

ARE WE HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION? ASSESSING UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DIMENSIONS OF A SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

University-Community engagement has become the latest core business of South African Higher Education Institutions adding to traditional teaching and research duties. As a consequence of its newness, university-community engagement policies and programmes are poorly developed, opening a window for various incoherent and inconsistent interpretations and implementation inefficiencies. With this background, the objective of this paper is to develop and apply an analytic framework that can be used to critically assess the university-community engagement policy and practice dimensions of a South African Higher Education Institution. To achieve this, the author utilises scientific literature to develop an analytic framework and subsequently applies it to categorise university-community engagement initiatives of a South African Higher Education Institution. This categorisation is organised along a continuum from weak community engagement (i.e. community services and outreach projects) to strong community engagement (i.e. community engagement projects). Results reveal that community services dominate the collection of university-community engagement initiatives at this university. Overwhelmingly, the results point to the fact that even a leading South African Higher Education Institution grapples with the practice of community engagement. This paper concludes with novel recommendations.

Keywords: Analytic framework, Conceptual framework, South African Higher Education Institution, University-community engagement participation typology

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or universities have added university-community engagement (UCE) as a core activity alongside teaching and research. Despite its newness, South African universities have hastily initiated projects in the name of 'university-community engagement'. In this rush, any university initiative that involves local community members and/or external stakeholders is applauded as genuine university-community engagement. In fact, most South African universities report on 'university-community gatherings' as genuine university-community engagement initiatives. This naive comprehension of university-community engagement plagues many South African universities and discourages scholarly inquiry on this subject. It is in this context that this paper develops and applies a university-community engagement participation typology that will aid both the policy and practice of this third mission statement of universities. This deeper comprehension of university-community engagement is necessary for societal transformation-a moral duty of any university, here and elsewhere. To achieve this mammoth task, this paper is organised into the following manner: section 2-addresses the contested nature of 'community' and 'engagement' resulting in the conceptualisation of university-community engagement; section 3-develops an analytic framework that will be applied to assess university-community engagement at the selected university; section 4-outlines the research design, describes the case study institution, and limitations of this study; section 5-

presents the results from the application of the newly developed analytic framework (i.e. the University-Community Engagement Participation Typology); section 6-discusses these results, and; section 7-draws concluding remarks and charts the way forward.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper begins by conceptually the contested nature of community and engagement in order to add context and direct the audience accordingly.

Defining Community and Engagement

Contested nature of Community

The term community remains highly contested and this is reflected in the agglomeration of ninety-four (94) definitions of this term. Banks (2003) points out that it is almost compulsory that any publication with the term 'community' in the title should have a section on this topic and this paper does not deviate from the norm. According to Banks (2003), one of the difficulties with 'community' is that it falls into the category called an 'essentially contested concept'. This is because the term 'community' descriptive, evaluative, and active connotations. The active and descriptive meanings refer to attributes of the world that describe what it is to be a 'community' –for an example, 'a group of people with something in common'(Green & Mercer, 2001). The evaluative meaning of 'community' comprises the value connotations that attach to the term –that is, 'community' is a positive term, and when used may invoke images of affection, cooperation, and kindness and so forth (Green & Mercer, 2001). Here is the detailed explanation of descriptive, evaluative, and active meanings of communities. The *descriptive community* refers to the social scientists' use of the term to describe a group or network of people, institutions, or organisations that share 'something' in common (Green & Mercer, 2001). This generally involves both (social) interaction within the group or network, and a sense of attachment, identification with or belonging to. A distinction is often made between two types of communities: *territorial communities* and *communities of interest or identity* (Green & Mercer, 2001). In *territorial communities*, people have their geographic location/area in common, for example, their neighbourhood, village, town or city. *Communities of interest or identity* are based on characteristics other than physical proximity such as ethnicity (Caucasian), professional membership (Medical doctor's association), and religion (Islam) and so forth (Green & Mercer, 2001). However, these categories are not mutually exclusive, as some communities, such as mining or fishing villages, for example, may be rooted in both shared locality (near mines or fishing water ways) and common interest (as miners and fishers). Banks (2003) continues that whilst we would define descriptive community as entailing an attachment to a group or social network. This author posit that it is important to note that the term is very often used in the context of policy and practice simply to refer to a geographical neighbourhood (for example, 'the Pretoria community'), or set of individuals ('the New Yorkers') who may not actually feel any sense of attachment to an area or identity with any group referred to. Strictly speaking, this is a misuse of the term, but it is used so commonly that we need to take it into account. The term 'community' is often used in a policy context to mean simply people who live in an area and/or lay people (people who are not professional) (Banks, 2003). This is often what is meant when reference is made to 'community representatives', 'consulting the community', 'community development workers', or University-Community Engagement (UCE). This use of the term may imply a sense of belonging or attachment, even though there is none whatsoever.

