

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: DEVELOPMENTS AFTER THE FIRST INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT CYCLE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how three universities have responded to the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) recommendations regarding deficiencies in implementing their community engagement (CE) missions. The Education White Paper 3 locates community engagement within the policy changes of transformation in higher education. However, literature reveals that there is still considerable resistance to accepting CE as a core function of universities. This study is qualitative and uses document analysis to understand the extent to which three universities identified for this study have progressed regarding their CE missions. The documents analysed include HEQC first audit cycle reports, policies, strategic plans, annual reports and institutional websites. Open Systems Theory (Emery) was used to underpin the findings of this study. The results revealed that despite the challenges reported in the literature, universities had developed policy frameworks to facilitate understanding of the concept among internal stakeholders and put structures for managing CE initiatives.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Higher Education Qualifications Committee, first audit cycle, transformation, universities

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Community engagement (CE), together with learning and research, is one of the three fundamental pillars of the higher education system. In post-apartheid South Africa, policy directives articulating the mission of CE were initiated to make higher education institutions more responsive to societal needs. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (1996) report took into cognisance the importance of including the responsiveness of higher education to policy frameworks. With transformation at the heart of the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education 1997), the need for higher education institutions to contribute to establishing a critical civil society was expressed. In addition, Education White Paper 3 advocates for a desegregated single higher education system that serves both individual and collective aspirations. Efforts towards this were established within the institutions and through their influence on the larger community.

CE was seen as a distinct mission that would strengthen the democratic ethos, sense of shared citizenship and commitment to common good in South Africa. In view of this, one of

the goals of the transformation agenda at institutional level alludes to demonstrating the institutions' social responsibility and commitment to the common good by making expertise and infrastructure accessible for community service programmes (Department of Education 1997). As a result, CE is located within the transformation agenda (Council on Higher Education 2020). It is increasingly being recognised as a tool for transforming pedagogy and introducing a more democratic and socially just higher education system that propels higher education towards the public good (Bhagwan 2017; 2019).

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature, including the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training, that affirms that the interest in the mission of CE is gaining momentum despite it being a complex subject. Researchers have shown that universities have heeded the call of the transformation agenda and increased their engagement with external communities (Bringle 2007; Gyamera and Debrah 2021; Khanyile 2020; Molepo and Mudau 2020), especially in the context where the first and second missions of teaching and research are always seen as the primary functions of universities (Bhagwan 2019). For this reason, Wood and Zuber-Skerrit (2013) argue that the traditional conception of universities as "ivory towers" may be changing. Similarly, Bhagwan (2019) perceives CE as a mode of bridging years of disconnection, disengagement and marginalisation of communities within academia's elitist spaces.

The South African government funds public universities as part of the national development budget (Council on Higher Education 2020). Accordingly, the government has put in place statutory bodies to ensure that higher education institutions implement legislative and policy stipulations about the transformation agenda as envisioned. In this context, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) was founded through an act of parliament, the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended), as a body that will assure quality in the South African higher education sector. The CHE is also responsible for advising the Minister on aspects of higher education. In particular, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) was established as a permanent committee to accomplish the quality assurance mandate of the CHE. The quality assurance mandate of the HEQC comprises, among others, quality promotion and capacity development, institutional audits, standards development, national reviews, and, programme accreditation and re-accreditation (Council on Higher Education 2021).

This study aims to contribute to the growing area of research in CE by exploring the current developments of this third mission of the university in the context of the recommendations made by the first audit cycle that took place from 2004 to 2012. According to the Council on Higher Education (2004, V), the purpose of institutional audits includes providing stakeholders with information regarding institutions' "responsiveness to societal

needs through enhanced student access and mobility; through research and innovation that address social and economic development; and through engagement with local, regional and international communities of interest”. Furthermore, one of the general objectives of the institutional audits is to encourage and support Higher Education institutions in maintaining a culture of continuous improvement through institutional quality processes based on HEQC and institutionally established requirements (Council on Higher Education 2004).

