Community Engagement in African Universities

Perspectives, Prospects and Challenges

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Community engagement in Africa: Common themes, challenges and prospects

Julia Preece

> *An African university must not only pursue knowledge for its own sake, but also for the ... amelioration of conditions of life and work of the ordinary man and woman. It must be fully committed to active participation in the social transformation, economic modernization, and the ... upgrading of the total human resources of the nation.* (Wandira, 1977, p. 22, cited in Seepe, 2004, p. 21)

The above statement was first cited in 1977, but is still reflected in Seepe's publication some thirty years later. It constitutes the thread of all the chapters in this book – that of the need for universities to be relevant and connected to their societies, albeit recognising that connection is to an increasingly complex world. Seepe highlights the need for scholarship to address, among others, issues of hunger, disease, poverty, crime and racial divisions. The pursuit of truth, he argues, must be 'imbued with a sense of social responsibility' (p. 27). But he also stresses that this pursuit must be from African perspectives grounded in African experiences 'so that the African experience should be a source of ideas leading to public policy' (p. 31).

The focus of this book has been on eliciting a multiplicity of African experiences and perspectives that may contribute to the wider global debate on universities and engagement. Thematic concerns that run through most of the chapters include a desire to develop Africa-centric engagement strategies for collaboration, fostering lifelong learning, knowledge building, enhancing the

university curriculum, creating opportunities for mutual learning, and repositioning the university within its environment to achieve these strategies. The first part of the book addresses these issues under the broad label of learning cities and regions. The second part provides some practical examples and speculative notions of engagement as community-based initiatives, often involving the concept of service learning as a means of encouraging critical reflection among student participants.

This chapter compares perspectives and challenges on some of the most common themes (engagement, collaboration, lifelong learning and knowledge) in the context of wider literature.

Engagement

The literature is not short of definitions for engagement for universities, as chapter 1 shows. It has been associated with active citizenship (Department of Education, 1997; UNESCO, 2009), the expansion of learning as a lifelong project (Longworth and Allwinkle, 2005) and the co-production of knowledge (Muller and Subotzky, 2001).

Two chapters in this book offer conceptual frameworks for how engagement appears to operate. The first, in chapter 8 (Preece *et al.*), suggests that it can be plotted on a sliding scale or continuum of working relationships that starts from engagement as a unidirectional outreach activity led by universities and often encompassing formal course provision to the world outside the university's walls (see also Openjuru and Ikoja-Odongo, chapter 9). The most extensive form of engagement on this continuum is one where staff and students are involved and which includes a service learning process to ensure the activities are embedded in the university curriculum. In relation to the associated activity of service learning with engagement, O'Brien (chapter 11) provides a conceptual framework or typology of four strands of engagement.

These strands reflect many of the activities across the chapters, irrespective of their service learning component, and the typology offers a way of positioning them as follows.

'Scholarly' engagement focuses on knowledge generation and integration of service learning into academic programmes. The Malawi case study in

chapter 8 and Tagoe's positioning of service learning within experiential learning pedagogy in chapter 10 are indications of this type of engagement.

'Benevolent' engagement positions service learning and other activities within a philanthropic mode, focusing on 'doing good', volunteerism and acting as a service provider to community needs. Many of the project activities described in chapter 8 fit into this mode. For instance, all the projects involved volunteering by staff and students with a view to benefiting community identified need.

'Democratic' engagement perhaps reflects the aspirations of three of the Botswana chapters. Dube, in chapter 5, and Molebatsi, in chapter 4, both talk about democratic participation in public decision making and Ntseane, in chapter 2, stresses the consultative nature of engagement that leads towards ownership of decision making and social action or change. O'Brien also stresses that this form of engagement focuses on assets rather than needs – again reflecting Dube's concern with developing indigenous assets for sustainable development. In the context of the Malawi case study in chapter 8, there is also evidence that the service learning students, through their Theatre for Development activities, contributed to increased social awareness and motivation to challenge oppressive structures.

'Professional' engagement is understood as a formal arrangement between institutions, but in the context of managerialism and organisational structures. There is evidence that the Botswana learning city initiative reflects this aspect of engagement through its formal memorandum. Similarly, Openjuru and Ikoja-Odongo, in chapter 9, describe a number of formal arrangements that signify professional engagement.

It can therefore be seen that while engagement can be subdivided into different typologies, in practice one engagement initiative may embrace more than one typology.

