

Igniting Student Development Through Collaborations

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“The higher education democratic, civic and community engagement movement emphasises that collaboration inside and outside the academy is necessary for producing knowledge that solves real-world problems and results in positive changes in the human condition.” (Benson et al. 2017, p. 69)

ABSTRACT

Many structural societal problems are common in the villages, townships, squatter camps, hostel dwellings, ghettos, and shanty towns. The worst-case scenarios are the areas surrounded by universities where the universities are supposed to be changing lives. The values of the public good must drive universities' services and involvement in community engagements and empowerment. The university's role must be to change society, mainly those surrounding it. South African universities must drive the African way of co-existence. It must be characterised by communal sharing, empowerment, ubuntu, communalism, common co-existence goals, responsiveness and responsibility. Universities' curricular and extra-curricular programs must serve the public towards the surrounding poverty-stricken communities. The programs must provide positive spin-offs and spill-over effects into the communities. The positive effects must minimise the pains of the powerful and the downtrodden who find it challenging to make ends meet in terms of survival because of abject poverty. Universities must form collaborations and or partnerships to serve the public good toward the surrounding power communities. Universities must be driven by a non-internal, inclusive approach and be outward-looking. The goals of a university must be to be in service to the community. They must strive towards active civic and social engagement, investment, and community development. This paper suggests that universities require open-ended partnerships with their surrounding poor communities in an unconditional and non-legalistic manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study is a conceptual framework for collaborations between university students and their surrounding communities. It derived data from the author's experience as an experienced Student Life and Development Practitioner working with student societies on community engagement projects and the existing literature review on universities and community engagement. The experience was helpful in this research study as it became a crucial moment for reflective practice and leadership. The conceptual framework seeks to demonstrate that university community engagement must be made a public mission for universities as part of student development and producing engaged students with an outlook towards community development.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS AND EMPOWERMENT

The former ANC President Thabo Mbeki spoke of the year of Lestema or Ilima (communities working together) during the 90th anniversary of the ANC. He said Letsema meant that communities must be able to mobilise each other to be their development agents in their quest for the reconstruction and the development of their lives and communities. He asserted that communities must be their liberators in their quest for emancipation. Thabo Mbeki was introducing the spirit of South African volunteering to uplift one another as part of his promotion of the African Renaissance project. He wanted communities to stand up and help one another (Twala, 2003, pp. 1-12). South African universities can wake up and arise in the spirit of volunteering

and engage and empower their surrounding communities to reconstruct and develop themselves. Universities can do more with the knowledge and the limited resources to ignite the spirit and the culture of arising and acting together as a form of community empowerment and development. Thabo Mbeki asserts that reconstruction and development happen only when communities come together and share their knowledge and skills.

The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education required universities to be more responsive to the needs of society, where community collaborations must be part of the learning and teaching. Collaborations and/or partnerships between the university and society at large must be embedded within the university's business, which is learning and teaching. The universities will be in part exercising social responsibility, the common good towards surrounding communities, enhancing, and promoting social responsibility and self-awareness within their student communities (Department of Education 1997, pp. 1-4). The transformation agenda of Higher Education has not necessarily addressed the societal challenges of development, poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Shawa, 2020, p. 106). The National Plan for Higher Education encourages universities to be involved in community engagements and collaboration (Department of Education 2001, p. 1).

The role of the universities is not only in the academic sphere, but their roles also encompass the social sphere, which includes community engagements and collaborations as part of uplifting and empowering communities. Universities can assist the surrounding communities through social awareness campaigns, sustainable development methods and knowledge, community development and reconstruction, responsible consumer behaviour and social behaviour change projects, and training and making communities with the current trends in the world in terms of social change and development (Sharma, 2015, p. 1). The role of Student Life and Development officials in collaborations with the academics and student societies can do more in the development and reconstruction of their communities. Communities do have ideas that may be hidden or inactive; it just requires universities to ignite the fires of change and social consciousness in the communities. The culture of Letsema or Ilima is in the hands of the communities and universities.