A set of 19 criteria was developed to serve as evaluative tools for different audit levels. The issues of CE are addressed explicitly under criterion 18. For institutions to meet the requisites of criterion 18, the following would be expected, among others:

“Policies and procedures for the quality management of CE; integration of policies and procedures for CE with those for teaching and learning and research; where appropriate, adequate resources allocated to facilitate quality delivery in CE, and regular review of the effectiveness of quality-related arrangements for CE.” (Council on Higher Education 2004, 19).

The 19 criteria informed all the activities performed by the institution, HEQC peers and expert evaluators (Council on Higher Education 2004). In the first phase of the first audit cycle, the HEQC organised several events and activities in collaboration with partners to contribute in the development of policies and systems that would foster CE (Council on Higher Education 2016).

Despite the third mission gaining traction, studies have shown that in comparison to the tasks of teaching and research, CE remains a peripheral concern of universities, and its credibility is dependent on framing it within a scholarship base in various university disciplines (Bhagwan 2019; Molepo and Mudau 2020; Preece 2013). To this end, Bender (2008b, 83) mentions that “CE and service continue to be regarded as mere add-ons, nice-to-have, and philanthropic activities”. This assertion resonates with the observation made by Hall (2009) that even with increasing incentives awarded for implementing CE programmes, there is still considerable resistance to accepting CE as a core function of universities. Accordingly, this study asks, have universities’ CE initiatives moved as per the recommendations of the HEQC first institutional audit cycle?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the article focuses on a review of literature on CE. The review of literature has been organised as follows: First, CE is defined and conceptualised. Second, the drivers of CE are briefly discussed. Third, the perceived value of CE is highlighted. Fourth, the challenges regarding the implementation of CE are discussed.

Defining and conceptualising community engagement

Researchers concur that it is difficult to pin CE to a single definition (Bringle 2007; Council on Higher Education 2020; Bender 2008a). Although numerous terms are used to describe CE civic engagement (Bringle 2007), social responsiveness, community service, academic engagement (Kruss 2012) and social engagement (Krčmářová 2011) are the most commonly used. Literature also shows that the concept is characterised by intense debates and contestations (Gyamera and Debrah 2021). Because of the degree of uncertainty around the definition of community engagement, institutions of higher learning find it difficult to pursue and measure it (Council on Higher Education 2020). Hence, the complexity of the concept leads to different interpretations and poor translation of the conception of CE into authentic transformation programmes (Council on Higher Education 2020). What could be exacerbating the lack of a unanimous definition is that university-community engagement takes many forms, is implemented using various models, and has numerous benefits for the community, the university, and its external collaborators (Bhagwan 2017).

It is necessary to clarify precisely what community and engagement mean separately. Community is a broad term used to refer to groups of people (Hlalele and Tsotetsi 2016). To this effect, Bhagwan (2019) attests that, on the one hand, the term can be used as a geographical or territorial concept, whilst on the other hand, it can be thought of in relational terms and involves social network relationships. Then again, in terms of social network relationships, Hlalele and Tsotetsi (2016, 30) have shown that it can also refer to a “community of similar interest (community of practice) or a community of affiliation or identity (such as industry or a sporting club)”. According to a definition provided by Brunton et al. (2017), a community may also be defined by social or economic characteristics, interests, values, or traditions. Hlalele and Tsotetsi (2016) assert that a community is held together by at least two points comprising reciprocity and mutual co-existence. The authors further posit that the concept of “community” includes the supposition of “the existence of oneself for self and others and sharing collective ownership” (Hlalele and Tsotetsi 2016, 30).

Bender (2008a) draws our attention to the term community in the context of the university’s CE activities. In this regard, “communities are the specific, local, collective interest groups that participate in a university’s CE activities and are regarded as partners with a full say in the identification of service needs and development challenges” (Bender 2008a, 1163). The notion of community as active participants becomes essential. The definition given above is closer to the assertion made by Brackmann (2015) that community partnerships bring together actors from various sectors inside and outside the university. It is also important to note that in South Africa, the communities commonly targeted for collaboration with

universities are usually found in underprivileged areas (Bender 2008a).

