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Advancing Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa: Addressing the Leadership Gap

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Abstract

Globally, higher education institutions are charged with the responsibility to play three roles, which are teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. This chapter focuses on the third mission, community engagement. Reviewed literature has revealed that teaching and learning and research in higher education have had greater attention and support from the government, while community engagement remained at the periphery of this support. The success in teaching and learning and research in higher education in South Africa stems from its astute leadership, whereas the same cannot be said with community engagement. A plethora of literature has revealed that the challenges experienced in community engagement in higher education in South Africa include among others lack of, and leadership, lack and insufficient funding, and lack of outcome evaluation for example. This chapter focuses on the leadership gap in community engagement with specific attention given to four (n = 4) purposively selected institutions of higher education. The main objective was to identify the challenges impacting the successes or lack of it in community engagement efforts in higher education in South Africa. This is desktop qualitative document analysis conducted to analyse the alignment between the strategic plan and the annual reports.

Keywords: community engagement, strategic planning, Africa, higher education, university ranking, third mission, curriculum

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEI) are trusted with multiple tasks, which are equally important to improve the lives of citizens and develop and direct new knowledge and innovative solutions to the challenges bedevilling society [1, 2]. The three-pronged university responsibilities include teaching and learning, and research and community engagement. Through community engagement, HEIs are to ensure that
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community needs are met to ensure social transformation [3, 4]. This commitment demands quality, efficient and effective leadership.

While institutions of higher education prioritise leadership for teaching, learning and research, the same has not been the case with community engagement. This is despite the notion that community engagement is among the three components or functions of the HEI. Designated top leaders such as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) in community engagement are thought leaders charged with responsibility and accountability to ensure the achievement of the strategic objective of community engagement [5]. On the other hand, the supporting structures or offices will ensure daily operations of community engagement activities across the university. The importance of community engagement is well noted through its endorsement in the policies governing higher education institutions [6]. A plethora of scholars [1, 3] has affirmed challenges for full implementation of the community engagement wing across various universities. Such challenges include poor leadership direction, lack of insufficient funding and lack of community engagement outcome evaluation among others [7–9].

The conceptualisation of community engagement has been an issue for decades. For example, in some institutions it is called social responsibility; in others, it is referred to as the Third Mission, while others call it community service, engaged campus, civic or public engagement and so on [5, 8–10]. In most instances, community engagement has been institutionalised to fit the contextual mission of the respective facilities. The 2024 Carnegie First Time Documentation Guide recommended that whereas there are different conceptualisations of community engagement, the important thing is the core value that grounds the process. These are 'participatory practices, reciprocity, co-construction, democratic practices, shared authority, and shared resources' ([11], p. 2). In midst of these various conceptualisations, this chapter will adopt the concept of community engagement. It is acknowledged that the contestation along the conceptualisation of community engagement lends challenges in monitoring and evaluating and reporting outcomes and performance measurement among universities globally [5]. In the absence of clear measuring tools, activities performed by universities as services and skills shared or exchanged with communities or other institutions at the consultancy level may not be quantified or credited correctly to such institutions. For example, in view of Boyer’s model (discussed below) in the scholarship of the application when university faculty or academics are invited to provide expert knowledge on national television or radio programme to educate the community on certain social issues. Contrasting views in the conceptualisation impact largely on the measuring of outcomes because one institution would devalue what others values. For example, when community engagement is measured based on benefits to communities or public good, the question is who determines whether the community has benefited or not? How much voice or power does the community have to determine their benefits?

The concept of leadership is elusive and fluid based on the nature of various dimensions played by those in the position [12, 13]. Leaders influence desired organisational culture and goals through various approaches and styles [12]. Community engagement is all about innovation and creativity within the respective disciplines to collaborate with communities to address identified needs. Effective leadership influences members to challenge, build capacity and inspire intellectual capacity to change the status quo and break boundaries to advance change [12]. In academia, senior leaders are responsible for driving the vision and monitoring performance towards the intended goal [14]. According to Arntzen [15] whether the leader is a
Dean or not academic leadership entails comprehensive responsibility for setting goals for all the functions of the university. Leaders provide strategic direction by infusing energy through their management role to stimulate interest and innate ability to those lead [15].

