13-16 MAY
2024

RHODES UNIVERSITY, MAKHANDA, SOUTH AFRICA
Commemorating 120 Years

RU120
1904-2024

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONFERENCE

RUCE | commUNITY engagement

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND THE TRAJECTORY OF COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY-SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

PREAMBLE

Community Engagement (CE) is part of contemporary higher education lexicon because of its formalization as a core function of universities in democratic South Africa, other parts of Africa and some countries in the global South. However, the interaction between community–university–society has a much longer history than its current higher education function. For example, on the one hand, during the apartheid era in South Africa, universities lacked democratic accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the majority of South Africans because there were no meaningful two-way and reciprocal engagement and partnerships between universities and communities (Bunting 1994) cited in (Saidi 2023: 5). On the other hand, Vally (2023: 57) points out that in pursuing the objective of engagement, we do not have to assume a tabula rasa... as South Africa has a long history of student involvement-often supported by academics-in community struggle. He further states that prior to 1994 and during the transition, this strong tradition of university academics and students working closely with civil society and grassroots structures continued. Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa* programme in Tanzania in the 1960s is another early example of community-university-society interface in the African region.

The engagement and relationship between community-university-society in contemporary South Africa is significant and topical because of the developmental role mandated to universities as part of the national transformation agenda. Universities are required to demonstrate social responsibility and commitment to the common good through community engagement programmes. While the conceptualization of higher education CE remains fluid, depending on the context and history of higher education institutions in South Africa, CE is often described as the process through which universities bring the capabilities of its academe and students to work collaboratively with community groups and organisations to achieve mutually agreed upon goals to build capacity, create just and sustainable outcomes, and improve the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the university. In higher education, community engagement is a collection of activities that includes service learning, engaged research, and volunteerism, and it aims to address specific social, economic, and political needs (Hall, 2010).

Saidi (2023) affirms that responsiveness through CE is regarded as central to programmes of transforming and decolonizing higher education towards an African philosophy of education centred on communalism and humanism (referred to as Ubuntu) in Africa. While CE has made some progress as a 'third' mission of universities in South Africa and some parts of Africa, Johnson (2020) affirms that universities are still grappling with understanding the essence of CE as a core mission of universities, its theory and praxis and importantly, the community-university-society relationship. Much more work still needs to be done if CE is to meaningfully contribute to the transformation agenda in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Undoubtedly, getting to know the past and its influence on the present will serve to map the future possibilities of the mission of community engagement in higher education institutions in South Africa and the rest of Africa.

The Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division is one of the hubs of the UNESCO Knowledge for Change (K4C) Consortium, an international partnered training initiative of the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, co-chaired by Prof Budd Hall of Victoria University (Canada) and Dr Rajesh Tandon of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India. The K4C Consortium aims to develop research capacities for the co-creation of knowledge through collective action by community groups and academics working together in training hubs around the world on issues related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Currently, the K4C international network is composed of 23 training hubs, each of which represent a formal partnership between universities and civil society organisations in 14 countries. As a global training partnership between higher education institutions and civil society organisations, the K4C programme expands individual and institutional research training capacities, building and mobilising new knowledge for community change. Its overall objective is the generation of new co-constructed knowledge to address critical issues facing local communities through research capacity development, centred on community-based experiential training. The thinking is that policy and community-change agendas can occur when academics come together with civil society organisations in participatory processes to cocreate knowledge around society's most pressing issues. These hubs are one example of initiated change through research in the community-university-society relationship globally, with its focus on knowledge democracy and the co-creation of knowledge.

PURPOSE

It is important that the history of community-university-society relationship and its influence on contemporary higher education CE in South Africa be told, written and known. Critical and structured reflection is an essential learning activity in CE. Reflection on experiences can take many forms, including the telling of stories on the CE experience and through relating current experiences to prior knowledge, perceptions, and historical events. This knowledge will have a significant impact on future possibilities for community engagement, specifically with regard to epistemic justice, social justice and the cultivation of humanity in South Africa and the rest of Africa.

As a contribution to the knowledge building process, RUCE is hosting this international conference titled *Community Engagement and the trajectory of community-university-society relationship: past, present and future possibilities* in May 2024.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

The conference objectives are to:
i)   Contribute to building a body of knowledge on the history of community engagement (community-university-society relationship) in South Africa; the rest of Africa and the global South.
ii) Foster and strengthen partnerships between academics and institutions in the Global North and South to enhance the global impact of community- university-society relationships.
iii) Deepen the relationship with the hubs from the K4C international network to contribute to knowledge building on Community-Based Participatory Research and Social Responsibility for the Global South.
iv) Commemorate the 120th anniversary of Rhodes University by tracing the trajectory of the community-university-society relationship in Makhanda.

CONFERENCE THEMES

The conference topic of *Community Engagement and the Trajectory of Community-University-Society Relationship: Past, Present and Future Possibilities* comprises of themes and sub-themes under the following four perspectives: conceptual, pedagogical, ethical and university social responsibility.

THEME 1: CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE
SUB-THEMES
1.1   **South African Context:** Questions asked in reference to the South African context specifically are: How was CE understood prior to democracy? What was the nature of and to what extent were higher education institutions involved with communities prior to 1994? In what form was CE implemented pre 1994? How did the local communities benefit, if at all, through engagement with universities prior to 1994? How has the past affected the national agenda of CE and what is the national agenda currently for fostering community-university-society relationship through CE?