The history of universities being in service of society is an old phenomenon that covers various areas of urban health, international problems and challenges, science, technology, developmental challenges, and the sustainable use of the environment. The emphasis was also placed on empowering agricultural production in the society, teaching young adults parenthood and universities were expected to convert scientific knowledge into immediately applicable knowledge for the communities (Carnegie Foundation 1967:1-4). The age of this literature by Carnegie Foundation indicates that the challenge faced by non-collaborations and engagements of universities and communities has existed since immemorial. The demise of non-collaborations and engagements must happen with immediate effect.

PRACTICAL UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

There is no framework for communities and universities to engage in South Africa. Universities are expected to be socially engaged entities and democratise the knowledge, learning, and teaching activities in terms of the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education. There are no clear guidelines for the partnerships and or collaborations. The lack of guidelines has also created barriers to successful collaborations or the buy from communities because universities have more power than their surrounding communities. Most universities go to the communities and conduct research. They leave poor communities behind without any social benefits from the research conducted (Johnson, 2020, p. 1). It must be noted that universities must collaborate or partner with communities with mutual benefits for all involved. Communities cannot be used to acquire or process knowledge from university research respondents.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal School of Agriculture and the uMgungundlovu Local Municipality collaborated with the local farmers to create resilient and adaptive farmers for the challenges created by climate change and/or global warming. The relationship centred on helping the local farmers with flood management skills, skills on the rehabilitation of their farms and ecological infrastructure, and developing climate-resistant

farming infrastructure. The collaborations were centred on creating capacity for the local farmers and sharing knowledge acquired from the collaborations (uMngeni Resilience Project 2019, p. 4).

The Durban University of Technology's Centre for African Development and Governance (CAGD) has collaborated with the Zimbabwe community-based organisation called Livelihood and Export Aided Program (LEAP). The donor for the project is African Economic Development Strategies (AEDS). This project is based in the Nyanyadzi and Mutambara irrigation scheme villages. AEDS ensures that the communities receive the materials required for the agronomics project. The sustenance includes farming and harvesting techniques. The LEAP program aims to provide the communities with enhanced agricultural sustainability, food security, gender equality and health security related matters. The agreements between farmers and production factories, including fertilisers and seed companies, have been entered into (DUT, 2021, p. 1).

University of Pretoria students participate in the Street Store@UP community project in Mamelodi, providing clothes and food for the needy communities. Community engagement projects can be part of co-creating solutions to societal problems with the affected communities. Universities must produce students ready to positively contribute to the world's sustainable futures and livelihoods (Green, 2021, pp. 1-2). Community engagement projects take students from the comfort of their university lives and engage them in resolving societal and developmental challenges. They must ignite sustainable developmental solutions in communities through community involvement (O'Malley, 2021, pp. 1-2).

The Nelson Mandela University Wood Technology Students' Society manufactured wooden beds for donations to the Bethesda Child and Youth Centre in 2018. The students used the academic knowledge they received from class to produce wooden beds in practice and donated them to the surrounding needy community under the Society for Sustainable Timber Management (SYSTM). Close to 35 Wood Technology students were involved in manufacturing beds using pine wood. The students sourced the locally produced wood through collaborations with the surrounding Forestry companies like MTO and SANPARKS. The companies also assisted with technical skills and financial resources to uplift the surrounding communities (Sinxo, 2018, pp. 1-2). This is a clear example that Letsema/Ilima, as championed by Thabo Mbeki, is possible between university students and the local business communities in volunteering their finances, technical skills, and coordination in the betterment of the needy communities. This is an example of converting academic scientific knowledge into immediately usable practical knowledge.



Figure 1, George Herald: 2018

The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) has partnered with the Nelson Mandela University Agriculture students in the farming project on the farming land provided by the DCS. The students go to the farm and share their agronomic skills with the incarcerated offenders in the DCS George facility. The farming produce will be donated to the surrounding needy communities for alleviation. Academic staff are also involved in the project to provide agricultural technical skills needed to manage the project (NMU/George Herald 2021, p. 1).



Figure 2, NMU in George Herald 2021



NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY



Change the World

Figure 3: The Plants of the Agri Project

The Nelson Mandela University's Covid-19 Convergence Fund has donated items necessary to alleviate poverty and household hunger challenges in the surrounding communities. The recipients of the donations from the fund were the elderly population, victims of gender-based violence, and recipients of chronic medication who are likely to default because of the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The fund received close to R520,000 during the article's publication, and many families had already received assistance from the fund (NMU 2020, p. 1). Universities must be ready to assist the communities in times of need without any conditions or expectations from the university. The university must be there for what is good for society in the service of society, while changing people's lives.

The Student Life and Development of the Nelson Mandela University have been hosting the Annual Youth Leadership in collaboration with the George Municipality. The primary purpose of the annual conferences is to engage and empower the local youth and the students at the university. The conference has been going on for the past 2 years since 2019. The 2020 conference theme was as follows: "When life throws you lemons, what do you do? You make lemonade, they say..." (NMU 2020, p. 1). The following posters are the depiction of the annual collaborations between the Nelson Mandela University and the George Municipality towards youth leadership development and empowerment.

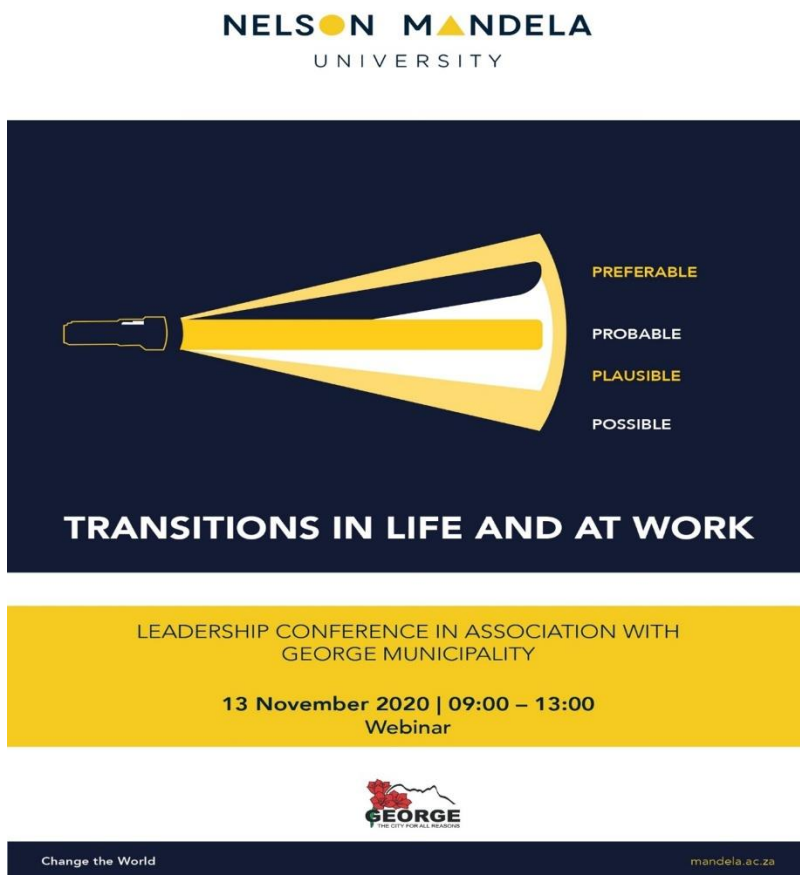


Figure 4: Nelson Mandela University 2020



Figure 5: Nelson Mandela University 2021

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Societies cannot solve the social ills and challenges, unemployment, high crime levels, Gender-Based Violence, femicide, poverty, and illiteracy levels in the country alone. Universities must work with communities in search of solutions to the world's problems. Students' societies must align their developmental agendas with their communities. There are many platforms where students can engage with the local communities as part of their student leadership and development trajectory. Students who study mathematics, science and or ICT can help local schools with extra lessons in mathematics or identify students with challenges and empower them. A student studying environmental health can help communities with environmental management skills while using the environment for survival.

Students studying agriculture can help communities with communal gardening with their academic skills while also getting real-life farming experiences. Universities must be spaces where communities find solutions to their problems. Special projects need to be identified by universities, such as creating youth enterprises in the surrounding communities. Universities can design special short courses to support and enhance community economic development activities. These short courses will create self-sustainability in the communities. Universities must train their students to be change agents in the communities. Students studying wood technology and forestry can assist the local government in infrastructure developments for the poor and needy. They can help communities rehabilitate environmental spaces and create job opportunities for the local communities. ICT students can assist communities with free computer literacy lessons using university infrastructure. Food technology students can partner with local small-scale business owners regarding food safety and health-related matters.

Universities must create community builders and social change champions, not the elite educated or certified class. A university can operate as a club for the mighty and educated class in a vacuum. The university must be at the centre of community activism in resolving society's challenges. The university has the skills, tools, and sometimes the infrastructure that can improve our communities. Many South African communities are under strain and distress. Universities must play a significant role in developing local communities while developing their students through community collaborations and engagement. The product will socially responsible young people with a social conscience, for the engagement and energy needed to change the world.

Student Life and Development Divisions must design the structure of their development programs with community collaborations and engagements becoming the core in their architecture. Universities must be outward-looking towards their communities to develop, empower, enhance, and strengthen the community's knowledge base and its applicability at a practical level. Universities must become central to their surrounding communities and the society at large. Social justice must be the motivator for community collaborations and engagement. Universities must resist the temptation of being part of society's re-social engineering.

RECOMMENDED MODEL FOR UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

Bawa (2018), Bhagwan (2017), and Khanyile (2020) have written extensively on the collaborations between universities and society. A proposed model emanates from a journal published by Bhagwan in 2017. The model is proposed to assist universities and or Student Life and Development Practitioners in their quest to introduce their student leaders to community service and being in service to society. Community service means that universities must be of service to society. The following drivers must be central to university community collaborations for community empowerment and student development.

- Community engagements must be centred around social justice.
- To link universities with their surrounding communities.
- Fostering citizenship in service to the community.
- Fostering a sense of community building.
- Opportunities for experiential learning for students.

- Relationship building between universities and their surrounding communities.
- Co-beneficial projects and outputs.
- The university must assist communities with innovations and knowledge to solve societal problems and developmental challenges.
- Integration of community enjoyment and knowledge production.
- Both universities and communities must co-create an engagement project.
- The enhancement of lifelong learning in the communities.
- Communities and universities must be co-owners of the produced knowledge and end products.
- Universities must recognise and record Indigenous knowledge in the communities.
- Universities must be responsive to the communities' challenges through collaborations.
- Partnerships must be based on sustainable development.
- Community collaborations must be part of the universities' public mission.

Universities and community collaborations must enhance and enable students to interact with community organisations and their roles in civic education and engagement, such as the role of elections in the communities, the role of government, and the rights of communities. Students must understand the value added by communities and their civic structures' decision-making. Students must be able to reflect on their participation in community collaborations at personal, developmental, political, and philosophical spheres (Fried, 2006, p. 8). The strength of collaborations must link the learned or taught knowledge, learned and lived experiences from community engagements and collaborations, and impactful developmental experiences for students and communities (Steffes & Keeling, 2006, p. 70).

Universities must strive to assist communities in producing and implementing solutions for social challenges like poverty, inequality, and unemployment. The existence of universities must be beneficial to the surrounding communities. Their existence will avoid taking the challenges communities face to the next generation, which is an antithesis of sustainable development. Community engagement must be about money from universities and community upliftment, empowerment, and reconstruction (James, 2021, p. 1).

Community collaborations must be the learning pillar towards enhancing students' practical skills of what they have learned in class. They must learn to identify and diagnose society's problems through practical community engagement projects and be able to diagnose such problems. Students will learn adaptive skills while adjusting from the lecture hall to real-life experiences and adapting from being a student to being a citizen, collaborating and transforming communities in many ways (Blackwell & Cummins, 2007, pp. 49-52).

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