement from existing literature to include meaningful, mutually beneficial initiatives. The paper contextualises Nelson Mandela University within its stated identity as a 'transformative, responsive university in service of society', which, in essence, is a university that sees itself as an active community member. Therefore, to answer this article's central question of how Nelson Mandela University's community engagement relations were strengthened through the pandemic, we submit that the university's engagement strategy was consistent with its long-term vision, even within its emergency community support during the pandemic. Restructuring its community engagement initiatives during the pandemic also indicates that tackling various social ills is possible when a university uses its positionality to promote collaborative community work.

Bibliography

- Albertyn, R. & Daniels, P. 2009. Research within the context of community engagement. In: E. Bitzer (Ed.). *Higher Education in South Africa: A scholarly look behind the scenes*. Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920338183/18>
- Benhayoun, J. E. 2020. *The new global university in the post-COVID-19 world*. Available at <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200704092348232> [Accessed on 11 March 2023].
- Bhagwan, R. 2017. Towards a conceptual understanding of community engagement in Higher Education in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 35(1): 171185. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v35i1.13>
- Bhagwan, R. 2020. Towards the institutionalisation of community engagement in higher education in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 38(2): 36-55. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v38.i2.03>
- Black, S., Speen, C. & Vally, S. 2020. Education, COVID-19 and care: social inequality and social relations of value in South Africa and the United States. *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production*, 26(1): 40-61.
- Boyer, E.L. 1996. The scholarship of engagement. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49(7): 18-33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3824459>
- Bringle, R.G. & Hatcher, J.A. 2002. Campus–community partnerships: The terms of engagement. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(3): 503-516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.00273>
- COVID-19 Coordinating Committee (CCC). 2021. Annual Report. Gqeberha: Nelson Mandela University.

Department of Education [DoE]. 1997. *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Department of Education [DoE]. 2001. *National plan for higher education, Ministry of Education*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Department of Education [DoE]. 2013. *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Department of Higher Education [DHE]. 1996. *Green Paper on Higher Education and Transformation*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Department of Health. 2022. *COVID-19 Statistics in South Africa*. Available at <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2022/07/29/update-on-covid-19-friday-29-july-2022/> [Accessed on 11 March 2023].

Du Plessis, M., Jansen van Vuuren, C.D., Simons, A., Frantz, J., Roman, N. & Andipatin, M. 2022. South African Higher Education Institutions at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic: Sense-making and lessons learnt. *Frontiers in Education*, 6: 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.740016>

Engagement & Transformation Portfolio [ETP]. 2022. *Report 2020-2021*. Available at [https://etp.mandela.ac.za/etp/media/Store/documents/Docs/ETP-Report-\(2020-2021\)-Final-Draft.pdf](https://etp.mandela.ac.za/etp/media/Store/documents/Docs/ETP-Report-(2020-2021)-Final-Draft.pdf) [Accessed on 11 March 2023].

Erasmus, M. 2014. The political unconscious of higher education community engagement in South Africa. In: Albertyn R, Erasmus M (eds). *Knowledge as enablement: Engagement between higher education and the third sector in South Africa*. Bloemfontein: Sun Press. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920382636/04>

Favish, J. 2010. Towards developing a common discourse and a policy framework for social responsiveness. In: Council on Higher Education. *Community Engagement in South African Higher Education*. Pretoria: Jacana Media.

Francis, J., Dube, B., Mokganyetji, T. & Chitapa, T. 2010. University-rural community partnership for people centred development: Experiences from Makhado Municipality, Limpopo Province. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(3): 357-373. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v24i3.63443>

Habib, A. 2019. *Rebels and rage: Reflecting on# FeesMustFall*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Hall, M. 2010. Community engagement in South African Higher Education. In: Council on Higher Education. *Community engagement in South African Higher Education*. Pretoria: Jacana Media .

Hedding, W.D., Greve, M., Breetzke, D.G., Nel, W. & Van Vuuren Jansen, B. 2020. COVID-19 and the academe in South Africa: Not business as usual. *South African Journal of Science*, 116(7/8): 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/8298>

Higher Education Quality Committee. 2004. *Criteria for Programme Accreditation*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Higher Education Quality Committee. 2001. *Founding document*. Pretoria: Council of Higher Education.