Normative community or *community as values* refers to the universal values that are associated with communities (Green & Mercer, 2001). These universal values may include, but are not limited to, affection, friendliness, care, dignity, respect, and love and so forth (Green & Mercer, 2001). In scientific literature, Butcher (1993, p 14-17) identifies three 'community values' as: *solidarity*, *participation*, and *coherence*. In their strongest form, he argues, these are grounded in a communitarian philosophy. Although there are many different versions of communitarianism, broadly speaking they all hold to a view of the individual as constituted by society (Etzioni, 1995a; Etzioni, 1995b). In African culture, this sense of community is articulated in the *Ubuntu* philosophy (I am because you are). Butcher's three community values can be described as follows: *Solidarity* –the relationships that sustain community members at an emotional level. Solidarity is what inspires affection, even loyalty of an individual member towards the group; *Participation* –shared activities with others, through which individuals are involved in realising common goals and playing a part in the collective life and aspirations of the group. *Coherence* –the embracing by individuals of a framework of meanings and values that provide some overall sense of their world.

The meaning of *Active community* builds on and encompasses the descriptive and value meanings identified above. It refers to collective action by members of territorial or interest communities that embraces one or more of the communal values of solidarity, participation and coherence (Green & Mercer, 2001). This is the idea of community that public policy makers often have in mind when they seek to promote initiatives drawing upon community strengths and capacities (Banks, 2003). In the context of university community engagement (UCE), we can further distinguish between the internal and external communities. The internal community refers to the 'university community' comprised of academics and support staff working for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or universities and the student populace. The external community refers to stakeholders that work together with the university including surrounding 'communities', corporate citizens, civil society organisations, and government departments etc.

Characterising Engagement

Definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary unambiguously indicate that, in engagement, two or more partners, such as people, institutions, or nations, enter into an asymbiotic agreement or mutual destruction (such as armed conflicts). The essence of engagement is that both parties actively participate. However, literature, notably Arnstein Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969), supported by Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Reed (2008), have shown that participation can occur at different levels sometimes with negative unintended consequences. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation-in Figure 1-depicts that participation begins with involvement-or non-participation-characterised by manipulation and therapy through to citizens control. Participation increases as we move through the ladder from manipulation up until the citizens are empowered to take ownership of their lives or any initiative (i.e. Citizen control).

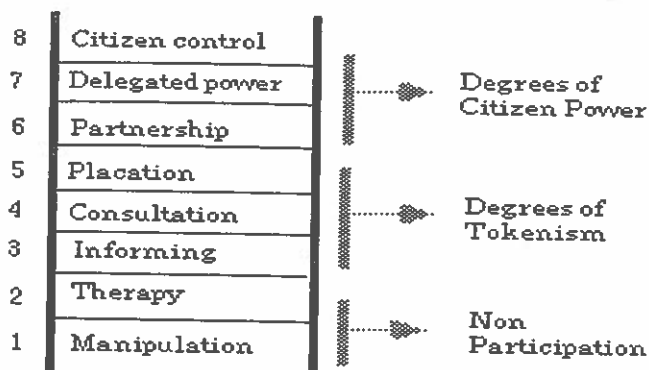


Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969)