Leadership inoculates energy among various structures in the university, ‘establishing and strengthening culture’ by demonstrating the ability to maintain external relations through ‘networking, representing, conveying and convincing, transmitting and buffering’ [Arntzen p. 53].

Those occupying top positions cannot be dissociated from both leadership and management responsibilities. This is because the leadership position is governed by university statutes, laws and policies, while at the same time the person must influence organisational goals by employing unprescribed innate abilities and experiences. Organisational leadership is a matter of collective efforts because no single person can make an organisation achieve its vision alone [16]. In the case of community engagement, the person assigned and charged with the position uses his situational and authoritative power to influence goal attainment in collaboration with academics, administrators, technical support staff and students to network with external stakeholders for a common goal.

This chapter aims to present leadership challenges and gaps to facilitate the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of community engagement among the four South African universities. The chapter will furthermore present the extent of strategic processes among some universities and related implications, funding and its implications. The methodology, findings and discussion are thereafter presented. The chapter closes by stating the recommendations and concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

2.1 Strategic management shortfall in community engagement

Strategy is an intentional action to maximise strength and opportunities while finding ways to navigate weakness [17]. Strategic management provides direction and inspiration for the institution to move to the next level [18]. According to Usoh and colleagues [19], strategic planning within universities ‘is an official document that determines policy direction, decision making and institutional strengthening within the university’. Such planning is done to ensure proper resource allocation [20], which leads to positive organisational outcomes [21]. The organisation’s strategic plan and objectives are aligned with the vision and mission. Most universities include community engagement in their vision statement. The challenge is mostly in the actualisation of the statements. The failure of attaining the intended objectives renders such vision statements fruitless. Strategic objectives should be well-defined and have clear indicators to measure and monitor progress. Evidence from a study at the University of Vienna pointed out that when goals are not clear, faculty are not certain of what to do [22].

Based on the evidence that universities do not include community engagement in the strategic planning, it is important that university top managers reconsider its inclusion. This will require that all the layers of leadership be involved in various forums to bring input on what is required. In fact, if universities are to live up to what community engagement is, that is, redressing the skewed relationship with communities, such strategic planning should start at the community level to identify needs
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to influence transformation [4]. If universities are to be true to themselves [23], it would important to include community inputs, such as social needs or gaps, in the strategic planning to ensure accountability and responsible reporting in their report. Such needs will inform strategic objectives whether short-term or long-term. The community-university collaboration will amplify and authenticate their voices and ideas. This aligns with what Julius Nyerere challenged universities on not using their knowledge for self-prestige but to bring change among communities whose taxes are the lifeblood of universities globally [24].

Scanning through the strategic plans of some universities revealed that community engagement is an afterthought. This is because the teaching and learning component and research have clear targets and are well funded [25, 26]. The same cannot be said for the third component, community engagement since it is prioritised in most universities globally. This is despite the call to transform community engagement so that it addresses social needs [10]. According to Martin [27], without strategy, business is left to chance or wishy-washy thinking, which might never happen. Holland [28] emphasised the need for universities to establish strong administrative leadership to steer the community engagement schedule to achieve the set vision and mission.

When HEIs endeavour to define community engagement-related strategic goals, all role players are aware of the intended objectives; thus, required activities are planned and implemented [22, 28]. Given the limited resources within HEIs, the development of such objectives forces management to take bold decisions and challenge themselves to break the status quo related to community engagement by taking new stances through budget provisions. Observations from the University of Cape (UCT) Social Responsiveness annual report indicate the level of boldness, and the management has taken to lead the transformation of the community lives no matter how small it may be compared to the extent of inequalities in RSA [29].