Nkoana and Dichaba (2017, 181) define engagement as an “act in which two or more partners, such as people, organisations, and nations, enter into a symbiotic agreement”. Significant to the act of engagement is that both parties become active participants. The following definition by Bender (2008b, 91) is intended to put the term “engagement” in the context of the university’s CE activities. Engagement is used when referring to:

“The partnership between a university’s knowledge and resources with those of the public service and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research and innovation; enhance the curriculum and be curriculum responsive, enhance learning and teaching; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic (social) responsibility; address critical societal issues, and contribute to the public good.”

In essence, engagement requires dialogue between the university and the community based on a mutual relationship.

The definitions by Bender (2008a) and Khanyile (2020) bring in the scholarship of engagement whereby CE is seen as the integration of service, teaching and research applied to identified community development programmes. Hlalele and Tsotetsi (2016) refer to it as a planned process that focuses explicitly on working with targeted groups of people, irrespective of their geographic location, special interests or affiliation, to identify and address issues affecting their well-being. A definition given by Frank and Sieh (2016) sees CE as a mission that reflects universities’ determination to increase connections and develop synergies with non-academic activity. Hall (2009) indicates that it encompasses the interaction of several forms of engagement, both with each other and with the academic mission of universities.

Drivers of community engagement

Some evidence suggests that most universities’ mission and vision statements include a firm commitment to CE, teaching and research (Marks, Erwin and Mosavel 2015). It should also be noted that support of leadership and what leadership communicates is informed by the mission and vision of the university (Johnson 2020). Likewise, the idea of CE should be infused across all structures, policies and priorities (Bender 2008b). This is supported by studies conducted by Molepo and Mudau (2020), which highlight that universities need to institutionalise the policy of CE and encourage faculties to put structures in place and develop strategic plans that will facilitate the involvement of internal and external partners in the engagement. In the same breath, Bender (2008b) recommends the development of a CE framework that speaks to an institution’s unique context, vision, mission, strategic plans and objectives. Moreover, the

framework should consider the institutional culture and promote the scholarship of engagement.

The perceived value of community engagement

Community engagement departs from the supposition that universities do not exist in a vacuum but in a social environment that impacts the quality of education they provide (Hlalele and Tsotetsi 2016; Molepo and Mudau 2020). Therefore, they must establish value-adding partnerships that benefit both the universities and the existing societies (Munsamy 2013). A review of voluminous literature, for example, Council on Higher Education (2020), Krus (2012), Marks et al. (2015), and, Mutero and Govender (2019), has revealed the potential value of CE. To be specific, Brackmann (2015) believes that CE fosters new knowledge circuits by positioning education and research outside the ivory tower, thus, enhancing higher education's civic commitment. Munsamy (2013) perceives it as a process toward economic and societal growth. Elsewhere, Brunton et al. (2017) suggest that the prospects of empowering the community lies in CE aimed at promoting social justice and structural changes, assisting people in participating in, negotiating with, influencing control over, and holding institutions that affect them accountable. According to Johnson (2020), CE is a formidable transformative force and should be recognised.

Findings of the study conducted by Grobbelaar, Napier and Maistry (2017) reveal a variety of authentic community participation initiatives for the co-construction of knowledge, academic learning, growth and practical experience. Marks et al. (2015) hold a similar view by stating that communities must be critical collaborators in creating knowledge, designing research, and, defining what services might result from engagement-based programmes and community-based research. These views emulate the advice given by Mutero and Govender (2019) that initiators of university CE should endeavour to facilitate an equitable inclusion of stakeholders to increase the sustainability and community ownership of CE projects. It is now understood that CE requires academics to conduct research with, rather than on, communities. Thus, information is mutually shared between the different stakeholders (Wood and Zuber-Skerrit 2013).

