

## Chapter 48

# Forging University Social Responsibility Through Community Engagement at Higher Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter interrogates the notion of community engagement or service learning. The chapter argues that universities pay lip service to community engagement to the detriment of teaching and research functionalities. Most prestige universities operate on the belief that it is only research that matters; hence, research is prioritized. Universities and their staff have adopted an ‘ivory tower’ attitude. This modus operandi negates the reality that reliable knowledge could be produced through responsible community engagement and can become the source of empirical data that can be used for teaching and shared through publications. For universities to impact transformational change within and in their surroundings, community engagement should be elevated to equal teaching and learning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education sector is bestowed with certain social and academic responsibilities. Primordially, higher education was entrusted to human civilization, knowledge creation and molding members of society (Livingstone, 2016). These responsibilities make universities unique in their daily engagement with immediate stakeholders and broader society. Worldwide, institutions of higher learning are knowledge actors with the primary mandate of generating and disseminating knowledge for societal transformation. Higher education institutions are social institutions funded through public purse and as such are obliged to conduct their business in the manner that is academically and socially beneficial to the entire society (Tshishonga, 2019). At the core of higher education, are the three functions, namely learning and teach-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3706-3.ch048

ing, research and community engagement (service learning or community service). These functions reinforce each other in allowing universities to consolidate academic scholarship and further exercise their social and civil responsibility (Terevova & Sabolova, 2010 and El-Khasawneh, 2008). Balancing the key functions is fundamental as enormous expectation is put on university education to upskilling and further provide solutions to challenges facing the modern society (Shaikh, 2019).

This chapter is concerned about the third leg of community engagement as an integral part of university social responsibility. The chapter argues that paying lip service to community engagement has detrimental effects on effective teaching and research functionalities of the university. Most prestige universities operate on the belief that it is only research that matters hence research is prioritized. University operating on an 'ivory tower' mentality led to the adoption of 'talk about what is going on, don't get involved' (Maurrasse, 2003, p. 29). The Ivory tower model further perpetuates the dislocation of university from the people who possessed the relative knowledge and understanding shaping scholarship (Makgoba & Chetty, 2010). This modus operandi negates the reality that reliable knowledge could be produced through responsible community engagement can become the source of empirical data which can be used for teaching and such information shared through publications. For universities to impact transformational change within and in their surroundings, community engagement should be elevated to the same and even more level to teaching and learning as the key pillar (Tshishonga, 2019). Institutionalization of community service or engagement is not sufficient provided there is financial and human resources investment and commitment from all core higher education stakeholders. The chapter starts by laying the conceptual background on the notion of university and its responsibilities. The second section grounds community engagement theoretical exposition underpinned by university social responsibility as propounded by scholars such as Bokhari (2017); Giuffre & Ratto (2014); Terevova & Sabolova (2010) and Vasilescu, Brana, Epure & Baicu (2010). Thirdly, the chapter locates university social responsibility within the context of community of practice as the pragmatic foundation for practicing responsible community engagement. The notion of responsible community engagement was deliberated in section four followed by challenges faced by universities in implementing community engagement and service learning or

## **BACKGROUND**

Universities are social institutions charged with the responsibilities of teaching and learning, conducting research and community engagement (Ramphela, 2008). Traditionally, these functions comprise the core business of the university (Uys et al. 2010). Although teaching and research form the core business of the university, the university is also expected to be responsive to the communities in their proximity. The trio functions of universities of teaching, research and community engagement underlie the traditional roles of universities. These functions help to define a university within the broader higher education institutions. From the developmental role, a university is associated as an ancillary, self-governing institution, an instrument with a development agenda, and as engine of development (van Schalkwyk and Bailey, 2013: 157-158). As such, universities should be conceptualized as part of the broader institutions of higher learning designated to produce knowledge and disseminate such knowledge to a broader society. At the centre of the notion of a university is the production of knowledge with scientific and scholastic rigour. In essence, a university is a community of scholars, people who apart from teaching and learning, indulge in ground breaking research and further extend their scholarship through community or social

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