2.2 The community engagement in the African higher education context

It is commonly believed that Africa lags behind in most educational development areas. While there are few universities in the top World University Ranking (WUR) report, the majority are at the bottom of the list [30]. In view of the university rankings, most universities globally are miles behind in gaining points on community engagement. From the very beginning, in East African University, one African leader, the first President of independent Tanzania, emphasised the importance of universities being visible in the communities, ‘work against prejudice’ by revealing the truth within communities through science, to advance community development [4]. The sharing of knowledge concurs with Julius Nyerere who said if a part of Africa develops, then the whole of Africa will benefit as well [24]. Thus, according to Horthemke [31] knowledge is regarded as an instrument to create culture and identity among the citizens. According to Cunningham and colleagues [10], Community engagement must be engrained in universities such that it becomes a culture. This means that it must be a tangible lifestyle through which those academics and students strive to improve those around them. Ultimately, through community engagement, the discriminations, marginalisations and inequalities are removed as university faculty engages reciprocally to share and exchange knowledge [9, 24, 32].

A plethora of evidence reveals that the other aspect of community engagement which is service learning has been receiving the best attention from most universities globally. For instance, students across various disciplines such as medicine [33], nursing [34] and education [35] and among a few are annually exposed to experiential learning within
communities. This is mainly because service learning is clearly defined, and allocated time bears credits for students’ learning outcomes [36].

The most recent quest for university transformation in South Africa (SA) appears to be turning the tide towards the long-neglected social responsibility and collaborative knowledge development through community engagement [37, 38]. The call for engaged scholars and community-driven universities was long made by the late President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere who challenged universities to use education to influence change in the African continent [24]. From the inception of the ‘third mission’ in 1800, in the West, education was challenged to include community engagement, which was meant for nation-building and not to enrich an individual only [39]. Universities are gunning towards commercialization and entrepreneurship, which relates to community engagement [22, 40]. In SA, top-ranked universities such as the UCT, Stellenbosch and Pretoria, their budget is most fed by the so-called third-stream financial system [41]. On the contrary lower-ranked universities such as Sol Plaatjie, Mangosothu, Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU) and Zululand depend largely on government and student tuition for funding [41]. Of course, there are many factors causing such disparities in income generation and allocation among the RSA universities. The main driver is the long-term history of inequality, skewed prioritisation of communities, and race difference through the apartheid system. The wounds of such a system will obviously take longer to heal because the historically disadvantaged universities such as those listed above are occupying the bottom sits in the RSA ranking are left miles behind by those at the top. This will take longer and would require serious reconsideration by the government and respective universities if the community engagement status quo is to be changed.

Reflecting on the report by the 2019 Department of Statistics report, it appears that universities such as Cape Town and Wits depends less (34% and 36%) on government funding (40% and 30%) on the third stream [41]. The allocation on these universities is much lower than total average of all universities in RSA. On the flip side, Sol Plaatjie and Mpumalanga depend largely on government funding 87% and 86%, respectively, with very little coming from the third stream 4% and 2%, respectively. Based on the funds’ allocation presented by the Statistics Department of SA [41], the annual reports of the four universities with a high focus on the third mission can sustain themselves more than their counterparts. While the business of the university is good as another funding, it is recommended that the basic humanitarian aspects of social responsibility must not be neglected [40] and such university’s innovative strategies feed SDG number nine, on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation [42].

3. The theoretical framework

This chapter is underpinned by Boyer’s model. Boyer’s model provides a framework that guides knowledge exchange and transfer during community engagement [20, 43]. The model guides community engagement using four interrelated components—the scholarship of discovery, integration, teaching and application. There is a close relationship between the three functions of the university because one leads to another. Faculty develop research out of their teaching practice, while students are exposed to the service learning aspect of community engagement [36, 44]. Evidence from most universities reveals that universities clearly report on the teaching and learning, which includes the scholarship of and application through
service learning, the scholarship of application, and discovery through research and the scholarship of integration through collaboration locally and internationally [29, 44]. Scholars such as Farnell [3] have acknowledged that the Third Mission has not received well-deserved attention, especially in the addressing social needs of the vulnerable group among others [22]. The assertion concurs with the evidence from reports from Universities, which points to the absence of inclusion of transformative collaborative activities with communities [25, 26]. Through research, the engaged scholarship facilitates community-based research that will address socioeconomic needs through skill development. Some global universities have made impressive strides through innovative community projects that address both students’ knowledge and the economic wing of the community [45, 46]. The lack of consensus on the definition of community engagement creates grey areas in reporting outcomes especially because Boyer’s model includes all components of teaching, research and community engagement.