Challenges regarding implementation of community engagement

Literature has conclusively shown that CE faces multiple challenges (Gyamera and Debrah 2021). In the context of South Africa, one of the key challenges is that CE is not guided by a nationally agreed-upon framework (Johnson 2020; Nkoana and Dichaba 2017). In agreement, Bhagwan (2017) reckons that the institutionalisation of CE will remain a challenge until those entrusted with implementation understand the concepts used to guide its implementation. There

is also some evidence that some universities do not have policies and strategic plans, and some of those with CE policies do not enforce them as envisioned (Molepo and Mudau 2020). Another major drawback is the perceived lack of the required infrastructure and funding, resulting in partial fulfilment of this mission (Marks et al. 2015; Hikins and Cherwitz 2010). Critics have also argued that most academics lack motivation and view CE as an activity that should generate funds for the university (Molepo and Mudau 2020). One of the main challenges is that not all South African universities perceive CE to be fundamentally interconnected with research and teaching activities (Marks et al. 2015). What propelled the problem is that most institutions do not have performance indicators or CE targets (Council on Higher Education 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EMERY'S OPEN SYSTEMS THEORY

This study is grounded on Emery's open systems theory, OST (E), which regards an organisation as an alliance of divisions with interdependent relationships. Thien and Razak (2012) assert that those who promote OST (E) consider the external environment, including government regulations, and socio-cultural, economic and political forces, to be paramount for the survival of the system or organisation. Therefore, for the organisation to be successful, it must interact with the external environment in which it operates (Bastedo 2004; Thien and Razak 2012). Central to this theory is the promotion and creation of change toward a world that is purposefully designed by people and for the people (Emery 2000). The system is pronounced as people and organisations in the environment act persistently to influence the environment and communicate, collaborate and learn from it (Barton and Selsky 2000). People are regarded as goal-oriented open systems, and their goals are attained through the synchronised effort of continuous interaction with their environment.

When investigating models such as CE in higher education, it is essential to take note of the importance of agency. In OST (E), agency is understood as adjustment through cognisant collective action, which is beneficial for creating a dynamic equilibrium between the system and the environment. OST (E) further promotes the concepts of joint sociotechnical systems and optimised human purposefulness and creativity (Emery 2000).

OST (E) stands on four basic parameters, namely, system, environment, planning and learning. According to Emery (2000), these four parameters are the foundation of human decision-making and consequently can be the source of human ideals and societal transformation. As expressed in OST (E), CE articulates the transaction between the institutions of higher learning and the external community. During this correspondence, all components ought to be governed by explicit laws. When the system acts upon the environment, the

planning function occurs, and when the environment acts upon the system, a learning function occurs. The interaction between the system and the environment brings about cultural change, and in the case of CE, the focus is a transformation in society. Emery (2000) also attests that cultural change, which is the practical purpose of OST (E), is produced by integrated series of activities in which there is an individual goal for each phase and, at the same time, an ultimate goal for the whole system. As the third mission, CE has the potential to advance higher education's social development and social transformation agendas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on an analysis of qualitative data drawn from secondary sources. It presents findings from a synthesis that examined documents, including HEQC's first audit cycle reports, policies, strategic plans, annual reports and institutional websites. The HEQC first audit cycle reports and the other documents were read and analysed using thematic analysis. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) define thematic analysis as the process of finding patterns or themes in qualitative data. The primary purpose was to discover common themes, identify patterns and make connections between data presented in the findings from the 23 public universities that were audited. The following themes were used to categorise text segments from the audit reports: the existence of CE, the availability of policies, the conceptualisation of CE, the availability of a framework for monitoring quality, and institutional structures. The descriptive analysis captured areas of good practice and identified gaps. The purpose of this study was not to benchmark the outcomes of the first audit cycle on CE but to understand the developments as far as some of the institutions that had fallen short during the first audit cycle were concerned.

Three universities were selected based on university type and adverse findings during the first audit cycle. I decided to include one traditional university, one comprehensive university and one university of technology. Due to ethical considerations, I withheld the names of the three universities and replaced them with the following pseudonyms: Traditional University, Comprehensive University and the University of Technology. Private higher education institutions were excluded from this study. This study is limited by its focus on desktop research. Some required documents were not found in the public domain. Data could not be triangulated through other data collection methods. Therefore, the findings of this study are not meant to be generalised.