- Higher Education Quality Committee. 2004. *Criteria for institutional audits*. Pretoria: Criteria for institutional audits.
- Hub of Convergence [HoC]. 2022. *HoC- Project Report*. Gqeberha: Nelson Mandela University.
- Jansen, J. 2017. *As by fire: The end of the South African university*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Jordaan, M. & Mennega, N. 2021. A community-university partnership: Responding to COVID-19 in South Africa via the University of Pretoria's Community Engagement Initiative. *Alliance for African Partnership Perspectives*, 1(1): 117-123. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aap.2021.0014>
- Kamvalethu, K. & Mzilen, P. 2021. Higher education leadership responses applied in two South African comprehensive universities during the COVID-19 pandemic: A critical discourse analysis. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1-9.
- Keet, A., & Muthwa, S. 2021. The Transformative, Responsive University in South Africa. In: C. Brink (Ed.). *The Responsive University and the Crisis in South Africa*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004465619_011
- Kliwer, B.W. 2013. Why the Civic Engagement Movement Cannot Achieve Democratic and Justice Aims. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 19(2): 72-79.
- Landa, N., Zhou, S. & Marongwe, N. 2021. Education in emergencies: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa. *International Review of Education*, 67(1-2): 167-183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09903-z>
- López-Valenciano, A., Suárez-Iglesias, D., Sanchez-Lastra, M.A. & Ayán, C. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on university students' physical activity levels: an early systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11: 37-87. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.624567>
- Maistry, M. 2012. Community engagement, service learning and student social responsibility: Implications for Social Work Education at South African universities: a case study of the University of Fort Hare. *Social Work*, 48(2): 142-158. <https://doi.org/10.15270/48-2-95>
- Martinez-Juarez, L.A., Cristina, S.A., Miriam, O. & Raj, B. 2020. Governments and international institutions should urgently attend to the unjust disparities that COVID-19 is exposing and causing. *EClinicalMedicine*, 23: 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100376>
- Motala, S. & Menon, K. 2020. In search of the 'new normal': Reflections on teaching and learning during COVID-19 in a South African university. *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production*, 26(1): 80-99.
- Mtawa N.N., Fongwa, N. & Wangenge-Ouma, G. 2016. The scholarship of university-community engagement: Interrogating Boyer's model. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 49: 126-133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2016.01.007>
- Muthwa, S. 2018. 17 April. *Inaugural Address. Professor Sibongile Muthwa, Vice-Chancellor*. Available at <https://www.mandela.ac.za/getmedia/233de940-990b-4091-94d8-f9bcf53de6b3/92Inaugural-Address-Sibongile-Muthwa?disposition=attachment> [Accessed on 11 March 2023]
- Muthwa, S. 2021a. *Experts unpack 'the engaged university' in challenging times*. Accessed at from University World News. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021082211483599> [Accessed on 11 March 2023].

Muthwa, S. 2021b. The Transformative, Responsive University in South Africa. 2nd USAF Higher Education Conference. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFLeMbl7Enc> [Accessed on 11 March 2023].

National Institute for Communicable Diseases. 2020. The first case of COVID-19 announced - An update. Available at <https://www.nicd.ac.za/first-case-of-covid-19-announced-an-update/> [Accessed on 11 March 2023]

Nelson Mandela University [NMU]. 2021. *NMU Strategy - Vision 2030*. Available at <https://www.mandela.ac.za/www-new/media/Store/documents/Leadership/V2030/Mandela-University-2030-Strategy-March-2021.pdf> [Accessed on 11 March 2023]

Ohmer, M. Finkelstein, C. Dostilio, L. Durham, A. & Melnick, A. 2022. University-Community Engagement during a Pandemic Moving Beyond “Helping” to Public Problem Solving. *Metropolitan Universities*, 32(3): 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.18060/25329>

O'Meara, K.A. 2005. Encouraging multiple forms of scholarship in faculty reward systems: Does it make a difference? In R.D. William (Ed.). *Research in Higher Education*. New York: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-005-3362-6>

Paphitis, S.A. & Kelland, L. 2015. Challenging the dominant ideological paradigm: Can community engagement contribute to the central epistemic aims of philosophy? *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 34(4): 419-432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2015.1105481>

Phakeng, M., Kupe, T. & Habib, A. 2020. *Three South African vice-chancellors paint a post-COVID picture for universities*. Available at <https://theconversation.com/three-south-african-vice-chancellors-paint-a-post-covid-picture-for-universities-143490> [Accessed on 11 March 2023].

Sachs, J. & Clark, L. 2017. Imagining a curriculum for an engaged university. In: J. Sachs & L. Clark (Eds.). *Learning through community engagement*. Singapore: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0999-0>

Sathorar, H. & Geduld, D. 2021. A critical approach to university-community partnerships: Reflecting on the diverse realities. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 10(2): 88-104. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2021/v10i2a6>

Schalkwyk, F.V. 2020. Reflections on the public university sector and the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1): 44-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1859682>

Schuetze, H. 2010. The Third Mission of Universities: Community Engagement and Service. In: P. Inman & H. Schuetze (Eds.). *The community engagement and service mission of universities*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Shaw, D. 2020. Invisible enemies: Coronavirus and other hidden threats. *Bioethical Inquiry*, 17(4): 531-534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-020-10015-w>

Starke, A.M., Shenouda, K. & Smith-Howel, D. 2017. Conceptualising community engagement: Starting a campus-wide dialogue. *Metropolitan Universities*, 28(2): 72-89. <https://doi.org/10.18060/21515>

Van Schalkwyk, F. & De Lange, G. 2018. The engaged university and the specificity of place: The case of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. In: L. Bank, N. Cloete & F. van Schalkwyk (Eds.). *Anchored in Place Rethinking the University and Development in South Africa*. Cape Town: African Minds. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2017.1419858>

Wood, L. 2016. Community development in higher education: How do academics ensure their community-based research makes a difference? *Community Development Journal*, 52(4): 685-701. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsv068>

Witze, A. 2020. Universities will never be the same after the coronavirus crisis. Available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01518-y> [Accessed on 11 March 2023].

Yin, R.K. 1984. *Case study research: Design and methods*. Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications.