



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROFESSOR MANDLA MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

HETL: REACHING THE SUMMIT 2015

Making Community Engagement a University Priority – The University of South Africa Experience.

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Slide 1 - Introduction

Until fairly recently, the core, state funded business of South African Universities, including the University of South Africa, has been Teaching and Learning and Research. Community engagement was mostly undertaken by individual academics and volunteers (with limited institutional support) and largely comprised philanthropic outreach programmes and civic engagements, mostly in disadvantaged communities and on a donor-to-recipient basis. This obviously limited the growth of community engagement in higher education in any truly meaningful and transformative way, in terms of size, design and academic conceptualization.

With the advent of democracy in South Africa in the early 1990's and the concomitant reconfiguration of the higher education system, the focus shifted to redressing historic

inequalities and imbalances in society-at-large. Higher education was seen as a key driver of this process, and new higher education legislation, policy and regulations were introduced to formalize and guide higher education institutions to this end. The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (1997), exhorted higher education institutions to “demonstrate their social responsibilityand their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes.”¹ (1997:10) The White Paper further states that one of the goals of higher education is to “promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes”² (1997: 10).

Studies conducted by various bodies in the ensuing period (Perold et al 1997³; Perold, 1998;⁴; Mouton et al (2007)⁵ showed that while many South African higher education institutions included community engagement in their mission statements, few had taken the next logical step to conceptualization and implementation. In other words, CE did not form part of institutional strategy. A key barrier to the planned implementation of community engagement in many HEIs was, and remains, a lack of state funding for CE. In many instances community engagement is simply beyond the financial reach of many HEIS on any significant scale. This calls for innovative thinking and practice.

Slide 2 – Unisa’s CE strategy and structure

The University of South Africa is I believe, one of the foremost proponents and practitioners of community engagement in higher education – in South Africa, on the Continent and internationally.

¹ Department of Education (1997) Education White Paper 3: a programme for higher education transformation. Government Gazette no. 18207 15 August 1997. Pretoria. Government printers.

² Department of Education (1997) Education White Paper 3: a programme for higher education transformation. Government Gazette no. 18207 15 August 1997. Pretoria. Government printers.

³ Perhold, H and Omar, R.(1997) Community Service in Higher Education: A Concept Paper. Johannesburg. JET Education Services.

⁴ Perhold, H. (1998) Community Service in Higher Education: Final Report. Johannesburg. JET Education Services.

⁵ Mouton, J and Wildschut, L. (2007). An Impact Assessment of the CHESP Initiative High-Level Findings . Johannesburg. JET Education Services.

Having been through an extremely complex merger as part of the post-democracy reconfiguration of the higher system, Unisa emerged as a *comprehensive* (that is, academic *and* vocational) distance education institution. (NPHE 2001⁶). Unisa's vision, to be *the* African University in the service of humanity, and its values, which include *Social justice* and *Fairness* set the tone for its commitment to the national strategy as outlined in the White Paper, including the exhortation to community engagement. Our mission states:

The University of South Africa is a Comprehensive Open Distance Learning Institution that produces excellent scholarship and research, provides quality tuition, and *fosters active community engagement*

In fulfilment of this commitment, Unisa has, since 2008, had an institutionally devised Community Engagement and Outreach Policy in place. Community engagement is actively promoted through the CE policy, which aims to: Clarify the practice of community engagement at Unisa (including its integration into scholarship); nurture existing and promote new community engagement and outreach activities; establish sustainable quality co-operative CE partnerships; raise awareness of CE and CE best practice in the university community; promote the recognition of the scholarship of community engagement as a valid pedagogy; facilitate collaborative research within communities within communities; regulate community engagement and outreach in Unisa and establish structures and principles for its effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The following structures were put in place in 2013, to formally facilitate CE Unisa: the Senate Community Engagement Committee; the College Community Engagement Committee; and the Community Engagement Coordination and Operational Committee. Each of these has a designated function aimed at ensuring that CE strategy is implemented, monitored and evaluated in much the same way as scholarship at Unisa. A Quality Management System for community engagement has also been developed and approved to measure external impact and to assess staff performance for Community Engagement.

⁶ MoE. 2001. *National Plan for Higher Education* in South Africa. Pretoria. Ministry of Education.

Unisa has a dedicated Department of Community Engagement and Outreach which ensures that arrangements for community engagement are formalised and integrated with those for teaching and learning, where appropriate, and are adequately resourced and monitored.

Slide 3: Categories and scope of CE at Unisa

There are five main categories of community engagement at Unisa:

- Curriculum-related engagement which includes formal, accredited academic programmes, as well as credit-bearing short learning programmes aimed at service learning.
- Non-curriculum-related community engagement which entails the professional involvement of employees, who have considerable skills and expertise, in community engagement initiatives.
- Research-related community engagement which focuses on the advancement of scientific knowledge through community engagement – the community is engaged as a partner, and Unisa’s research capacity is used to address community problems.
- Community building and capacity building entailing the development of individual skills and knowledge in order to address community-specific needs.
- Community outreach involves voluntary outreach efforts by academics, university employees, alumni and students in response to the social, economic and political needs of communities.