The practice of engagement, however, seems to share a common characteristic. One of the most commonly used concepts throughout all the chapters is that of 'collaboration'. Although Dube (chapter 5) does not refer explicitly to this word, it is worth exploring in a little more depth what, in the different chapter contexts, is meant by collaboration as a feature of engagement.

Collaboration

Within the wider literature, collaboration is often a theme of the caring professions. So, for instance, Bruner *et al.* (2011, p. 2), in the context of promoting patient health care, describe the core features of collaboration as embracing 'sharing, mutual respect, complementarity and interdependent roles'. They cite interprofessional collaboration as a process of 'promoting and optimizing active participation'.

Schmied *et al.* (2010, p. 3518), again in relation to the nursing profession, suggest that collaboration also operates on a continuum, starting from a position of 'coexistence', where there is no formal relationship between services, to 'cooperation,' which may involve *ad hoc* sharing of information, to 'coordination', which entails some shared decision making. Finally 'integration' and 'co-ownership' collaboration entails formal arrangements 'based on common values, where there is no differentiation between services'. Schmied *et al.* argue that this level of collaboration requires 'high-level vertical and horizontal integration' of agencies working together at all levels of service delivery.

These interpretations translate across to community engagement. For instance, Schmied *et al.*'s rendering of high-level collaboration bears similarities to the more integrated aspects of engagement described by Charles and Benneworth (2009) and cited in chapter 8 by Preece *et al.* Schmied *et al.* (2010, p. 3522) elaborate on their understanding of successful collaboration systems by highlighting some key elements which include 'shared vision and values'; 'clearly stated aims'; valuing different contributions; attention to power issues in relationships; conflict-resolution mechanisms; sufficient resources and time to build the necessary relationships between participants; suitable communication and information sharing systems; and an understanding of participants' value systems. Other features include the use of multidisciplinary teams, collegial respect and trust, and a willingness to overcome pre-existing assumptions about each other in order to develop a shared framework for action. Thune and Gulbrandsen (2011) emphasise the complexity of collaboration. They argue that its coordination feature is an evolutionary process that must also take into account power relations.

So how does collaboration manifest itself in community learning regions and community engagement activities? Walters (2007), cited in chapter 1, summarises one of the characteristics of a learning region as having high

levels of collaboration and networking. Kearns and Ishumi in chapter 7 also stress the need for broad partnerships between the different actors. In reality, though, as authors in chapters 6 and 7 point out, very few universities have formal collaboration relationships with their constituencies. One example of a formal arrangement is cited by Openjuru and Ikoja-Odongo in chapter 9, where there are a number of institution-wide, vertical and horizontal structures to facilitate coordination and integration of partnership activities between private and public agencies to address regional development needs. Here, there is a university-wide strategy that partners with local government at district leadership levels as well as with the private sector which, in turn, actively participates in university policy structures. While many of the activities described reflect traditional extra-mural work, there are some interesting interdisciplinary university interventions such as the model village project, which encourages self-sustainability by developing skills in building, sanitation and agriculture.

Botswana is one of the few exceptions to demonstrate Schmied *et al.*'s (2010, p. 3522) 'co-ownership' end of the continuum where there is a formal arrangement that has undergone a variety of stages in order to build up sufficient trust and relationships. The extent to which information sharing systems are sufficiently embedded to sustain the collaboration has yet to be tested, as chapters 3 (Modise and Mosweunyane) and 4 (Molebatsi) highlight.

Other chapters – for instance chapter 8 by Preece *et al.* – show that collaboration is rather more at the level of 'cooperation' where *ad hoc* activities, such as individual projects set up for particular purposes with selected stakeholders, entail some shared decision making. But Preece *et al.* emphasise that collaboration at community level also requires a community, needs-led approach, perhaps going some way towards addressing the issue of power and control that Thune and Gulbrandsen (2011) talk about. The different strands of engagement cited by O'Brien in chapter 11 could also be plotted across Schmied *et al.*'s collaboration continuum so that 'democratic engagement', for instance, represents the most sophisticated form of collaboration. However, O'Brien stresses that collaboration also entails recognition of 'assets that each sector can contribute to the collaboration'. This is an important feature of engagement, which focuses on reciprocity rather than philanthropy and positions universities as partners rather than sole providers in collaboration relationships.

A theme that only emerges in part 2 of the book is the notion of service learning as a student-focused feature of community engagement. Chapters 10 and 11

focus on this issue in some detail. Tagoe, in chapter 10, links it ideologically to pedagogy and as a resource for collaboration, particularly drawing on the heritage of adult education extra-mural work. Service learning is often sold as a reciprocal, mutual learning experience, though, as chapter 1 highlights, there is much criticism about how effectively reciprocity and mutuality are realised in practice.