GENERAL FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST AUDIT CYCLE REPORTS

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the HEQC reports. It is divided into five subsections, each presenting results relating to one of the themes.

Existence of community engagement programmes

This theme focused on whether the HEQC observed any evidence of the implementation of CE at public universities during the first audit cycle. The analysis of reports revealed that various projects aimed at engaging communities were reported at different institutions. As observed in the literature reviewed, other concepts were used, including CE, social responsiveness, civic engagement, service learning, voluntary community outreach and community service. Data analysed also depicted that some universities had a long history of CE, and that substantial projects were being implemented. It appears that staff participation differed from one university to the next ranging from institution-wide involvement to voluntary participation. In most cases, the extent of engagement differed across departments and faculties. Moreover, in some universities, CE was rendered an ad hoc mission with fewer activities.

Findings have shown that some universities provided incentives to encourage staff members to participate in CE activities. Accordingly, involvement in some form of CE activity was credit-bearing and considered in staff performance evaluation and was part of the promotion criteria. This is despite CE being allocated a lower weight than teaching and research.

However, some universities were found in limbo when it came to the implementation of CE programmes. It was reported that the Comprehensive University selected in this study had neglected CE as a formal system, and that its performance varied within its colleges (Higher Education Quality Committee 2010). Although some projects were undertaken by the selected Traditional University, the auditors found that it did not have a well-defined conceptualisation of CE and its communities, and that the type of relationship it wished to have with them was not identified (Higher Education Quality Committee 2008). Very little evidence of participation was found at the selected University of Technology. Hence the HEQC recommended seriously considering all aspects of CE (Higher Education Quality Committee 2005). It is also important to mention that commendations and recommendations were given to all the audited universities.

AVAILABILITY OF POLICIES

Findings revealed that not all universities had CE policies. In some instances, policies were still being drafted or were recently approved by senates. In one case, the procedure was available, but it was yet to be institutionalised. It is also important to mention that in some institutions, efforts to implement CE programmes were undertaken without any guiding policies. In some instances, an institution's mission would comprise CE even though no policy framework provides the regulatory framework for the task's realisation. It was interesting to note that in

one institution, the provisions in the CE Policy were extensive enough to include aspects of community outreach, cooperative education, volunteerism, work-integrated learning, and service learning.

In terms of the three institutions sampled for this study, findings revealed that the Comprehensive University was developing a broad CE policy (Higher Education Quality Committee 2010). There was no indication of the availability of a CE policy at the Traditional University on the HEQC report. The Traditional University was advised to develop a plan for CE (Higher Education Quality Committee 2008). It can also be concluded that the University of Technology did not have a policy during the audit (Higher Education Quality Committee 2005).

Generally, it was recommended that universities develop policy frameworks and overall strategies to enhance approaches to CE.

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Reports revealed that most South African universities had no conceptualisation or strategy to guide existing and future activities about this mission. As a result, there was no shared definition and understanding of the CE concept. In most cases, implementation occurred at faculty level with no institution-wide debates. This would often lead to inconsistencies between what the institution advances in understanding CE and the interpretations displayed by different role players. Consequently, there was evidence of contradictory, fragmented, poorly integrated, and inconsistently implemented programmes. There was also evidence of senior staff not being supportive and misunderstanding the value of CE. Even in some exemplary cases, there was still a lack of shared understanding of what CE is.

There were cases where definite connections were made between CE and transformation. In addition, some institutions had clear definitions of CE and demonstrated how it was integrated into the other core functions of the university, for example, research, teaching and learning. Such institutions were placed in good positions for the effective implementation of CE. Some institutions included CE in strategic goals and measures to monitor and audit processes were put in place. Even with reports of shared understanding, some academic staff perceived CE as an extra obligation that is not sufficiently rewarded.

It was reported that the identified Traditional University did not have a clear conceptualisation of CE. Even so, it was acknowledged that the Traditional University had made some efforts to define this third mission. HEQC advised that the university must engage the entire institution to decide on a shared understanding of CE and develop requisite guidelines (Higher Education Quality Committee 2008). Regarding the Comprehensive University, there

was an indication that conceptualisation was initiated. However, HEQC could not give any feedback as it was still too new to comment on (Higher Education Quality Committee 2010).