According to Arnstein (1969) manipulation refers to non-participation by the less powerful who are used by the powerful to achieve their own ends (Cornwall, 2008). Therapy aims to cure or educate the participants and their role is only to achieve public support through public relations rather than contributing to the process. Informing or communication is vital for legitimate participation, but all too frequently the emphasis is on a one-way flow of information, as there is no channel for feedback (Cornwall, 2008). Consultation is also a legitimate step in utilising apparatus such as attitude surveys, neighbourhood meetings, and public enquiries (Cornwall, 2008). However, Arnstein (1969) argues that this is just a window dressing ritual. Placation an example of this level is co-option. It allows citizens to play an advisory role or to plan, but power holders and/or gate keepers retain the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice. Partnership in this level, according to Arnstein (1969), power is in fact redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders (Cornwall, 2008). Planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared. The poor and powerless citizens can negotiate and engage in trade-offs with power holders, for example, through joint committees. In Delegated power, Arnstein (1969) considers that at this level, citizens hold a clear majority of seats on committees and have delegated powers to make decisions (Cornwall, 2008). The public thus now has the power to assure accountability of the policies and programs for themselves. Last, in Citizen Control the residents handle the entire process of planning, policymaking, and managing a programme, for example, neighbourhood cooperation, with no intermediaries between it (Cornwall, 2008). Furthermore, citizens formerly without power obtain the majority of decision-making seats in the committees or full managerial power (Arnstein, 1969). Most of Arnstein's Ladder is characterised by non-participation and limited participation akin to manipulation and tokenism. We begin to see genuine engagement creeping into the ladder through partnership, delegated power, and citizens' control. This is because, in genuine engagement, information and decision making flows into both directions from the experts (university community) to the lay people (external community) and vice versa-this is what engagement is supposed to be.

ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

In the previous paragraphs the author conceptualised community and engagement. In paper, we use the university community to refer to staff members, mostly academics and students, and the external community to refer to communities outside of the university or external stakeholders including lay people from local or surrounding communities-which are often the subject of university-community engagement. This background information will aid the

process of developing the university-community engagement (UCE) typology which will be used (in section 5) to analyse UCE activities at a South African Higher Education Institution. This newly developed university-community engagement framework is inspired by work from Bender (2008), Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamati (2008), Reed (2008), and Arnstein (1969).

University-Community Engagement Typology

Both community and engagement reinforce each other. We require active communities-meaning engaged communities to have community engagement. Also, the term engagement itself implies that two or more parties are working together-side by side (Dempsey, 2010). In the context of this paper, university-community engagement is when (lay) people from external communities work together with the members of the university community in a back-and-forth processes characterised by equal powers in the decision making process. To this end, the researcher has developed a University-Community Engagement Typology (see Table 1) that will be used as a continuum to analyse UCE activities of a selected South African Higher Education Institution (HEIs). Table 1 is explained as follows: First, the participation objectives of UCE determines the type of participation (as indicated in Table 1) and this might include mere information and consultation in which information or knowledge flows in one direction, either from the external community members (ECMs) to the university community members (UCMs) or vice versa. Second, during the involvement stage, the external community members (ECMs) and the university community members (UCMs) collaborate in the University-Community Engagement (UCE) initiative and information or knowledge flows in both directions. Third, the last stage of University-Community Engagement (UCE) is ownership of the UCE initiative by the external community members (ECM) resulting in empowerment (see Table 1). Last, various University-Community Engagement (UCE) activities will be judged by this engagement/participation typology. Again, the levels or degree of external community members (ECMs) participation in the University-Community Engagement (UCE) activities depends upon the objectives or intended outcomes/results of the UCE activities. Examples of UCE activities might include, but are not limited to, student internships, volunteer services, and social programmes and so forth.