In a number of chapters, collaboration is emphasised with a specific contextual focus of drawing on African communication styles. Mwaikokesya, for instance, in chapter 6, first positions Tanzania's learning cities origins within the nation's historical heritage of Nyerere's socialist development goals of the 1960s. Kearns and Ishumi, in chapter 7, also advocate an African learning city network that draws on traditional methods of learning. Ntseane, in chapter 2, emphasises the need to do things 'the African way', particularly with regard to public consultation and consensus building to ensure collective ownership of ideas and plans. In African contexts this takes time. Modise and Moswunyane (chapter 3) suggest that part of the responsibility lies with universities taking a proactive step to create a more attractive public image of themselves in order to position themselves as partners in development. Molebatsi, in chapter 4, reinforces the need for 'interactive and reciprocal partnerships'. In the context of urban planning, this is manifested by promoting opportunities for participatory decision making concerning the city's ongoing urban developments and the consequences of non-consultation.

However, partly due to the emerging nature of these collaborations, none of the chapters addresses the complexity of human relationships in collaboration. Fryer (2010, p. 172), in the context of Canadian university projects, asserts that engagement is 'all about relationships'.'Successful community-university engagement is not only a function of what people do ... but also ... it is a function of *who people are*'. A primary issue for collaboration in university–community engagement is the fact that all stakeholders are influenced by their cultural world view and internalised norms – including the situation where different institutions have their own practices and work cultures. For example, a for-profit business operates on different value systems from a not-for-profit department of education. There is a need for ongoing tolerance and willingness to understand the cross-cultural dynamics of interactions and willingness to 'co-create hybrid cultural spaces' (*ibid.*, p. 174) where people can collaborate to develop shared visions. Fryer emphases the need, therefore, for strong communication links and awareness of the unequal power differentials between the different players. Ntseane (chapter 2), in support of this,

highlights the need for dialogue. This, Fryer asserts, includes being persistent with negotiations but also maintaining respect for the 'emergent power' (Fryer, 2010, p. 177) of untapped resources in the community itself and in students who can be partners in decision making.

Other challenges in relation to collaboration include those summarised by Wergin (2006, pp. 25–6) in relation to academic staff not being 'accustomed to the messiness of direct engagement in societal problems', their lack of experiential knowledge and the need for participating stakeholders to spend time together to build mutual trust. Finally, he also suggests – perhaps controversially – that collaboration 'is not always beneficial'; not all partners in a partnership are useful and sometimes results could be achieved more effectively through other strategies.

In spite of these challenges and caveats, it is important to recognise the inextricable relationship between the university engagement-as-collaboration philosophy, and lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning

Chapter 1 has already highlighted that lifelong learning as a concept is not well defined in policy documents on the African continent, though the term is often referred to in relation to universities. (Chapter 8, for instance, cites policy documents from Botswana, Lesotho, Nigeria and Malawi which all link lifelong learning to community service in relation to universities.) We have also noted that education-sector strategic plans often reduce lifelong learning to a basic education and literacy focus (see chapter 6), largely because of the influence of donor funding policies.

Longworth (2012) points out, however, that learning cities and learning regions are essentially about a notion of lifelong learning for all, understood in its broadest sense – to embrace a wide range of competencies, attitudes and skills which can address environmental and humanistic issues as well as economistic concerns.

For the African continent, this vision for lifelong learning must also connect with African identities. For many this means recognising the traditional heritage of lifelong learning that was interrupted by colonialism (Fordjor *et al.*, 2003; Omolewa, 2002; Amutabi and Oketch, 2009). The challenge is to

reflect on how such traditions impact on the value systems that are part of lifelong learning in contemporary contexts (Mbigi, 2005; Lekoko and Modise, 2011). There are overlapping features between those articulated in Africa and those articulated in the political north in relation to engagement and learning cities (Longworth, 2012). The emphasis in both cases is on a holistic view of learning – the role of heritage and culture as arenas for learning and building community and the organic nature of learning that draws upon its living heritage and communal life (as cited by Kearns and Ishumi in chapter 7). Mwaikokesya, in chapter 6, also highlights the life-wide and life-deep nature of learning. All these aspects take us away from the dominant, individualistic and economistic focus of most policy documents (CEC, 2000; OECD, 2004; World Bank, 2003, for instance).

