



## EXPLORING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE: ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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### Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have come under scrutiny for not sharing their substantial resources and immediate support with nearby communities. As a result, they should not be seen as deviating from the main goals of HEIs in terms of active research, teaching and learning, or scholarship. Therefore, HEIs must reach out to assist nearby communities to raise the profile of the latter, foster its growth, and provide the social capital necessary for sustainable development. This research makes a case that HEIs and communities should establish a collaboration to promote rapid gains in the diversification of the communities' sources of income. HEIs should assist the surrounding communities, aid in community empowerment, enhance the quality of life, and act as change agents to address socioeconomic conditions. The paper draws on existing literature and reports to explore each of the roles of HEIs in community engagement in South African communities. Different databases like Google, Google Scholar, Scopus, AOSIS, ProQuest, and university repositories utilised to search data. Themes were developed and used to search the data until completion. The Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) approach was applied. Additionally, the research is supported by observation and real-world experience. The Social Capital Theory is acknowledged in this article to create the foundation of its argument. The conclusion that can be derived from this research is that for successful transformation and growth, HEIs and communities must work together amicably.

**Keywords:** *Community Engagement; Higher Education Institution; South Africa; Socio-Economic Illnesses*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of "community engagement" within South African higher education institutions (HEIs) is gaining traction in the academic discourse. However, it remains at an early stage of development and necessitates further exploration. Recent controversies in the South African educational system, particularly within HEIs like the University of Pretoria, Stellenbosch University, North-West University, and the University of Cape Town, have sparked unrest both within and outside these institutions, as well as in their surrounding communities. The imperative of "community engagement" has emerged as a strategic response to these challenges, notably prompted by the Department of Education's (1997) White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education, which called for feasibility studies and pilot projects to investigate community service within HEIs. The Higher Education Service Partnerships program, initiated in 1999, was a tangible outcome of this conceptual development, aiming to assist South African HEIs in integrating community interaction as a key element of academic endeavors (Bernardo et al., 2012; Daniels et al., 2013; Erasmus, 2014). Lazarus (2008) underscores that the project aimed to guide South

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African HEIs in positioning community engagement as a central aspect of academic pursuits. In the higher education landscape, community engagement is characterized as a collaborative process involving individuals affiliated with the university, either due to geographical proximity, shared interests, or similar circumstances, working together to address issues impacting their well-being, as articulated by Bidandi, Ambe, and Mukong (2021). This research asserts that community engagement influences behavioral and environmental changes, benefiting both the universities and the involved communities. This positive impact is bolstered by the active involvement of staff and students who volunteer their time to support neighborhoods or contribute to projects aimed at enhancing community well-being.

In examining the contribution of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to the development of nearby communities, questions arise about the adequacy of their efforts. While HEIs are recognized as catalysts for community growth, primarily focusing on teaching, learning, and knowledge production, there is a call for the incorporation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as community engagement, to enhance the community profile (McIlrath & Lyons, 2012). Communities perceive HEIs as potential catalysts for socioeconomic transformation (Egerton, 2002; Bernardo, Butcher & Howard, 2012). However, concerns are raised about schools in close proximity to HEIs exhibiting poor performance despite their advantageous location. This paper specifically aims to illuminate the deficiencies and lack of effort by learners and schools near HEIs. The expectation is that schools in close proximity should outperform those at a distance (Bernardo et al., 2012), yet the reality contradicts this assumption. The central question revolves around whether HEIs are falling short in contributing to the social development of communities, or if it is the schools and communities themselves that are not fulfilling their roles.

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

South African universities, serving as a focal point in this scholarly investigation, aspire to play a pivotal role in advancing the economic, cultural, research, intellectual, and social development of South African communities through robust community engagement initiatives. Despite Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) conscientiously integrating community engagement into their framework as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitment, the communities situated in close proximity to these HEIs continue to grapple with persistent developmental challenges, notably in the realms of unemployment and a deficiency in knowledge and skills. These challenges are discernible in the surrounding areas of prominent institutions such as the University of Venda, the University of Limpopo, and the University of Fort Hare, among others. This paper places a distinctive emphasis on schools and communities due to the observable hurdles they confront, which encompass inadequacies in resources, scarcities of information, restricted developmental opportunities, and prevalent unemployment. Despite the immediate access to vital resources provided by HEIs, such as well-equipped libraries, computers, internet access, and support services, these communities remain entrenched in enduring challenges. The impetus for this study arises from the acknowledgment that existing measures, including university-hosted career exhibitions, fall short in effectively addressing these multifaceted issues.