Table 1: University-Community Engagement (UCE) Typology in the context of social science research

| Stages of participation (i.e. degree of participation/rungs of the ladder) | Main purpose of participation (i.e. objectives of participation) | Characteristics of the stage (i.e. direction of communication flows) | Type of participation (i.e. theoretical basis/pragmatic participation etc.) | |
|--|--|--|---|--------------|
| Non participation | Manipulation | Powerful stakeholders uses powerless stakeholders to legitimise decision making | Non-participation | Comm Service |
| | Therapy | Information/knowledge flows in one direction from the powerful stakeholder to the powerless stakeholders | | |
| Communication (Informing) | Information | Information/knowledge flows in one direction from the university | Passive | |

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|-----------------------------|
| | | community members (UCMs) to the external community/stakeholders (ECMs). | participation (degrees of tokenism) of | Community Outreach |
| Consultation (& placation) | Extraction | Information/knowledge flows in one direction from the external community/stakeholders (ECMs) to the university community members (UCMs). | | |
| Co-construction/co-design/Involvement (delegated power & partnerships) | Co-development (characterised by reciprocity of actions) | Flow of information/knowledge is arranged in both directions: from the UCMs to the ECMs and vice versa, in a process of shared learning (co-learning/collaborative learning). | Interactive participation (delegated power & partnership) | Community Engagement |
| Decision/Empowerment (citizens control) | Ownership | External community/stakeholders (ECMs) are responsible for the UCE initiative(s). | Active participation/self-organisation/citizens control (Citizens control) | |

(Researchers' own synthesis inspired by Bender, 2008; Lazarus *et al.*, 2008; Reed, 2008; Arnstein, 1969)

RESEARCH DESIGN, CASE STUDY DESCRIPTION, AND LIMITATIONS

Research Design

This study utilised literature and developed a University-Community Engagement (UCE) Participation Typology. The author then applied this newly developed typology to categorise UCE activities and/or projects of the University of South Africa (UNISA) along a continuum. This continuum is constituted by three categories namely: Community Services, Community Outreach, and Community Engagement. The author groups Community Services and Community Outreach as Weak UCE engagement and Community Engagement as Strong UCE engagement (these are explained in the discussion section).

Secondary data on university-community engagement projects was obtained from the various colleges at UNISA. These projects were analysed using the newly developed assessment framework (see Table 2 for results). The links to the websites of considered colleges and their various community engagement projects are also presented in the results section.

Case Study Description

UNISA was used as an instrumental case study in order to test and refine the newly developed UCE framework (Baxter & Jack, 2008). UNISA was founded in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope and later became the first public university in the world to teach exclusively by means of distance education in 1946. UNISA is unique in the sense that it was the only university in South Africa to provide all people with access to education, irrespective of race, colour or creed. Today, UNISA is the largest open distance learning institution in Africa and the longest standing dedicated distance education university in the world. The university enrolls nearly one-third of all South African students. It offers short

courses and certificate programmes to three-and four-year degrees and diplomas, to over 400 000 current students. This institution actively promotes community engagement together with teaching and research activities. The Department of Community Engagement and Outreach drives their community engagement endeavours.

There are five (5) main categories of community engagement at UNISA and these are: Curriculum-related community engagement, Non-curriculum-related community engagement, Research-related community engagement, Community building and capacity building, and Community outreach.

This institution with its headquarters in Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa and it also has campuses in major cities and towns throughout the country.

RESULTS

This section presents the results from the application of the University-Community Engagement (UCE) Participation Typology to UCE projects.