In view of Boyer’s scholarship of engagement [20], there seems to be notable progress in some aspects of the model across universities, particularly service learning, but the engaged community components are still staggering behind. Observations from the university ranking systems demonstrate great strides in community engagement because the ranking measures aspects such as scholarship application, and integration [47], where academics collaborate to share and exchange knowledge as the scholarship of application and integration.

4. Community engagement curriculum gap in the higher education institutions

The curriculum provides directions on what to teach, how, when, who and how long. At the outer layer of curriculum planning, the national and the international level, community engagement or the Third Mission is part of higher education [22]. Since the birth of the Higher Education division centuries ago, the teaching component of the university has always enjoyed the top and highly recognised position by governments and universities [48]. As far as the other aspect of community engagement concerned, which is another component of community engagement, their reporting and outcome measures are very narrowly focused. This is because most studies report on the experiences of students, participation, learning and outcome achievement but nothing on its impact on recipients of such services [49]. Such an approach defeats the very primary objective of community engagement—thus redressing the skewed position of academics or researchers and that of the communities. For community engagement through the service learning wing to benefit the communities, their voices, thoughts, experiences and gains or benefits should be exemplified in the reporting. This questions the level of respect given to the communities during service learning. There is a dearth of studies reporting research outcomes from community-initiated activities where universities joined hands to solve social problems. On the contrary, academics engage communities to identify problems using approaches that illuminate their weakness, such as poverty, level of income and living conditions that are compared with unrelated areas.

The country-specific policy and higher education Acts are the antecedents of community engagement practice and processes of the universities [22, 32]. This is because such institutions provide expectations and direct the vision at the university level. While this forms the basis of the intended curriculum, and most universities
align their visions and missions with it, in some universities, there is no direction on the implemented curriculum. Ironically, community engagement does not form part of the subject delivered or a module in the teaching plans. Lack of alignment of teaching and learning, and research and community engagement create a situation of ‘optional or subjective activities’, which will only be done by those who are interested or are necessitated by the programme outcome. Similarly, there will not be assessment outcomes to be measured, that is, the achieved curriculum.

5. Community engagement funding

It goes without saying that all academic activities require funding to be realised. It is worrisome that community engagement has not yet received its well-deserved attention even after centuries of the birth of universities [3]. This is because there are no clear policies supporting and providing guidance at the policy level both at the universities and government level. In his speech in 1968 at the inauguration of the University of Zambia, Julias Nyerere summoned the government to play its role in providing funds for universities to use its intellect and resources to advance the development of proximal and distal communities and Africa for Africans in general [24]. While community engagement is well articulated in the institutions’ vision and mission, there is a gap between pronouncement and actualisation of such pronouncements through the strategic budget and goal setting. Evidence from the strategic planning of most universities is that there are no clear objectives or goals set for community engagement. In the absence of set goals, there will not be activities planned and this will mean no accountability from both students and faculty. Inherently, there will be an allocated budget. Looking at the strategic plan for Universities such as Zululand [45], there is no mention of community engagement goals. There is an agreement between the various university reports [50] and studies reporting lack of funding as a challenge to implement community engagement across universities in the both developing and developed countries [3, 22].

There is strong and closer relationship between government and universities such that there is a close alignment of university policies to government legal frameworks [47]. In RSA, HEIs are expected to submit the annual performance plan (APP) to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) annually [37]. The APP should report on the performance targets, which must be aligned to the respective university strategic plan during DHET’s Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) period. DHET as the major funding body of the HEIs [20] measures the performances because the department ensures that set targets by the government are met. Each university’s APP and the annual reports must clearly display the relationship between the strategic plan and the performance relating to the three-core business of the university as tabled in the reporting regulation [37].

