Universities in South Africa

Ivory towers or social workshops?
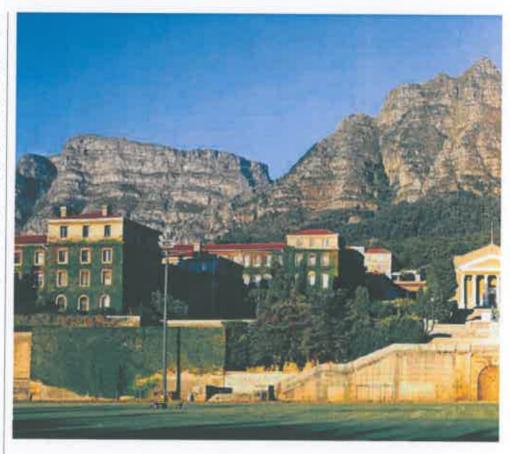

Universities are in the knowledge business. Academics have skills and knowledge relating to many disciplines.

But they are now also expected to engage directly with communities in developmental roles of some kind. Is this what they should be doing, or should they rather be doing what they are meant to do best – researching and teaching? Are universities really the best organisations to carry out social outreach? Or should they leave it to those more qualified in this area? Is it all, in fact, a wasteful distraction?

Whatever doubts there may be about what community engagement really is, it is certainly prominent on the South African higher education agenda. Institutions such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE) declare it an essential part of the higher educational process. Universities are reacting to such pressures and it is being widely debated at these institutions throughout the country.

Kruss focused on two research universities with different institutional cultures. Her study led her to identify four critical issues:

▶ To what extent does community engagement have weight within the structures of institutional power in universities? Do senate and other university committees pay much attention to it? Are there senior posts dedicated to the area?

▶ Is there a coherent, generally accepted institutional policy framework for community engagement?

▶ Is there coordination and alignment between university structures that deal with research, teaching and innovation on the one hand and outreach on the other?

▶ Are there mechanisms for disseminating information about community engagement throughout the university? Are there incentives to award achievements in it amongst academics? Is such achievement a criterion for promotion?

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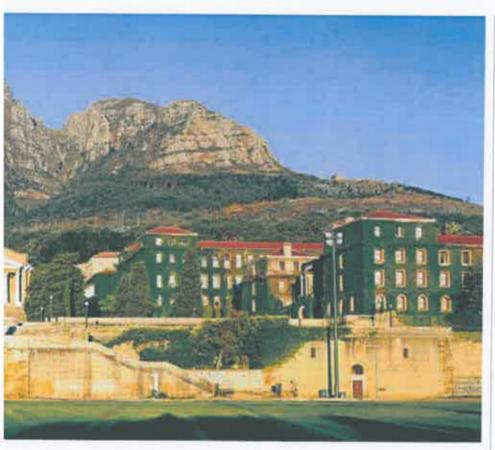
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Is it publicised and reported? Are resources dedicated to it? There was lively debate on Kruss's paper. The role of higher education in social development is clearly an issue of great concern to government and social activists.

However, although universities are urged to become engaged with communities, there is little official clarity as to what this might involve.

The 1997 Higher Education White Paper introduced the concept of community engagement but gave no guidance as to how it might be implemented. Though there is a large body of literature on social responsibility and industry, the CHE, for example, has published little on the issue in relation to universities.

In addition, it is an unfunded mandate, which wealthier universities may be able to carry, but which is a burden on the poorer universities that are

Research, teaching and community engagement appear in nearly every South African university's mission statement. We feel we know what research and teaching are. But 'community engagement', 'social responsibility' or whatever it may be called, seems like a good thing. Should universities not be doing more of it and fulfilling this mandate? DR GLENDA KRUSS of the HSRC looked at what they are doing.

and many other areas? In this context, may not community engagement – seen as separate to the normal work of a university – be a distraction from the vital interactions with the wider society in which they are already involved?

Vagueness about the meaning of community engagement, accompanied by insistence that it takes place, opens the way for wasteful and inappropriate models to take hold.

Where there are so few accepted norms, there is much room for inflated claims representing very little, thereby debasing the currency.

If people want to involve themselves with charitable or philanthropic work, they are free to do so as private citizens. But should academics with valuable and often scarce skills be sidetracked in their professional lives into such areas? Also, a 'cake sale' outreach model, as one participant termed it, can alienate academics and marginalise the concept by trivialising it.

Though generally given verbal endorsement, there seems to be a lack of engagement at operational level between mainstream academics and those involved with community engagement.

Indeed, community engagement professionals are often low in the institutional pecking order. Minimal dedicated funding and lack of recognition in terms of promotion, pay and allocation of time suggest that much apparent focus on the area is superficial. As Kruss said, support and incentive mechanisms, integrated with institutional strategies and structures, are missing.

The growing tendency towards enforcing compliance in this area is problematic, some participants believed.

Because community engagement remains vague and its results difficult to measure, to insist that it be assessed as part of the criteria for allocation of funding and other forms of support is an invitation to tokenism and evasion. ◄◄

perhaps closest to community needs. Community engagement takes place in a conceptual muddle amidst financial stringency.

Academia needs to be implemented practically

The idea in any case implies that the work of universities is somehow not already engaged with communities. Clearly academic areas differ, and some are apparently remote from ordinary life, though an argument could be made that even the most seemingly obscure disciplines serve the community in a broad sense.

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Is training people in the numerous skills and competencies upon which universities focus not central to community engagement?

Even more, is it not already obviously at the heart of education, social work, agriculture, engineering

State of the force
THE VERDICT IS IN

Indigenous Knowledge
STEALING OUR IK IS NOT OK

World Cup
Did we score?

XENOPHOBIA
Stopping the hate