



ANNEXURE 13

RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT

Briefing paper prepared for the second national
Higher Education Transformation Summit, 2015

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Abstract

This paper argues that discussions about the ways in which universities engage with their local, regional and national contexts are inextricably bound up with conceptualisations of the developmental role of universities, and efforts to transform the knowledge project of universities. Given the constraints on the length of the paper, the focus is on engaged research and not on engaged teaching and student volunteering. Examples are provided of different ways in which universities are helping to improve the quality of people's lives in South Africa through engaged research. Drawing on the results of a national survey, the paper argues that whilst a lot of progress has been made towards institutionalizing engagement the progress is uneven and a lot more needs to be done to move engagement from the periphery of the institutions to the centre. Some recommendations are provided for enhancing and expanding engaged scholarship.

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The White Paper 3 on Higher Education Transformation of 1997 laid the foundation for encouraging institutions to grapple with their role in relation to advancing reconstruction and development. It referred to a key mandate of higher education as being to address social and economic development through responsive educational and research programmes and recognized community service as a key vehicle for promoting critical citizenship (DoE, 1997).

Whilst the White Paper for Post School Education and Training of 2013 acknowledges that “Community Engagement (CE) in its various forms has become a part of the work of the universities” (DHET, 2013:39), neither it nor previous policies contain any strategies for strengthening or expanding this work.

In assessing whether it is sufficient for government simply to acknowledge that ‘engagement has come to be seen as part of the work of universities, we need to ask three important questions.

- First, given the pervasive inequalities that continue to characterize our society should the question of how our public universities engage with these inequalities not be integral to any discussion about transformation of higher education?
- Second, should we not be interrogating the extent to which universities have **consciously organized themselves** to play active developmental roles in society?
- Third, if we accept that engagement on the part of universities is a key vehicle for addressing the development needs of our society, what needs to be done to enhance and expand engaged scholarship?

In the 2014 Global Universities Network for Innovation (GUNi) International Report of Higher Education, Hall suggests that “that the sharing of knowledge across and through the boundaries of the community and the university plays a central role in the re-imagining and self-renewal of society” (GUNi, 2014:39). To address global grand challenges such as poverty, inequality, various forms of discrimination, climate change, food security etc., it was recognized in a communique at the end of the conference, that universities would need to think about the kind of transformation that would be needed in their governance structures, curricula, in resourcing both pure and applied research and extra-curricula activities to enhance their responsiveness (GUNi, 2014).

According to the Diagnostic Report of the National Planning Commission (NPC), released in June 2011, poverty is still pervasive and insufficient progress has been made in reducing inequality. Millions of people remain unemployed, spatial and structural patterns exclude the poor from the fruits of development, infrastructure is poorly located, under-maintained and insufficient to foster higher growth, there is a widespread disease burden, public services are uneven and often of poor quality, and South Africa (SA) remains a divided society (NPC, 2011).

In the South African context given the extreme injustices that continue to characterize our society it is argued that how universities engage with their society should be seen as integral to the transformation agenda. This view has been strongly echoed in the student protests that are spreading across the country. As Mbembe, in reflecting on the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement at UCT has said, “They [the students] are asking **new questions about the politics of the production, circulation and redistribution of knowledge** [my emphasis]. They are reading new texts. They want to reform the classroom, the modalities of teaching and learning, the spatial and symbolic environments the universities are, how to turn them into livable and habitable spaces for all” (Mbembe 2015: 1).

Or, as Kamanzi, an active member of the RMF movement, has said, “In calling for “decolonisation” the very basis of the universities’ construction comes into question and it becomes necessary for us to conceptualise how we battle against the legacy of separation that the walls of the institution were built to protect. We must therefore facilitate an environment where members of the university can conceptualise ways to subvert the physical space and **more crucially we must open up channels to engage with members of society that are not formally part of the university structures** [my emphasis] in ways that go beyond top-down open lectures that do little more than reinforce “who” has been traditionally allowed to claim authoritative knowledge” (Kamanzi 2014-2015).