Table 2: Applying University-Community Engagement (UCE) Typology to UCE activities of UNISA

| Stages of participation (i.e. degree of participation/rungs of the ladder) | Type of participation (i.e. theoretical basis/pragmatic participation etc.) | | University-Community Engagement (UCE) initiatives at the University of South Africa (UNISA) |
|--|--|-----------------------|---|
| Non participation | Non-participation | Community Services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Polokwane Rural Schools Development -Winning Schools Project (WISP) -College Student Career Day -Maths, English, and Accounting Tutorials -Health & Life Skills Training Project -Community Asset Mapping (Camp for Change) Program -Unearthing a Sustainable Future -Mandlethu School Project -Tswelopele Skills Development Programme (Human Capital Development) -CEMS Going Green (inward looking) -EMSSA & Enactus (Student Initiatives) -Dynamics of Violence in Schools Project -Vhembe Schools Project -Early Childhood Development (ECD) Outreach Intervention -Growing ECD Teachers in Rural Areas -Llima Lemfundo -Science Outreach (in KZN) -Analyses of Mathematics Teacher Professional Development Programmes -Learn not to Burn -I-SET (Inspired Towards Science, |

| | | | |
|--|--|----------------------|--|
| | | | Engineering & Technology) -GirlPower Project -MathsEdge Project -Computer Literacy in Communities (CLIC) -Socially Relevant Computing -Cyber Security Awareness Community Engagement Project (CSACEP) -Engineers Without Borders-UNISA -Astronomy Outreach Programme -Solar Vehicle Project -ICT in Classrooms -Unisa Science Exhibitor -Kgautshwane Integrated Community Development Programme -English Language in Postgraduate Research (inward looking) -Mathematics and Science for Nkungumathe Youth Development Project (Training in KZN) -Institute for Science & Technology Education Winter School Project -Ukuphepha: Child Safety, Peace, & Health-Community Intervention -Ukuphepha: Authorship Workshop (inward looking) |
| Communication/ Information | Passive participation (degrees of tokenism) | Community Outreach | -Makapanstad Career Expo -Community Asset Mapping (Camp for Change) Program -Environmental and Map Literacy -Entrepreneurship (E-Hub) -Professional Learning in Schools Management (Mpumalanga Project) -ICT in Classrooms -Community & Public Safety Measurement |
| Consultation (& placation) | | | |
| Co-construction/co-design/Involvement (delegated power & partnerships) | Interactive participation (delegated power & partnership) | Community Engagement | -Urban Agriculture Project -Lenasia Eco-schools Project -Mothong African Heritage Trust project in Mamelodi -Entrepreneurship (SMME Summit) -500 Schools Project Lesson Study -Waste to Energy for Lenasia's Thembelihle ECDs -Mothong Indigenous Medicine and Fruit Nursery Project -Photovoice Project (Ukuphepha Initiative: Demonstrating African Safety) |
| Decision/Empowerment (citizens control) | Active participation/self-organisation/citizens control (Citizens control) | | |

Table 2 is converted into a schematic illustration below (in Figure 1). It is clear that community services dominate the collection of University- Community Engagement (UCE) project at UNISA.