6. Method

6.1 Study design

The chapter employed a qualitative document analysis (QDA) approach to the strategic plans and annual reports of four universities in South Africa. The advantages of QDA are time-serving, reliable data, yielding multidimensional data and
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easy access to the public domain such as websites or libraries in a short space of time without seeking permission [51, 52]. According to Scott, 1999 in Karpipinen and Moe [51], documents are primary sources of activities and interest of the owner; in this case, universities, so in analysing them, researchers move from 'sources to facts'. The interpreted data present facts on the actual alignment of the university’s vision, mission and strategic goals as depicted in the annual report. The strategic plan provided the context from which the annual report was derived [52]. In this chapter, an analysis of the strategic plans and the annual reports give various dimensions of the community engagement activities in various disciplines and other university activities.

Like any kind of research, the content analysis should adhere to particular qualities to enhance rigour. In the case of journal articles, aspects such as peer reviews, citations and methods among others are preferred guiding principles [53]. This study employed desktop document analysis of strategic plans and annual reports of the four universities in South Africa. Document analysis is known for weaknesses such as missing information, among others [53]. The researchers compared annual reports for consistency of table contents with those of the previous years to identify wide deviations. The reporting framework prescribed by the DHET in South Africa was also used to check for annual report content alignment with the framework. Construct validity was ensured by comparing the reports with those submitted by the universities to the DHET and Department of statistics. All reports agreed with the reporting framework. The annual reports and strategic plans were considered authentic, reliable and valid because they were official documents of the universities and signed by the university chancellor and also contain statements by independent auditors [51, 53]. More so, the annual reports are a by-product of various academic activities in which universities account for spending on their clientele and DHET as a funding body [37, 52]. The documents contained the comprehensive university strategy for teaching and learning, research, community engagement and administrative and financial plans. The researchers scanned through the documents to locate community engagement-related plans and reports. Due to different conceptualisations of community engagement across universities, specific concepts per university were searched. For example, community engagement at the University of Cape Town is called social responsive, at WITS it is referred to as social impact, at UNIZULU it is community engagement, and at Fort Hare, it is community engagement [25, 26].

The quality in QDA is also established by document content quality and not by the number of documents assessed [52]. In the chapter, oldest universities such as the University of Limpopo were excluded by the available strategic plan was less informative [53], and only the 2017 annual report was accessible on the website. This is the step taken when triaging the documents for relevance [52].

6.2 Data collection approach

The study population was 23 South African universities, appearing on the 2021 university ranking list [WUR], from which four (n = 4) were selected for the study. The WUR 2021–2022 ranking list was used to identify the four universities as indicated in the inclusion criteria below. The first step was to establish the corpus [52], by analysing the university ranking table to identify the four universities to be included in the document analysis. This was followed by visiting each university website to access the documents. These documents are all ready for public consumption as they have been placed on public platforms such as the websites of these universities. The search keywords at the respective university websites were the annual reports and strategic
plans. The inclusion criteria were that universities should be historically advantaged or disadvantaged, 40 years and above, and at the top rank locally or at the bottom of the rank. The top-ranked Universities included are the University of Cape Town, 193 years old, at the first position and WITS 100 years old, at the second position, the University of Venda (UNIVEN) 40 years old, and at number 15, and the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) 60 years old, at number 22 in the 2021 RSA university ranking. Respective university strategic plans and annual reports were downloaded from the university websites. A checklist with variables was designed to ensure objective, fair and consistent analysis. The items identified were extracted from the DHET reporting framework [37]. The items are a five-year-old strategic plan, 2) the strategic plan has strategic goals and objectives, and a financial plan on community engagement, 3) an annual report aligned to the strategic plan and 4) evidence of a core set of indicators to monitor institutional performance on community engagement.

### 6.3 Data analysis approach

For this chapter, QDA was adopted following the described by Bowen [53]. The method was initiated by a material search of the local university ranking to identify the top one among the historically advantaged and the historically disadvantaged ones in RSA. The searching keywords were reports and strategic plan. The second phase was an in-depth reflection and descriptive analysis of the most recent strategic and annual reports 2020 to check for items listed on the study checklist. The researchers checked the strategic objective related to community engagements, its performance indicators, related funding, time frames, and monitoring and evaluation measures. This was then checked if the same activities were reported on the annual plan. The researchers read and re-read the report to check for variables tabled on the checklist.