## **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY**

Paulsen and Perna (2016) posit that theory serves as a guiding framework employed by researchers to navigate the terrain in their pursuit of insights to address research questions and resolve research problems. This perspective underscores the significance of anchoring an argument on a well-established theory, such as in the case of advancing discourse on phenomena like community engagement. The adoption of a theoretical framework lends credibility to the researcher's argument. Consequently, this paper is underpinned and enriched by the application of social capital theory. The use of social capital theory in this study is aimed at scrutinizing the interdependent relationships between communities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), specifically concerning the utilization of available resources to mutually enhance the development



of both the institutions and the community. As articulated by Miller (2001), social capital theory serves as a foundational framework for elucidating social connections or relations through collective efforts geared towards community improvement. Notably, Miller (2001) emphasizes the responsiveness of this theory, employing inclusive language ("we" as opposed to "I") to promote community participation and inclusive decision-making processes. The relevance of this theory lies in its ability to facilitate community engagement, where collaboration between HEIs and communities becomes imperative for enhancing livelihoods and potentially improving school pass rates, given that schools are integral to social development.

Drawing upon Flap's (n.d: 36) example, which underscores the value of a tightly-knit community network for school success, the theory can be applied within the educational system as a social network. This network functions as a positive force, enabling collaborative efforts between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and neighboring schools to address and rectify issues collectively. Additionally, Lin (1999) underscores the strength of social capital theory in leveraging embedded resources within social networks, constituting a collective asset that can be harnessed through community engagement initiatives by both communities and HEIs. Simultaneously, as noted by Miller (2001), the theory promotes cohesion and a predisposition to collaborate. Therefore, within the context of this paper, fostering collaboration between HEIs and communities through community engagement projects is essential for promoting social cohesion and potentially improving secondary school pass rates.

#### 4. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study briefly examined the role of higher education institutions in the South African context, along with a critical analysis of community participation. This was undertaken to reinforce and substantiate the study's assertion that "higher education institutions should lead transformative initiatives and actively contribute to the development and empowerment of the surrounding societies". The study, designed to explore community engagement and the role of higher education institutions, was deemed suitable for a qualitative investigation. The chosen inquiry approach was a case study methodology. When scholars aim to comprehend the 'how' and 'why' of a particular subject, the study's context is recommended. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to explore a study topic with unpredictable outcomes. Similarly, contexts are utilized to generate knowledge by providing a means to examine a complex social unit comprising various factors (Osborne et al., 2021).

Purposive sampling was used to collect data from a variety of sources, including pertinent national and institutional policies on community engagement, journal articles, conference papers and proceedings, chapters on community engagement in books written by South African academics, pertinent research, annual reports, strategic plans, and websites of universities participating in community-higher-education-service partnerships (Campbell Greenwood et al., 2020). Instead of employing a cursory, empiricist content analysis, Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was used to assess all of the textual data. Since I am aware that "analysing qualitative data is an eclectic activity - there is no one 'right' way and data can be analysed in more than one way" (McMillan & Schumacher, 200:461), I employed crystallisation to ensure the validity of the study. Therefore, TCA was used in this paper to develop, analyse and give gist, meanings and explanations of the themes.