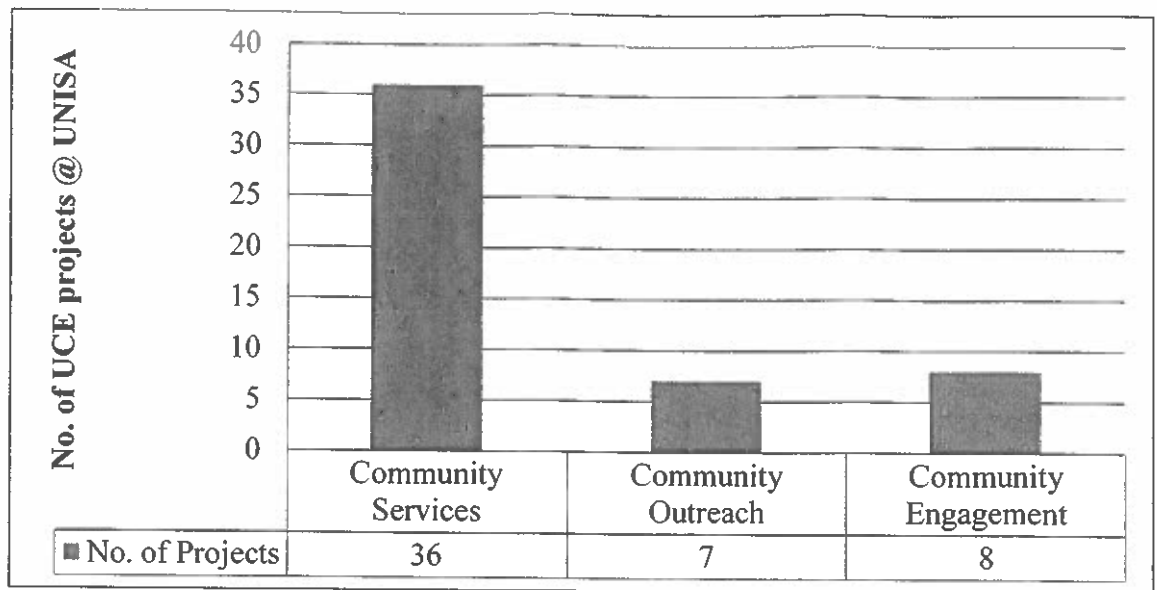


Figure 1: Number of UCE activities per category at UNISA

DISCUSSION

We discuss the results using the UCE participation typology synthesised from Bender (2008), Lazarus *et al.*, (2008), Reed (2008), and Arnstein (1969) and applied in Table 2. The discussion is organised along weak and strong university-community engagement categories. Weak university-community engagement refers to community services and community outreach programmes in which stakeholders, commonly lay people, are passive recipients of university services and information, and/or knowledge flows in one direction from the 'learned' university staff members to the 'lame' lay people. Occasionally, as in the form of information and consultation, university staff members will ask lay people to comment on their work-usually as subjects in a research study. This is classical placation whereby lay people are treated as puppets to legitimise decision made by power holders. Strong university-community engagement begins with partnerships between lay people and learned colleagues from universities. In this arrangement, power holders can delegate decision making powers to lay people in local communities-this represents a further step towards the ownership of UCE initiatives by local residents and/or external stakeholders. Citizen control is the penultimate expression of strong university-community engagement wherein lay people or external stakeholders are responsible for the management of UCE initiatives. Informed by this background, we discuss the results from the application of the UCE participation typology in Table 2 as follows:

Weak University-Community Engagement

Community Services

In the context of scholarly work, manipulation can refer to the 'ivory tower' social sciences research whereby lay people and/or external stakeholder are subject of scholarly inquiry (Cornwall, 2008). Academics gain valuable field notes from these subjects and then produce journal articles and book chapters that aid their career progression without benefiting the research subjects. In its worst form, manipulation might occur when the scholar/researcher does not provide feedback to the research subjects on his/her findings. Manipulation has been the traditional practice at universities since time immemorial and this is mainly responsible for the current research fatigue.

In Therapy, our findings reveal that initiatives akin to this practice (of therapy) dominate UCE activities at UNISA. According to Arnstein (1969), therapy refers to initiatives that aim to educate lay people in order for them to support societal transformation. Common activities undertaken by UNISA include training workshops for lay people in local communities, extra-curricular classes (tutorials) to boost Grade 12 learners' performance and improve Mathematics, Physical, and Accounting Sciences in school going children, career exhibitions to recruit prospective students, and awareness raising campaigns. Figure 1 illustrates that community services dominates the fifty-one (51) UCE projects at UNISA. The author argues that community services are weak university-community engagement initiatives in which learned university staff 'talks at' lay people in local communities-the one-way flow of information and/or knowledge in a workshop or classroom setting confirms this. The absence of a feedback mechanism in this type of settings has the potential to perpetuate powerlessness of lay people in decision making processes and further disenfranchising them. Cooke & Kothari (2001) termed this phenomenon the 'tyranny of participation' in which the (participation) setting is skewed in favour of powerful stakeholders and undermines the interests of powerless ones.