The transformational value of the community- university partnerships lies in an understanding of the fundamental role knowledge plays in confronting and changing the unequal and unjust ways in which society distributes rights and opportunities. The concept of engagement helps to capture the need for universities to engage with other social partners in the quest to generate knowledge that is appropriate for understanding our realities, and ensuring the maximum impact of universities’ research.

This view is echoed by Nyamnjoh, who argues that “legitimately and meaningfully enlivening accounts of Africa entail paying more attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies. Considering and treating the everyday life of social spaces as bona fide research sites entails, inter alia, taking the popular, the historical and the ethnographic [method] seriously, and emphasizing interdependence and conviviality. It also means encouraging ‘a meaningful dialogue’ between these epistemologies and ‘modern knowledge’ (Nyamnjoh 2012: 18).

It was this transformational potential of engagement of universities with communities to generate new, socially robust knowledge, and educate students for critical citizenship, that made the Council on Higher Education (CHE) embed a focus on community engagement into the institutional audit criteria (CHE, 2007). The inclusion of a criterion on Community Engagement (CE) was designed to get universities to integrate a focus on CE into their management, planning and budgeting systems. Sadly, an assessment conducted by Hall in 2009 suggested that after the first cycle of audits, CE was largely under-theorised and marginal in the universities (CHE, 2010).

During the period 2009 – 2014 there was a strong emphasis on building the field of CE at institutional level. The results of a national survey, conducted in 2014 of institutionalisation of CE, to which 19 out of 23 institutions responded (a response rate of 82%), indicated that CE was on institutional agendas at a symbolic level (CHE 2015 in press). 18 institutions reported that their strategic plans contained objectives related to CE and/or social responsiveness.

However, responses to questions designed to assess the extent to which institutions had been able to move CE beyond the level of rhetoric to the centre of the academic project were much more uneven. For example, nine of the 19 institutions had integrated criteria related to engagement into performance review systems for academic staff and only five considered commitment to, and experience of, engagement in the hiring academic staff. This is significant because integrating engaged scholarship into performance review and selection criteria is critical for demonstrating that value is attached to explicit connections being made by academics between their scholarship and the social context in which they find themselves, as well as to the production of a wide range of socially useful outputs. Six institutions have established initiatives aimed at building the capacity of staff in relation to engagement; and eight provide awards to recognize outstanding contributions to engagement (CHE, 2015). These results indicate while there has been some movement towards institutionalization of

CE, significant challenges continue to remain with regard to efforts to move engagement to the centre of institutions.

One of the reasons provided for the lack of detailed national policies on CE, and for hampering its effective institutionalization, is that conceptual frameworks on CE differ so much across the system that it is difficult to define exactly what CE is. Whilst it is indeed true that efforts to reach consensus on a single conceptual framework for community engagement across the sector have failed, it is significant that the responses to the survey revealed a good deal of consensus on “common elements which all institutions believe should characterise the field of CE” (CHE: in press). These are that:

- engagement can take multiple forms but for academics it **must involve interconnections with research and/or teaching²**;
- the activities should have an intentional public purpose or benefit;
- community engagement involves universities and multiple social partners, but excludes interaction with other academic constituencies;
- the interactions between universities and social partners should be characterised by reciprocity and mutual benefit;
- community engagement is a key mechanism for building civic consciousness amongst students and plays a role in building their commitment and capacity for critical citizenship;

It is suggested that the elements listed above can provide the basis for defining the field of practice referred to most commonly as CE. This more open-ended approach accommodates a view that conceptual frameworks should be contextually relevant. As the contexts of SA universities differ, so too will the conceptualisations of CE differ. However, it is important to recognize that these elements do not necessarily constitute the ingredients for a transformative approach to CE. A transformative approach to CE would require an explicit orientation towards identifying and challenging addressing inequalities and injustices.

We turn now to some examples, which illustrate how engaged research is helping to improve the quality of lives of the most marginalized sections of our society. The examples are derived from conference reports, journal articles, books and institutional reports (CHE 2010; HESA 2009; CHE 2015 (in press); University of Fort Hare et al, 2011; Kruss et al, 2013).