In the main, it was recommended that universities engage in institution-wide debates on the meaning of CE in different contexts. Conceptualisation was to be done about the core functions of teaching and learning and research.

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

This subsection discusses the availability of structures to coordinate CE activities at universities. Findings revealed that no formal institutional support structures took responsibility for CE at some universities during the first audit cycle. For this reason, the activities were not centrally coordinated and monitored. What was equally concerning was that some universities could not attest to the plans to establish departments for providing coordination and administrative support for CE. On the contrary, there were also universities with institutional structures established to direct the activities for CE. Therefore, this theme again revealed varying approaches to CE.

In the case of the Traditional University selected for this study, it was reported that the projects being implemented during the audit were not coordinated in a way diligently supervised by the institution (Higher Education Quality Committee 2008). It has been noted that different colleges at the Comprehensive University also implemented CE unevenly. Thus, no central structure at the institutional level provided coordination (Higher Education Quality Committee 2010).

The overall recommendation by the HEQC was that universities must put divisions at the institutional level in place to take responsibility for CE's coordination and administrative support.

THE AVAILABILITY OF A QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK AND MONITORING MECHANISMS

In terms of this theme, findings of the first audit cycle revealed an overwhelming deficiency. Almost all the universities did not have institution-wide instruments and tools to assess the quality of their initiatives. Moreover, many institutions did not develop performance indicators and targets to help evaluate their deliverables. As a result, they could not adequately monitor and comprehend CE initiatives' impact on the core functions. In some instances, evaluations at the faculty level were not in line with relevant guidelines. There was also evidence of reliance on external frameworks and assessments by organisations such as UNESCO.

Likewise, the three universities selected for further discussion did not have any quality

assurance framework and monitoring mechanisms at the time of the first institutional audit cycle. The general recommendation was that institutions develop frameworks to facilitate the quality assurance of CE activities and monitoring systems.

FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTS FROM THE THREE INSTITUTIONS

This section summarises developments regarding CE at the three selected universities. This article does not provide an evaluative critique of the selected universities but a synopsis of the current results. All three universities list their CE projects on their websites.

Synopsis of CE progress at the Traditional University

The Traditional University's Policy on Community Engagement, the first version signed in 2012 and the latest in 2019, defines community engagement as "the planned, purposeful application of resources and expertise in teaching, learning and research in the university's interaction with the external community to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes in ways that are consistent with the institution's vision and mission" (Traditional University 2019, 3).

The Strategic Plan 2025 captures CE as part of the Traditional University's primary strategy, which has been embedded in the university's research, teaching and learning (Traditional University 2011). To reinforce the CE mission, it is endorsed as a required credit-bearing module of several undergraduate programmes (Traditional University 2021). Moreover, CE is understood in civic responsibility and citizenship, which benefit internal and external communities. Consider this excerpt below, drawn from the department responsible for CE's 2021 Annual Report:

"... comprises linking the best research and teaching skills of the staff and students to the specific needs of diverse communities. In turn, students are enriched through service learning and engagement" (Traditional University 2021, 88).

It is believed that CE has been instrumental in curriculum transformation, allowing for contextualisation in partnership with the community. It is grounded in reciprocity and respectful and beneficial interactions with communities. The partners and designated communities are explicitly identified in the policy.

The policy makes provisions for the development of quality assurance instruments. See the extracts below:

"Monitor, assess and report on the impact of curricular community engagement initiatives and

include the outcome in student reflection reports.” (Traditional University 2019, 5).

“Monitor, measure and evaluate the outputs and impact of community engagement activities on an annual basis, eliciting input from communities as well as student feedback.” (Traditional University 2019, 5).

“Implement a Participatory Impact Assessment Model whereby communities work together with the university to evaluate the impact of an activity on the beneficiaries.” (Traditional University 2019, 6).