Nevertheless, writers such as Avoseh (2001), Mbigi (2005), Preece 2009 and Lekoko and Modise (2011) emphasise additional features of learning in African contexts that reflect a collective and spiritual vision of learning that, when drawing on African traditions, functions on the basis of a close connection between the living, the dead and those yet to be born. In other words, the emphasis is on our interconnectivity and the interrelations that link learning to practical issues but also take learning into the realm of spirituality, context and identity. Lekoko and Modise (2011, pp. 28–9), for instance, highlight a distinction between Western and African identities in the form of I/we. 'I' is the individualistic concept of the self in Western ideology, but 'we' is the more collective notion of the self in African ideologies:

> *The African philosophy of 'I am because we are' (Mbiti, 1988) encourages a culture of learning in which the learner's success is attributed to the entire situation within which she/he learns and lives ... This ideal is central to any learning that recognizes that an African has a past that can be tapped into to further his/her learning. It is also important to remember that experiences in the social environment serve as an index of relevant learning and as a measure of how one applies what he/she has learned. This further validates the importance of learning for social living.* (Lekoko and Modise, 2011, pp. 28–9)

Of course, such internalised rationales for existence are no longer universal for all Africans or specific to Africa, but they provide the basis from which to conceptualise lifelong leaning for community engagement that reflects an Africanised learning context.

Dube, in chapter 5, particularly emphasises the need to harness such indigenous aspects of learning in order to instil a sense of connectivity to the issues of sustainable development:

> *A western ... school system, isolated African children from their knowledge context – that is, from the family and community knowledge base – and starved them of a whole system of lifelong learning (Omolewa, 2002). This served to break down the system for transferring knowledge and skill, and erode confidence in African society.* (Dube, chapter 5)

Dube argues strongly for a lifelong learning approach that captures different knowledge systems to facilitate sustainable environmental engagement. She also recognises the complexity of contemporary society, which requires an evolution of traditional knowledge systems to facilitate connections with globalisation and take us beyond the immediate environment. This, of course, is part of the project of regional engagement – to develop networks and links that respect the local but also relate to wider international connections. Chapter 7, by Kearns and Ishumi, encourages such networking, utilising cyberspace as a resource. Chapter 2, by Ntseane, highlights the experiential value of such networking in Botswana's own lifelong learning project.

Lifelong learning is a feature of ongoing knowledge production, dissemination and application. Knowledge in African contexts includes the construction of knowledge that takes place outside the formal, scientific community.

Knowledge

The extent to which lifelong learning can be Africanised in the way that Seepe (2004) highlighted at the beginning of this chapter depends partly on its relationship to knowledge production. Indigenous knowledge is referred to specifically by six chapters in this book, though only Dube elaborates on the challenges of a development agenda that 'excludes locally adaptive systems in place of imported knowledge systems'.

Dube addresses the Africanisation theme in relation to traditional knowledge systems. This is the most comprehensive exposition in the book of how indigenous knowledge can both inform and be informed by the present and contribute to culturally sensitive development. She provides examples of the

dynamics and tensions between modernisation demands for commercialisation of resources and resultant over-exploitation of those resources in the face of competitive Western demands to produce at undervalued rates. She positions universities as potential think tanks with resources for research that can address sustainability issues in context. Apart from chapter 8, this is the only chapter that discusses how knowledge disciplines might work together to address the complexity of development issues. But Dube elaborates on this notion, emphasising the co-production of knowledge through collaborative learning that uses the social capital of traditional community ties. This perspective is also referred to in the wider literature on collaboration for engagement, as Fryer (2010) demonstrates.

There is another feature of knowledge, however, that is often articulated as mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). Mode 2 knowledge, particularly in African contexts, has been highlighted as a relevant feature of engagement scholarship because it allows for practice-based knowledge that develops in context and is not confined to disciplinary boundaries.

Waghid (2002), for instance, cites extensively from Gibbons *et al.* (1994) to distinguish between the more conventional notion of mode 1 knowledge as scientific, discipline-based knowledge that is more commonly associated with university knowledge production and that of mode 2 knowledge. Mode 2 is differentiated by its context-specific framework, rather than its disciplinary framework. It is associated with transdisciplinary production – or socially distributed knowledge. That is, the knowledge is problem based, and develops as a result of reflexivity and interaction with real-life situations. The knowledge producers may be teams of actors working across a variety of social groups and organisations to focus on addressing a specific problem, the solutions or products of which are accountable to a broader range of actors. Mode 2 knowledge thus steps out of its discipline and is socially produced as an outcome of dialogue and meaning making.