1.2   **Specific Countries and Global Perspectives:** From its historical roots, in specific country contexts and from a global perspective, where has CE come from and in what direction is it currently moving? How has the past affected contemporary definitions of CE and to what extent do we incorporate global development agendas when we conceptualise CE?

1.3   **Lessons Learnt from the Past:** What lessons have we learnt from the past? Can we depoliticise CE in the present for enhancing human well-being and for the cultivation of humanity?

THEME 2: PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
SUB-THEMES
2.1   **CE and the Academic Project of Universities:** What is the place and value of CE in the academic project of universities? How is learning for life taking place beyond the walls of the classroom and to what extent does CE contribute to this life learning of students?

2.2   **Service Learning and Engaged Citizenry\Volunteerism:** What are the changing trends in service learning and its practice? What is the history of volunteerism and its relationship to student volunteering in HEIs? How are students as volunteers educated in preparation for working with community partners and as engaged citizens? What kind of pedagogy is used to train students in service learning and as volunteers? What is the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in fostering inclusive learning in CE? What are the ethics necessary for CE and how do we teach these ethics to students?

2.3   **Inclusive Knowledges:** How are other knowledge systems included in the curriculum to enrich the knowledge base of students? What pedagogy and practices promote the inclusion of knowledge diversity in the classroom?

2.4   **Social Responsibility:** How do universities integrate and promote social responsibility into their educational programmes? What, if any, are the challenges and how can these challenges be overcome?

2.5   **Good practice** of CE pedagogies and lessons learnt.

THEME 3: ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE
SUB-THEMES
3.1   **HEI's Research Structures and Processes:** How are engaged research, CBPR and knowledge democracy understood and to what extent do universities' structures and processes promote or obstruct CBPR and knowledge democracy? What factors contribute to good CBPR practice?

3.2   **Decolonization of Research:** To what extent and how have HEIs decolonised research? How and to what extent is CBPR a decolonising approach to research? How does ethical engagement in research foster the development of inclusive and socially just knowledge, and how does it contribute to broader social and epistemic justice goals? What are the potential risks and challenges in balancing ethical priorities with the pursuit of social justice?

3.3   **Knowledge Democracy:** How is knowledge democracy understood and implemented? In the agenda of knowledge creation, whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge are we mobilising? How is knowledge democracy different from knowledge economy and what is the relationship, if any, between knowledge economy and knowledge democracy?

3.4   **Community-University Partnerships (CUPs):** How is the relationship between community and university understood from an historical perspective and in the present context of CE as a mission of higher education with the potential to contribute to transformation and social justice with communities? What are the ethical dilemmas for community-university partnership relationships and how may they be resolved?

3.5   **Good Practice of CBPR** and lessons learnt.

3.6   **Good Practice of CUPs** and lessons learnt.

THEME 4: SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE
SUB-THEMES
4.1   **Purposes of Universities:** From the past to the present, how has the purpose\purposes of universities changed and what are the reasons for the changes? What is understood by the public good purpose of universities and how does CE contribute to this purpose? What are universities good for?

4.2   **Socially Responsible Graduates:** How and what is the role of HEIs in developing graduates who are socially responsible? How do we assess the extent to which universities are socially responsible to communities and students?

4.3   **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** How does university social responsibility and the public good purpose of universities contribute to the SDGs?

4.4   **Universities as Anchor Institutions:** How are universities understood as anchor institutions in South Africa and other parts of Africa? To what extent does the conceptualization of universities as anchor institutions advance the mission of CE? How does *'the movement of universities from 'ivory towers' to 'being anchored in the community'* contribute to the social responsibility and developmental roles of universities?

4.5   **Good Practice** of universities as anchor institutions and lessons learnt.

4.6   **CE Effect:** How do we conceptualise transformation, development and social change and how do we know that transformation, development, social change, social justice, epistemic justice is being effected through higher education community engagement? To what extent does CE contribute to the holistic development of participants and transformation of thinking in relation to the cultivation of humanity?

What strategies and approaches can universities adopt to ensure that the effects of CE are sustainable and have a positive impact on individuals and communities? In the context of national agendas/conversations, how can higher education community engagement contribute to and influence broader transformation, development and social justice?

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS: TBA (watch this space)

TARGETED PARTICIPANTS
i)   South African universities, students, academics, civil society organisations, community members and community partner organisations
ii) Academics and post graduate students from universities of other African countries involved in community engagement; and from the global South
iii) Academics and institutions from the global North who have been involved as partners in community engagement activities in South Africa, other parts of Africa (e.g. the CHESP project in South Africa) and in the global South.

An outcome of this conference is the selection of papers for the online open access African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement (AJHECE) 2024 publication to maximise knowledge dissemination.

PRESENTATION FORMATS:
Research Papers
Posters
Storytelling

LANGUAGE: English

ABSTRACT FORMAT: Title, name of contributor\s, presentation format and summary of your presentation (maximum of 300 words)

IMPORTANT DATES
Abstract submitted by: 15 March 2024
Communication to Participants: 29 March 2024
NOTE: All abstracts must be uploaded directly on the website using the abstract registration form and should not be sent by email.

CONFERENCE FEES
Face to face: R3,900.00 for University Staff and R1,500.00 for Students and Partners (includes conference pack, teas, lunches, refreshments and dinner).

Bursaries are available for students and Rhodes Staff, contact 046 603 7229 for more information.

VENUE
Amazwi South African Literary Museum
Makhanda/Grahamstown, South Africa

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