A designated department manages CE at the institutional level. All activities are recorded on the Community Engagement Management System (CEMS) database managed by the Unit for CE. Furthermore, the Unit for CE coordinates training and liaises with the nine faculties to optimise outcomes and impact. It also negotiates student placement and communicates with external partners and communities.

The Traditional University publishes a newsletter, which showcases the different projects and documents the stakeholders’ experiences. The records about CE are easy to access on the designated department website. The 2021 annual report reveals that CE was integrated into 355 modules.

Synopsis of CE progress at the Comprehensive University

The Comprehensive University’s Community Engagement and Outreach Policy defines CE as:

“the scholarly activity of academic research and teaching that involves external communities and stakeholders in collaborative activities that address the socioeconomic imperatives of South Africa and the African continent while also enriching the teaching, learning and research objectives of the university.” (Comprehensive University 2013, 3).

The policy aims also include contextualising CE, explaining processes and means of engagement and clarifying structures for implementing and governing CE. The Comprehensive University understands that its infrastructure and capabilities should address challenges such as the wide socioeconomic gap, significant inequality, high unemployment, inadequate healthcare, high rates of violence, unintentional injury, and widespread poverty (Comprehensive University 2013). The disposition of CE at the Comprehensive University is that teaching, learning and research from interacting with the community should have a substantial impact. According to the Comprehensive University, education, research and community engagement programmes and partnerships are used to fulfil the aspirations of the sustainable development goals and other critical legislative frameworks (Comprehensive University 2013).

The department responsible for strategy, planning and quality assurance developed a

quality management system for community engagement which provides a framework for monitoring performance and measuring external impact. The strategic plan that covers 2021–2025 includes the following key performance indicators:

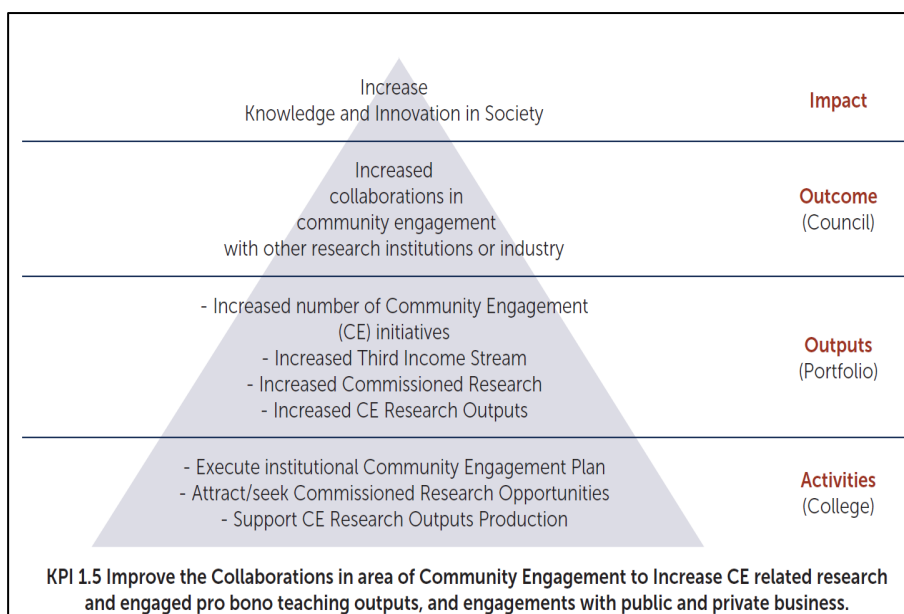


Figure 1: The Comprehensive University Strategic Plan 2021–2025 (n.d. 6)

The Comprehensive University also implements quarterly reporting and requires colleges to account for their project spending. The Comprehensive University CE initiatives are managed by the Community Engagement Coordination and Operational Committee across the colleges. The committee promotes internal stakeholder collaboration and initiates new and socially responsive approaches for CE.

The 2019 CE programmes are listed on the Comprehensive University website per college. The number of registered CE projects in 2018 was 113, and 203 communities were reached (Comprehensive University 2018). There were 109 registered projects in 2019, while there were 78 active registered CE projects in 2020 (Comprehensive University 2019; 2020).