- Research hubs with academics, practitioners, NGOs, business and government testing new insights, evidence and innovations to solve climate and development challenges in working class communities;
- Research on channelling waste water out of informal settlements with the Water Research Commission and local communities;
- Exploring factors contributing to the full range of inequalities in South Africa and policy interventions needed to address these in a conference and on-going workshops with researchers, NGOs, and government;
- Collaborative research on settlement upgrading proposals working with community leaders and residents and NGOs;
- Generating sustainable livelihoods using marine and other natural local resources working with government and local communities e.g. traditional fishing communities;

² Many institutions internationally use the term ‘engaged scholarship’ to capture the interconnectedness with teaching and research. However, others argue that the notion of scholarship, even if broadly defined to cover the notion of openness to debate and critique, is too exclusionary.

- Researching proposals for long-term sustainable food security via a multi-stakeholder initiative (the Southern African Food Lab), including smallhold farmers;
- Research on how risk management can be strengthened in informal settlements by bringing stakeholders to work together in flood dialogues to inform the development of holistic responses;
- Constructing small scale cooperatives drawing on local resources and interdisciplinary groups of academics;
- Collecting knowledge about child poverty dynamics to develop an evidence base to inform pro poor policy development with children's networks and researchers; and
- Facilitating access to health care through integrating research into the activities of a people's health network.

Different methods of engagement are used depending on the research questions to work within specially created 'boundary zones' (Nyden 2005), but many common principles underpin the approaches such as valuing local epistemologies; joint decision-making and determination of research questions and methodology; reaching agreement on expectations and roles and responsibilities of different players; highlighting voices of community partners; and providing feedback to the partners on the research.

In at least one university a unit has been established for brokering partnerships between the university and community organisations around research questions identified by communities which form the basis of students' research dissertations. The agreements between the parties specify outputs which will be developed for the community partner in addition to the academic outputs.

There is lots of evidence of how academics are using the knowledge generated through engaged research to challenge hegemonic theories of development and design contextually relevant curricula, which contain alternative ways of explaining development challenges and original solutions to problems – drawing on different disciplines and epistemologies.

Innovative approaches to knowledge sharing are often used including the use of festivals, plays, exhibitions, web-sites, joint preparation of educational materials and booklets, short films and involving community members in formal teaching.

Reflections

One of the biggest challenges militating against institutionalization involves broadening the scope of what is understood and recognized as 'scholarship'. Coupled with this, is the need for recognition for the many different kinds of outputs which emanate from engaged scholarship such as legislation, policies, plans and applied research outputs and the different formats used for dissemination of research.

Challenging dominant notions of what counts as excellence in scholarship and scholarship itself will require a willingness to challenge practices which advance particular types of research measured by rankings at the expense of institutions' their civic, social, and educational missions (Talloires Network, 2015).

A third challenge relates to the lack of funding for activities associated with engagement such as field work, transport, production of popular materials which has impacted negatively on the growth of engagement.

Recommendations

Internationally there are numerous examples of how governments, at a system level, have helped to create a more enabling environment for promoting engaged scholarship, such as the establishment of earmarked funds which institutions can bid for to seed new initiatives, the establishment of brokering entities at universities, the provision of national awards, and the widening of criteria used for measuring the quality of research to include considerations of the impact of research, where applicable, on wider society. Opportunities for funding should also be explored with provincial and local governments through identifying mutually beneficial activities and entering into agreements around the financing of these.

The DHET should also consider establishing a small unit to help promote the institutionalization of engagement within the fabric of the universities and support the development of strategic focus areas for engaged scholarship across the system, perhaps in partnership with the National Research Foundation.

The National Development Plan suggests that the potential and capacity of South Africa to address its pressing needs will depend on adopting an approach that “systematically includes the socially and economically excluded, where people are active champions of their development” (NDP 2011:3). Implicit in the notion of inclusive development is the need for collaboration between different social partners. Whilst acknowledging the different developmental paradigms informing engaged scholarship, we have demonstrated above that engaged scholarship is a key vehicle for addressing development needs facing the country. However, given the pervasive nature of poverty and inequality in our country, a transformative approach to engagement requires public universities consciously to allocate resources to generate knowledge to promote a more equitable and sustainable social order. A transformative approach also entails creating an enabling environment within universities for transforming the politics of the production, circulation and distribution of knowledge and re-thinking what constitutes a ‘good university’ in the South African context.

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