As you will have noted, the spectrum of Community Engagement is far removed from our humble beginnings pre democracy! Our community engagement programmes are explicitly aligned to service the critical challenges discussed in the White Paper. We provide world class, cutting edge capacity building and community empowerment and training in the areas of : Community Health Care; Parenting and childcare; Early childhood development; Care for those with HIV and AIDS and other diseases; Citizenship education; Community organization; Making effective use of new consumer technologies for various purposes such as seeking information

or marketing local products; Skills for self-employment in a range of areas from market gardening to small scale manufacture, arts and crafts. ⁷

Unisa has deliberately and incrementally invested substantial human and financial resources to support the integration of community engagement into teaching and learning and research in such a way that it forms a core component of engaged scholarship. While our university has moved into the funding of CE, it is evident that CE is sustainable through for example, subsidy income generated by publications, as well as SLPs and as such, a lack of funding need not necessarily present a barrier to community engagement.

Slide 4 – CE outputs and programmes

A recent study by Unisa's Bureau for Market Research⁸ found amongst other things, that the financial benefits of CE for tuition ranged between 10.15% and 37.81% and for research roughly between 30.3% and 52.15 %. At Unisa no fewer than 40 articles were produced from funded CE projects. In total 80 outputs were delivered from community engagement projects alone. These ranged from accredited outputs to policy briefs, fact sheets, research reports, workshops and other artefacts. This is a matter of some pride for Unisa, considering that 2013 marked the first year of a dedicated investment in community engagement and outreach. It also demonstrates quite clearly how CE can contribute to, and enhance, scholarship, while rendering an invaluable service.⁹

In 2013, for the first time in its history Unisa intentionally committed an institutional budget of R30 829 163.00 to fund community engagement and outreach projects. The Unisa Foundation has also committed an additional R6 000 000.00 since the beginning of 2013. In 2012, Unisa had registered 120 projects in colleges, regions and the PVC's office. Since 2013, that number has increased to 176 projects: 144 in Colleges, 27 in the regions, and 1 in the PVC's office. Apart from 4 projects awaiting funding, 176 projects are benefitting from the joint funding from Unisa and the Unisa Foundation.

⁷ Baijnath, N. 2014. UNISAWISE. Nurturing Fertile Ground with Knowledge: CE at Unisa. Summer 2014. Unisa

⁸ BMR. (2013) Assessment of the Impact of CE in the 2013 Financial Year. BMR Unisa.

⁹ Pienaar, S. 2014 UNISAWISE. Nurturing Fertile Ground with Knowledge: CE at Unisa. Summer 2014. Unisa

To demonstrate the integration of community engagement with research and teaching while simultaneously addressing development objectives, four examples of best practices of community engagement projects in the areas of lifelong learning, engaged research and engaged teaching and learning will be briefly mentioned. These projects address developmental objectives relevant to our context and time; lifelong learning to improve access to employment opportunities; research to improve the education system; and training to address issues of malnutrition and hunger.

The first is the *Chance 2 Advance* project in the office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor. This programme promotes a culture of lifelong learning to inform, equip and prepare poor and marginalised communities for study, work, community participation and local and international social justice challenges. It has reached 60 000 participants in communities across SA since 2011, through 60 programmes and 500 workshops in more than 100 communities. Academics from all of Unisa colleges have participated in designing and facilitating free workshops for communities.

The 500 Schools Project of the College of Education: *Making Schools Better*, consists of a multidisciplinary team from 10 departments doing research into underperforming schools, and developing targeted interventions to improve the quality of basic education.

The Household Food Security Programme in the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences is the collaborative labour of a multidisciplinary team of academics from Education, Consumer Sciences, Life Sciences, Environmental Sciences, Geography, Agriculture and Animal Sciences. Existing community development workers, home-based caregivers and volunteers are trained to work with vulnerable households to facilitate the behavioural change and learning strategies required to become more food-secure and in so doing to address issues of malnutrition and hunger. 250 students will be trained in 2013 as Household Food Security Facilitators.

The Platfontein San Community Site of Knowledge is a research project to access knowledge by means of community based methodologies to develop a localised understanding of

endogenous knowledge on conflict- and dispute resolution inherent in the oral tradition of the San community. The purpose of the project is to identify legitimate practical solutions for the development of first people communities and to protect and effectively share and utilise endogenous knowledge for the benefit of humankind, with special attention to the protection and nurturing of endogenous knowledge, to the benefit of the community.

There are many more projects – equally fascinating and equally interesting - which speak to the diversity of South Africa and her peoples, and the richness that resides in our borders in regard to engaged scholarship – indeed, the future for engaged scholarship at Unisa looks very promising indeed.

Slide 5 – Conclusion

Thus far, Unisa's Community Engagement experience has been a positive one under the guidance of a committed Council, executive and academe. Systems, structures, policies, processes, resources and initiatives have been put in place and committed to effect, govern, manage and support community engagement projects and activities. Community engagement has been conceptualised, defined and clarified contextually for its time. It now falls under the auspices of the Pro Vice Chancellor. This level of leadership assigned to community engagement elevates it to its rightful place alongside research and teaching and learning. We look forward to bigger and better in the years to come.