#### 5. RESULTS

##### 5.1. Conceptualising and Contextualising Community Engagement in South Africa

The emergence of community engagement in South Africa has presented opportunities for the evolution of teaching pedagogy and the cultivation of more democratic Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) dedicated to reimagining and redirecting higher education towards the public good, as articulated by Bhagwan (2017). Perold (1998) illustrates the developmental trajectory facilitated by the Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) in fostering the

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concept of community participation. Bhagwan (2017) references the Department of Education's 1997 White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education, which underscored the mission to promote the engagement mandate. This directive emphasized the need for colleges and universities to restructure their teaching, learning, and research activities to address social issues affecting communities in proximity to HEIs. Watson et al. (2011) elaborate on the establishment of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) post-2009, mandated to advocate for and strengthen community engagements across South African Universities. This initiative, rooted in the transformational White Paper, is deemed essential for fostering sustainable communities. Community engagement, as posited by the Higher Education Quality Committee (2007a; 2007b), is perceived as an initiative and process wherein HEIs apply their expertise in teaching and learning to address relevant community challenges. However, Bender (2008) maintains the stance that community engagement is a philanthropic endeavor. The author suggests that HEIs play a pivotal role in contributing to the social and economic development of neighboring communities, thereby enhancing their image. Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2000) emphasize the significance of HEIs dedicating themselves to community building through activities like community-based participatory research and outreach.

Bender's (2008) intersecting model conceptualizes community engagement as an essential element involving direct or indirect interaction with the community to address cultural, social, and economic issues. Bernardo et al. (2012) broaden the understanding of community engagement beyond traditional research roles, emphasizing the need for HEIs to uplift communities across various aspects. Hall (2010) describes community engagement as a cluster of activities incorporating service-learning, programs, and research to address socio-economic challenges in rural areas. However, community engagement, according to Bernardo et al. (2012), is a holistic approach that considers the needs of all stakeholders, emphasizing mutual relations built on trust, respect, and shared goals. Reflecting on a significant conference in 2006, involving representatives from South Africa's higher education institutions, the participants defined community engagement as a collaborative effort. This effort aimed to utilize the expertise and resources of universities in conjunction with those from the public, non-profit, and for-profit sectors to advance scholarship, research, innovation, adapt curricula, enhance learning, cultivate informed citizens, uphold democratic values, fulfil civic responsibility, address societal issues, and positively impact local communities. The importance of community involvement as an integral aspect of social responsibility was highlighted, emphasizing the university's role in providing intellectual leadership, making resources accessible, and collaborating for mutually beneficial outcomes. Hence, it is pertinent to offer a concise overview of how Higher Education Institutions operate in this study.

**6. MODELS OF UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

In exploring the concept of community engagement and the role of HIE, researchers saw it fit to further discuss the following three models of understanding community engagement.

- *Silo Model*

As per King and Cruickshank (2012), the Higher Education Institution (HEI) typically operates with three distinct responsibilities teaching and learning, research, and community service which are often considered independent of each other. In the current perspective of 'service' within South African HEIs, community involvement is viewed as a separate and primarily voluntary activity for academics. Various research studies indicate that, among the three performance categories, community service is perceived as the least prioritized, as highlighted by Koekkoek (Van Ham & Kleinmans, 2021). Examples of this independent community service-oriented approach in South African institutions include community health, legal, or dentistry clinics established by university students and faculty. In this silo model, community service and participation are typically associated with volunteering among students and staff, as well as community outreach (HEQC/JET, 2007a) using a philanthropic approach. This traditional understanding of Community



Engagement (CE) often overlooks the potential of CE to contribute to research, analysis, and teaching and learning (King & Cruickshank, 2012).

- *The Cross-cut Model*

Teaching & learning and research are the two primary functions of HEIs, and CE is defined as a core notion and viewpoint infused in and interwoven with both functions (Sengeh et al., 2020). According to this concept, research, teaching, and learning both inform the CE and vice versa. The context of CE enhances teaching, learning, and research, while CE itself is enhanced by the knowledge foundation of teaching, learning, and research (scholarship of engagement) (HEQC/JET, 2007a). The "community-engaged university" is the name given to this third kind of community involvement. According to this perspective, community involvement and service should be integrated into all aspects of teaching, learning, and research. It is the overarching objective of higher education. This idea of community participation must be fully integrated into all structures, policies, agendas, etc. Community participation is not seen as only an added benefit or a result, and it is not restricted to a distinct set of recognisable activities (Joe, Perkins & Subramanian, 2019).