### 6.4 Findings and discussions

Thematic content analysis revealed findings categorised such as 1) the content of the strategic plan, 2) alignment of the annual report with the strategic plan and 3) evidence of a core set of indicators to monitor institutional performance on community engagement. Details are presented below.

#### 6.4.1 Content analysis and discussion of findings

The authors analysed the strategic planning content per university based on the items on the checklist.

1. a five-year-old strategic plan,

2. the university strategic plan was checked for relevance to address aspects detailed by the reporting framework of the DHET (as indicated above).

#### 6.4.2 Content of the strategic plan

The strategic plan was checked for its ability to prescribe the university’s community engagement strategic goals and objectives, which are supported by a financial plan. UNIZULU has tabled its community engagement mission with related sub-objectives. From the strategic plan, it comes out that the university faces challenges...
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of limited management support through funding and provision of human resources. The lack of leadership support is highlighted on the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis as evidenced by poor alignment of community engagement activities within the university core business since community engagement is a once-off visit. The stated weakness concurs with poor income generation from the third stream as reported in the Statssa [41] where UNIZULU received only 8%. Such leadership oversight presents a double-sword in that leadership failed the support, which could have indirectly supported their revenue. On a positive note, in the 2021 strategic plan [26] the university ensured a clear definition of community engagement to avoid confusion in the implementation. Additionally, the performance indicators and funding needs were tabled, which include bringing hope in the next strategic years. Wits University’s long-term strategic goal (2030) [54] paved community engagement broad statement on what is intended to be achieved on social responsibility and its sustainability approach across disciplines. Specific community engagement achievements were narrated across various faculties.

The University of Forte Hare is among the oldest universities in RSA, which was founded in 1916 and currently is 106 years old [25]. Its strategic goal two speaks of building the University’s Research and Innovation Profile, which ensures the sustainability and multi-disciplinary identification of the rural- and urban-relevant research niche areas. However, the balanced scorecard as a yardstick to monitor performance lacks direction in this regard. This defeats the strategic intention to build the institutional culture of the core principle of community engagement through the scholarship of application and integration [25]. As Mallon [21] asserted lack of strategic goals leads to failure. The strategic plan alignment demonstrates the university management’s willingness and support to achieve the set objectives.

6.4.3 Alignment of the annual report with the strategic plan

Lack of funding related to community engagement has been reported for decades across various universities. It is concerning that university leadership seems to know how to allocate funds for classroom teaching and learning and research but not for community engagement. The Makerere University in Uganda has demonstrated achieving the most with what they have by ensuring that the teaching and learning policy includes activities, roles and responsibilities for students, academics and the community partners during the field attachment (which is a Makerere contextual concept for service learning in other universities) [2]. The policy clearly spelt the funded activities for students’ field visits. The Makerere University management demonstrated that it is a matter of leadership and not only a shortage of resources to bring the much-needed collaborations leading to transformation through innovative knowledge exchange [41]. The UNIZULU 2018–2019 facts and figures report [26] clearly quantifies the teaching and learning, and research output but the same is not done for community engagement. This reveals the poor alignment of the strategic plan with the annual reports. The 2020 annual reports had no clear achievement on community engagement, but a wishful indication to improve funding for community engagement. At the two top universities, that is WITS and the University of Cape Town, there is a clear alignment of engagement with society service learning, professional services, global engagement, public engagement, partnerships and international academic collaboration/cooperation.

Although there are critics such as one by William Herbert, the executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and
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the Professions, from the City University of New York’s Hunter College, that ‘...So many forces are pushing for education [to be] viewed as a commodity, as an expectation with a return. It’s devaluing education’ [53], in community engagement indigenous and local knowledge, and education of both the communities and the university scholars are appreciated, valued and promoted, while at the same breath/time stakeholders are capacitated socially and economically [43]. There should synergy between the strategic objectives and the measuring tools to monitor progress towards the intended vision. Such synergy is demonstrated through all the levels of the curriculum, the intended, the implemented through teaching and learning and community services or outreach by students, and the achieved curriculum reflected on various reports.