Community Outreach

Like the verb suggests, information is when learned academics and non-academics from universities 'talk at' lay people and/or external stakeholders. Here, the role of lay people and/or external stakeholders is to 'listen to' the university 'experts'. In environmental change studies, particularly climate change, information is used to 'educate' lay people and/or external stakeholders about the eminent danger posed by climate change and climate variability. Unlike information, consultation is a two-way process with a feedback mechanism. The two-way flow of information and/or knowledge allows the university 'experts' to 'talk with' lay people and/or external stakeholders. However, in this process, decision making is reserved to university 'experts' as they are usually the power holders and gate keepers at their institutions. Again, to use an example from climate change studies, that during consultation university 'experts' and lay people and/or external stakeholders can exchange scientific and indigenous knowledge about the occurrence of climate change. Placation is used by university 'experts' to legitimise their decision making processes but also to give credibility to their scientific inquires or research projects. By involving lay people and/or external stakeholders as subjects or participants in their scholarly inquiry increases the acceptability, credibility, transferability, and allows for generalisation of their findings. It also allows them to solicit and use public funds (from tax payers) by obtaining research grants (that are often tax free) from government funding agencies (such as the National Research Foundation in South Africa). In this regard, reaching out for community (via community outreach projects) serves to benefit the university and not the lay people and/or external stakeholders. UNISA, our case study area, clearly distinguishes community outreach from community engagement-this is a step in the right direction. Only seven (7) projects out of fifty-one (51) can be categorised as community outreach initiatives.

Strong University-Community Engagement

Community Engagement

Strong UCE is characterised by collaboration and reciprocity between university 'experts' and lay people and/or external stakeholders. Information and/or knowledge flows in both directions and decision making powers are shared equally between the different stakeholders and/or role players. This is achieved through a graduation process wherein lay people and/or

external stakeholders move from partnering with university 'experts' into decision making roles. The ultimate objective of this graduation process is to put university-community engagement projects under the control of lay people and/or stakeholders (through citizens' control). Only eight (8) out of fifty-one (51) projects at UNISA can be categorised as truly engaging communities.

LIMITATIONS

The authors wished to include more universities in the assessment. However, it was very difficult to locate the university-community engagement section on the website of most South African Higher Education Institutions or Universities. In turn, this limited the assessment to the University of South Africa which has University-Community projects listed on its website.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper developed and applied a UCE participation typology to categorise UNISA's UCE projects. Although our case subject, UNISA, clearly indicates on its website that it conducts UCE and outreach projects only. However, findings contradict UNISA's position by adding another categorisation of community services. This addition to the UCE participation continuum is derived from literature (Bender, 2008, Lazarus *et al.*, 2008, Reed 2008; Arnstein, 1969). The absence of this categorisation, up until now, is evidence that this paper makes novel contributions to the body of knowledge on UCE.

This paper warned against community outreach projects that solicit that participation of lay people and/or external stakeholders to legitimise decisions made without their consent. This has been the traditional approach of university staff, mainly academics, applying for research grants and producing research work. This approach has largely been responsible for the current research fatigue in local communities. The paper recommends that this process should be used in transition towards strong UCE.

Strong UCE offers universities and lay people the opportunity to participate in scholarly and community works. This arrangement increases the participation dividend on both sides and also rejuvenates societal interest in scholarly endeavours. In fact, strong UCE is the *Canaan* that most universities strive towards. This newly developed and applied UCE participation typology can bring universities somewhat nearer to this *Promised Land*. This paper recommends that this newly developed UCE participation typology should be applied as a guiding framework for universities across the world if we are to reach *Canaan*.

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