- *The Intersecting Model*

Teaching and learning, research, and community involvement are the three functions that higher education institutions play. Bender (2008) notes that these tasks sometimes overlap. Service-Learning and some kind of community-based research will be used when these responsibilities collide. Volunteering and community service continue to be pursued as independent endeavours when there is no overlap (HEQC/JET, 2007a). This strategy for community involvement positions it as an essential and necessary component of a university's ongoing operations. This concept of community participation makes the assumption that all research and education ultimately have an impact on the community, whether it be directly or indirectly, and regardless of whether it has a social, economic, or cultural impact. For instance, this strategy might encompass activities such as educational and research initiatives, advocacy campaigns aimed at improving the accessibility of existing university courses, graduates' engagement initiatives, or enhancing student support services. Scholarly publications, research findings, media exposure, and public discussions, all of which serve as channels for engaging with communities, can be viewed as an organic extension of universities' core duties in education and research, as suggested by Lawton (2019).

## 7. DISCUSSION

- *The Role of Higher Education Institutions*

In the realm of higher education, institutions serve as crucibles where theoretical constructs are conceived and disseminated (Das & Bisht). According to Bender (2008), community involvement by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) encompasses initiatives and processes through which the institutional expertise in teaching and research is harnessed to address pertinent issues within its community. Recognized as bastions of research, innovation, and education, HEIs are increasingly acknowledging community engagement as an indispensable facet of contemporary institutional activities, extending beyond academic coursework to encompass extracurricular pursuits sponsored by the institution. Bender (2008) underscores the role of scholarly publications, research documents, media attention, and public discussions as intrinsic avenues for HEIs to connect with communities, underscoring an inherent expansion of their fundamental roles in education and research. While numerous studies have scrutinized the role of HEIs in academic pursuits, with a focus on teaching and learning, authors like Das and Bisht (n.d) assert that HEIs serve as crucibles for the propagation of theoretical concepts by academics, scholars, and students. Concurrently, Marjolein and Van den Bosch (2010) posit that HEIs function as centers for the dissemination of knowledge. Nevertheless, the roles of HEIs extend beyond the confines of classroom dynamics in

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explicating concepts, with the community engagement aspect being comparatively under-researched and horizontally explored (Egerton, 2002). This study aims to alert and remind various stakeholders, including readers, academics, students, learners, and practitioners, about the crucial role of HEIs in addressing community issues. This recognition is deemed essential, given that HEIs are inherently intertwined with communities (McIlrath & Lyons, 2012). In emphasizing the expanded role of HEIs, it is acknowledged that their significance lies not only in knowledge dissemination, concept clarification, research and development, and the enhancement of reasoning abilities but also in their integral participation in community profiles and development. Community engagement initiatives and programs, alongside academic symposiums, serve as avenues through which HEIs fulfil their ethical responsibility to society. According to Bernardo et al. (2012), this ethical responsibility involves providing scholarships to the communities they serve and accepting moral accountability for participating in the social change processes within these communities. UNESCO terms this broader role as the "third mission," requiring HEIs to transcend their traditional role of teaching and learning (Bernardo et al., 2012).

Given that community engagement spans various disciplines and is often used interchangeably with public engagement beyond academic circles, this paper posits that South African universities need to enhance their efforts to improve the pass rates of secondary schools in neighbouring communities. This goes beyond traditional career exhibitions, encompassing a broader spectrum of educational programs to encourage those on the cusp of completing secondary school. HEIs are posited as crucial contributors to the solutions necessary for advancing community development, aligning with the vision outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 agenda, which envisions healthy and open communities fostered through education. While higher education remains an aspirational pinnacle for many individuals, HEIs' role extends beyond the domain of higher education itself. In practice, HEIs assume a pivotal role in establishing a continuum between various levels of education by educating future and current teachers, adapting curricula, and innovating new programs. HEIs contribute to the cultivation of fundamental principles through diverse teaching methodologies and channels, fostering innovations, including technological advancements, to enhance the learning process and academic outcomes (Fox, Zwickl & Lewandowski, 2020).