In the University of Cape Town and Wits [54, 55] the set targets are clear and there are dedicated leaders to oversee the implementation of the community engagement activities in the university. In comparing all four universities, the management structure is such that community engagement at the University of Cape Town and WITS is led by the DVC, while the other universities are led by the director. One may assume that the good results are due to the type of leadership. This is because, at Makerere University, the senior management has ensured that community engagement is part of each programme. At Makerere University, academics are required to ensure that their teaching and learning are tied to communities with students engaged in well-planned and funded field visits [2]. The same alignment is noted on the 2021 WITS university annual report where social responsibility achievements such as transformative engagement with society through students’ service learning, professional services, global engagement, public engagement, partnerships and international academic collaboration/cooperation enlisted are the focus within the university.

6.4.4 Evidence of a core set of indicators to monitor institutional performance on community engagement

Findings in this section revealed that the University of Cape Town and WITS had set clear targets to be achieved annually per discipline [29, 46]. On the contrary, universities at the lower rank provide broad statements only. According to the strategic plan development, indicators provide direction and guidance on what should be achieved [18, 28]. Such indicators are the yardstick or standard of facility performance. Without a clear definition of objectives, there will not be purposeful actions at various levels of operations to achieve the desired goals.

7. Conclusions

This section presents conclusions drawn from the study, summarises the practical implications of the conclusions, describes the study limitations, offers suggested recommendations for future research, and briefly summarises the conclusion of the study.

7.1 Conclusions drawn from the study

The conclusions emanating from the study were drawn from its focus areas, which are as follows: The review of the five-year strategic plan of each surveyed university with a particular focus on its ability to prescribe the university’s community engagement
strategic goals and objectives, which are supported by a reasonable financial plan. On the other hand, support for community engagement initiatives and targets from the university management has been mixed. While there is evidence that support is lacking in some cases, it can also be concluded that there is sufficient willingness among some university management to support community engagement initiatives and targets. This study concludes that community engagement is clearly defined and therefore clearly understood by stakeholders. The clear definition of what community engagement entails and the willingness of the university management to support the cause of community engagement through the provision of leadership reveal some level of strain for implementation. There are notable complexities and challenges in that there is a general lack of clearly developed strategic goals to facilitate meaningful community engagement initiatives and targets. Where there is evidence of lack of proper support from the university leadership on community engagement, pointers are that there was a lack of funding and provision of human resources to aid community engagement initiatives and targets.

The focus of this study was also on the ability of the university to align the annual report with the strategic plan. It is concluded that in some cases, universities prioritised other key performance areas of their operations such as Teaching and Learning and Research, for example at the expense of community engagement initiatives and targets. The majority of the universities provided audited or quantified their outputs on Teaching and Learning and Research for example, but these audits have often excluded community engagement. The prioritisation of Teaching and Learning and Research over community engagement in some universities reveals that there was a poor alignment of the universities’ strategic plans with their intended outputs as measured in the universities’ key performance focus areas. The reports reflect these patterns. For example, this study observed that the 2020 annual reports lacked clear outputs on community engagement, whereas these reports only revealed some wishful indications on the improvement of funding for community engagement for example. However, observations conclude that it is not all doom and gloom for South African universities. At the two top universities that were observed for the purpose of this study, there is a clear alignment of community engagement with service learning, professional services, global engagement, public engagement, development of partnerships and international academic collaboration/cooperation as evidence that community engagement in these universities remained a high priority.