Synopsis of CE progress at the University of Technology

On the University of Technology website, CE is defined as “the mainstreaming of the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum to advance the development and application of knowledge via quadruple helix partnerships and networks” (16 March 2020). The community engagement report indicates that CE is “known as the active interaction between the university and its community” (University of Technology 2013, 7).

The report also cites the draft community engagement policy as a key informant of the

values driving the CE mission. The values assert the following: CE must be integrated into the curriculum, fundamental strategies include service learning and work-integrated learning, and CE projects should be rolled out through universities, business and industry, and government (University of Technology 2014). The community engagement policy could not be accessed for further reference.

The University of Technology hinges on the mission of CE on transformation goals listed in the National Development Plan. CE also finds expression in the institution's Vision 2030.

The model of CE at the University of Technology is executed through the following foci: "eradicating poverty and related conditions, promoting human dignity and health, increasing social capacity, development, education, and balancing a sustainable environment with a competitive industry" (University of Technology 2014, 8). The 2014 CE annual report gave an overview of projects across the faculties. CE projects were also briefly reported on in the Annual reports.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study found that the sampled universities heeded the call by the HEQC to develop policies that will guide CE activities at the institutional level. The findings corroborate the reviewed literature, which revealed that the concept of community engagement is defined differently in different policies. Each of the universities in this study grounded its definition on its specific institutional mission and vision, thus considering their context. As observed in the studies by Bender (2008a) and Khanyile (2020), the three universities advance the scholarship of engagement which integrate service, teaching and research that is rendered in partnership with the identified communities. In alignment with open systems theory (E), the two universities understand that as systems, they have to depend on interactions with external communities for information required to advance scholarship. For instance, the Traditional University's definition alludes to achieving "mutually beneficial outcomes". The Comprehensive University notes that the engagement will address socioeconomic imperatives while enriching the objectives of the missions of teaching, learning and research.

The policy development process also included the conceptualisation of CE and how it should be understood across different faculties. Findings confirm that methods and structures were clarified. Moreover, the results of this study are consistent with previous findings that confirm CE as a conduit for curriculum transformation and social development (Bhagwan 2017). The universities as systems demonstrate the agency of creating opportunities in their immediate environment (communities) and purposefully designing initiatives that will bring about positive change. There is some form of synchronised efforts between the systems and the

environment to accomplish integrated series of activities. OST (E) advocates for systems that are goal-orientated, purposeful and creative (Emery 2000).

The results of this study indicate that universities established directorates to coordinate CE activities at the institutional level. In resonance with the principles of OST (E), planning occurs when the universities and systems coordinate activities to be implemented in the environment. During the transaction of CE, learning happens. Findings show that the Traditional University's Department of Education and Innovation is responsible for planning, providing training and creating synergy across the different faculties. Similarly, the Comprehensive University and the University of Technology have structures that liaise with internal and external stakeholders. The Comprehensive University' strategic plan for 2021–2025 includes an indicator and clear targets for CE. In line with HEQC recommendations, findings reveal that projects are being monitored and reported.

Emery's open systems theory found expression in the findings of this study. The three universities considered the external environment (communities) to be paramount in the effectiveness of the implementation of their key mandates. As advocated by Emery (2000), the universities collaborated with the communities to create and promote change programmes that will benefit both the people and the institutions. As open systems, people have their own aspirations and goals that they bring when partnering with the universities and it is through engagement with the universities that their goals could be attained (Barton and Selsky 2000).

CONCLUSION

Community engagement in higher education is imperative for the transformation agenda. The study's findings somewhat demonstrate that efforts had been made to implement the recommendation of the HEQC's first audit cycle. It was observed that there were challenges reported during the first audit cycle. The study also revealed that the three institutions selected for this study had implemented CE policies and strategies. Attempts have been made to institutionalise the CE mission, the activities are centrally coordinated, and there is evidence of reporting tools. To understand the full scope of developments around community engagement, an extensive study should be undertaken after the completion of the second audit cycle, which is currently underway.

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