In acknowledging that mode 2 knowledge has been received with some scepticism in the light of its validity in relation to science, and amid criticisms of relativism, Nowotny *et al.* (2003) attempt to reposition mode 2 knowledge as possessing five characteristics. First, as already stated, it is context specific. For community engagement activities, therefore, much of the knowledge described in chapter 8, for instance, was context specific. Second, it is transdisciplinary (as opposed to interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary, since these two concepts still present knowledge as framed within separate disci-

plines). Examples of acceptable transdisciplinary knowledge locations within universities include newly formed, non-discipline specific areas of study such as women's studies or social justice. Third, Nowotny *et al.* assert that mode 2 knowledge is an inevitable product of interactions between different sites of knowledge, facilitated by cyber interconnectivity and the crossing of transnational boundaries. Therefore knowledge producers are inevitably networking to produce 'new kinds of "knowledge" organisations' (*ibid*, 2003, p. 187). A fourth characteristic, as mentioned above, is that knowledge production is no longer confined to scientific experiment. It is often the product of a dialogic process, an ongoing conversation between researchers and the actors with whom they interact. The learning city or learning region, as a collaborative project, is a prime example of this ongoing dialogic process, as is highlighted by Ntseane in chapter 2. Finally – and associated with the dialogic process – the quality-control process of assessing knowledge validity inevitably moves us beyond the laboratory into the realm of peer discussion from a broad range of participants. In chapter 5, Dube emphasises the challenges to environmental awareness when we fail to interface conventional and local knowledge systems. In chapter 8, Preece *et al.* demonstrate how knowledge is shared and adopted differently by participating actors in the different community engagement projects. This latter aspect is elaborated further in the ITMUA project report (Preece, 2011). The projects demonstrate, for instance, how simultaneous learning occurs on different levels in the same activity. Students may learn about negotiation and planning skills, staff members learn about adult education pedagogy, and community participants learn how to adapt their indigenous farming practices for better productivity.

Engagement at any level, however, is not without its challenges. While some have already been mentioned in relation to the specific themes, we conclude with some more general observations.

Challenges and prospects

Some of the broader challenges to community engagement in African contexts reflect those on a global scale. Schuetze (2010, pp. 19–20), for instance, identifies several that are relevant to Africa. These include confusions about terminology of community and regional engagement; poor experiences of unrealised partnerships; the increasing emphasis on quality and competitiveness among higher education institutions, which tends to pull academics back to their core activities of teaching and research; cutbacks in funding; and the

prevailing culture of not rewarding academics for engagement work. African universities are increasingly being drawn into managerialist approaches to university competitiveness. Openjuru (2011) highlights this trend for Makerere University in Uganda and it is also evident across the South African higher education sector (DoHET, 2012). Furthermore, the battle to position lifelong learning as a holistic endeavour is not peculiar to Africa, as Inman articulates:

> *The greatest challenge to society today is the creation of genuine learning communities that encourage lifelong learning and celebration of relationship. This is differentiated from an individual lifelong learning agenda. ... lifelong learning ... is collaborative and defined by diverse stakeholders.* (Inman, 2010, p. 116)

But the historical circumstances outlined in chapter 1 – and the nature of national economies on the African continent alongside the vast inequalities that exist among its populations – require added resilience and resourcefulness to overcome them. Furthermore, the simultaneous plundering, exploitation and undermining of indigenous knowledge systems has the effect of belittling and denying African identity – ultimately taking away the African potential for agency (self-determination) and innovation.

Engagement, in whatever form, poses many challenges as the chapters have demonstrated. They include inadequate resources (material, technological and human); issues around political will, motivation and institution-wide infrastructure and systems to support engagement activities; and questions of conceptual understanding. But, as the chapters have equally shown, the African university has a strong historical mission to participate 'in the social transformation, economic modernization, and the ... upgrading of the total human resources of the nation' (Seepe, 2004, p. 21). In the South African context, this mission is enshrined in government policy (Department of Education, 1997) as part of the drive to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression and instil a social conscience in the younger generation of future citizens. As such, community and regional engagement are predictably an element of university life that is likely to grow, rather than diminish.

The more effort that is made to publicise what is already happening, the more opportunity there is to develop the very scholarship and critical mass that are necessary for credible legitimacy of community engagement in higher education institutions.

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