7.2 Practical implications

Observation of the strategic goals of the case study universities in this chapter paints an optimistic picture, especially among the poor-performing universities. According to [21] no matter how long the vision statement can be without visible outcomes, in the end, it will inoculate organisational culture, which will lead to such expected outcomes. Neglection of community engagement that is the third responsibility of the HEIs limits other opportunities such as university-community innovative knowledge development and potential socio-economic development of such communities. Lessons from this chapter are that universities cannot hope to be above the rest without clear goals and related indicators as drivers to the ultimate goal. Strong and productive leadership is important to steer the process with definite responsibility and accountability. When universities align their core functions with humanitarian development, the ultimate result is the attainment of all SDGs because all disciplines will provide their expert knowledge where communities are at a disadvantage.
When there are model universities such as those highly ranked, it is best if there join hands to uplift each other to greater heights. Benchmarking has proven to be a learning strong tool across all economic spheres. Julia Nyerere [4] spoke of one African University lifting another for the sake of Africans (public good) if we have a top-ranked University such as the University of Cape Town and also have the University of Fort Hare struggling to meet the social responsibilities as required in the community engagement, then we are miles behind to achieve the full responsibilities of the higher education institutions expected by governments, political leaders and communities at large. Companies that are aspiring to grow visit those that are doing well and exchange knowledge and skills. In the case of universities, skills and knowledge exchange is already in the process through examination moderations, exchange programmes, peer reviews and so on. If universities go contrary to knowledge and skills sharing to advance community engagement for the public good, we perpetuate knowledge ivory towers, strangle new knowledge creation, and block social networking opportunities and isolation of others.

Strategic decisions need designated leaders to influence decisions that will be communicated and articulated in a clear set of performance indicators to operational stakeholders at various levels within the organisation. Based on the comparisons between the top-ranked universities and those at the bottom of the ranking, strategy is the main deciding factor because, without the strategy, university vision is left to chance, gut feeling or subjective actions. Globally, universities need to shifitly move to the hybrid operation of in-campus and out-of-campus to address social challenges such as poverty and extreme hunger, climate change and its impacts, the digital divide that impacts learning across the low-resourced areas, contextual community-innovated agricultural approaches. If universities shy away from social needs, then HEI is irrelevant for communities.

7.3 Limitations

The authors were limited by using document analysis only without supplementation of interviews of the stakeholders from the case study universities. This could have closed data gaps and provided answers to some missing information on the documents analysed. A small study sample limits data generalisation since only four out of 26 universities were studied. Additionally, various conceptualizations of community engagement across universities created challenges in identifying activities related to community engagement. Reliance on documents available in the public domain such as the websites and some universities presented challenges where such documents were not posted.

7.4 Recommendations for further studies

Regarding the noted complexities and challenges pointing to a general lack of clearly developed strategic goals to facilitate meaningful community engagement initiatives and targets in some universities, a study is needed to establish how the universities which responded well to this effect were developing and implementing their strategic plans for community engagement. The lack of proper support from the university leadership on community engagement needs to be investigated as a gap needing assistance to improve the community engagement initiatives and targets for universities. Furthermore, a model of funding community engagement initiatives and targets needs to be developed. Currently, there is no known model which exists.
Respective universities should conduct research focusing on community engagement challenges and a general understanding of community engagement across all departments and disciplines. A university-community collaborative intervention study raises community awareness to stimulate community-driven or initiated studies. This will enhance contextual problem statements as understood by communities and not the other way around.

8. Summary

The chapter employed a QDA aimed at presenting the leadership challenges and gaps to facilitate community engagement among the four purposefully selected South African universities. The authors conclude that community engagement occupies a subordinate position compared to the three responsibilities of the university. Lessons drawn from this chapter are that strategic leadership is important to inspire and influence resource allocation internally and externally. In the exclusion of community engagement in the strategic plan, universities will not have clearly defined performance indicators and monitoring measures to evaluate the process. When there is an identified leader to drive community engagement, such as in the top-performing universities, there are concentrated efforts to achieve the set goals. While there are perpetual problems in the allocation of funds across the universities, the major hindrance is the lack of willingness and drive to use the available resources to pursue community engagement across the university disciplines and programmes. Finally, the global absence of a common definition of community engagement within the respective universities is a serious handicap because faculties use this as an excuse from taking the expected responsibilities.
References


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