- *Higher Education Institutions and Community Engagements Programs*

The concept of engagement in academia, as described by Welch and Saltmarsh (2016) encompasses a broad spectrum of activities that scholars undertake in collaboration with communities. This includes teaching, which can involve service-learning and practice-based learning, as well as research, which can encompass participatory community-based research. Additionally, it extends to clinical care, such as community-responsive primary care and academic public health practice, as well as service-related activities like community service, outreach, and advocacy. In various contexts, teaching and research can be adapted and genuinely contribute to community engagement, as exemplified by service-learning. According to Barnes and Schmitz (2016), academic staff members are involved in various civic endeavours, not all of which necessarily fall under the category of research. It has proven to be more challenging to change the meaning of scholarship at many institutions, particularly research universities. Traditional belief is that real research is essentially determined by the publishing of books and essays in peer-reviewed journals sometimes clash with the need to accept a wider understanding of study (Ahmed et al., 2016). When higher education is seen as a community of academics, scholarship is the distinguishing institutional trait. Engaged research, learning, and teaching must provide the sort of proof that shows responsibility if they are to be valued in higher education and by society. South Africa's HEIs should demonstrate and share models of actively engaged learning, teaching, and research that is grounded in scholarship.



By adopting suggested remedies, communities in South Africa, especially those in close proximity to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), can surmount these challenges and establish robust and sustainable community engagement initiatives. These programs aim to enhance teaching and learning while elevating the overall profile of the community. Consequently, this paper delves into various initiatives that could be implemented to bolster the relationships and engagement between HEIs and the communities. Presented below are some of the recommended programs:

- *Provide Student Engaged Activities.*

Student volunteering; Experiential learning (e.g., practice placements, collaborative research projects); Curricular engagement; and Student-led activities (e.g., arts, environment). These activities should also form part of the community engagement wherein, students should showcase their talents and expose what the university offers in a form of community outreach to nearby schools. Ultimately, it would motivate and inspire confidence among learners.

- *Provide Platform for Economic Regeneration and Enterprise in Social Engagement.*

This programs would focus on a number of issues such as aiding SMEs; cooperating in research and technology transfer; having the necessary skills in the field; initiatives that encourage creativity and design, such as gathering employees, students, and community members to design, develop, and test assistive technology for the handicapped; Prizes for creative company concepts are offered by business consulting firms (such as social companies) that support community-university partnerships.

- *Establish Institutional Relationships and Partnership Building.*

Collaborative, community-based research projects that take into account the requirements that the community has identified; a community representative on the board of governance; events, competitions, and ceremonies held in public; a community-focused website; a university division or office for community involvement; networks for education, knowledge dissemination, and interaction between the community and the university; Policies on corporate social responsibility, employment, the purchase of goods and services, environmental duties, linkages with other countries, conferences with public access, public concerns, and help desk facilities.

- *Improve Public Access to Knowledge.*

This initiative would concentrate on providing access to existing university curricula, organizing public engagement events (such as science fairs and science shops), maintaining a publicly accessible database of university expertise, and encouraging public participation in research. Universities ought to allow learners and schools in their vicinity to use the library for information consumption, ensuring that knowledge remains readily available to students eager to pursue further studies.

- *The Faculty Engagement*

This program emphasizes that community advisors must be consulted by research centres for guidance and assistance. Volunteering outside of job hours (for example, serving on local charity boards); personnel that specifically include social/community participation in their jobs; promotion practises that respect social participation; Alumni services, public talks, and advisory boards for research.

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- *Widening Participation (Equality and Diversity)*

In this program, the focus would be on increasing enrolment and graduation rates for students from non-traditional backgrounds via creative efforts (such as peer mentorship, financial aid, and access to courses); a technique that is openly accessible to promote accessibility for students with impairments.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The progress of cultural and economic facets in all civilizations relies on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their distinct role within communities. Various stakeholders hold differing perspectives on the current and future functions of higher education. Acknowledging the pivotal roles HEIs play in local, national, and global community engagement initiatives becomes especially crucial at a time when higher education is subject to scrutiny from politicians, the media, and the general public. In this essay, we have defined community involvement in higher education and outlined numerous initiatives that students can participate in to bring about change in their localities. In a nutshell, higher education institutions bear a diverse range of responsibilities in community engagement. These responsibilities encompass sharing knowledge, providing educational opportunities, promoting collaborative research, and advancing the social, economic, and environmental well-being of the community. These engagements not only benefit the community but also enrich the educational experience for students and contribute to the broader societal mission of universities.

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