

EDUCATING STUDENTS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CURRICULUM IMPERATIVES FOR UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Margie Maistry

University of Fort Hare
mmaistry@ufh.ac.za

Jayshree Thakrar

University of Fort Hare
jthakrar@ufh.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The public sector, including higher education institutions (HEIs), has a critical role to play in the national post-apartheid transformation agenda in South Africa. With the formalisation of community engagement (CE) as a core function of HEIs, universities are now required to contribute to the socio-economic development of communities and to promote students' social and civic responsibilities through community engagement. Students are viewed as both agents and beneficiaries of community engagement.

We propose that students of HEIs in South Africa have to be educated and prepared for engaging with communities, otherwise the potential to cause harm (albeit unintentional), specifically to previously disadvantaged communities, is real. Based on our proposal, this article presents the findings of exploratory research conducted for developing curricula to prepare students for community engagement practice and scholarship at the University of Fort Hare (UFH), in the Eastern Cape.

Students currently involved in various forms of community engagement and areas of scholarship were purposefully selected from both the rural and urban campuses of UFH. The research asked the following question: What should be the nature and form of education/preparation of students, for the different kinds of CE activities and scholarship undertaken at UFH? The notion of ubuntu formed the philosophical base, with holistic education as the theoretical foundation of the study. The research drew from the scholarship of Barnett and Coate (2005) on the three functions of university curricula – knowing, acting and being – which we deem well suited to the functions of community engagement in the South African context.

Keywords: community engagement, holistic education, South Africa, student preparation, University of Fort Hare

INTRODUCTION

In the foreword to *Managing Civic and Community Engagement*, Lambert (in Watson 2007) writes that universities are vital to the health of nations, of regions, and of communities; never more so than in the context of today's global knowledge economy, with all its strains and imperfections as well as its dynamism and opportunities. With the formalisation of community engagement as a core function of higher education institutions in South Africa, universities are now required to contribute to the socio-economic development of communities and promote students' social and civic responsibilities through community engagement.

Students are viewed both as agents and beneficiaries of community engagement. A major implication of this view is that university students in South Africa have to be educated and prepared for engagement with communities. Based on our proposition that students have to be holistically educated and prepared if they are to have a positive impact, specifically on historically disadvantaged communities, our research asked the following question: What should be the nature and form of preparation and education of students for the different kinds of community engagement activities and scholarship undertaken at the University of Fort Hare (UFH)?

This article thus presents the findings of an exploratory study conducted among 43 students at UFH, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, for the purpose of developing a curriculum that would prepare students for community engagement practice and scholarship. A group of undergraduate and postgraduate students currently involved in various forms of community engagement and areas of scholarship was purposively selected from both the rural and urban campuses of the university.

In developing a conceptual framework for the study that supported our proposition of holistic education, we drew from Barnett and Coate's (2005) scholarship on the three functions of university curricula – *knowing*, *acting* and *being*. While we acknowledge the interrelationship between these three dimensions, we focused on *being* as significant for community engagement curricula in the South African context. We adopted the notion of *ubuntu* which depicts an orientation towards mutual responsibility and incorporates the values of compassion, hospitality, generosity and the wholeness of relationships (Kamwangamalu 1999) as a philosophical base for community engagement curricula.

We propose that knowledge of a student's self in relationships with others is critical for the development of student social responsibility. Our thinking is similar to the ideas of Relational Cultural theory which highlights the individual's development of self-with-others, rather than self-development as a purely individualistic exercise, as positioned in traditional psychodynamic theories (Edwards & Richards 2002; Motulsky 2010).

We contend that community engagement provides a potential and critical space for the holistic education and development of students. From the findings of the study, a tentative framework for community engagement curricula is presented.

CONTEXT: HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Historical overview

The ‘rainbow nation’ of South Africa has had a compelling and tumultuous history, with the education system as one of the main arenas of dehumanisation of the black majority in the country. The apartheid system of education aimed to keep the black population as unskilled labour, and excluded from economic power. As a legacy of the apartheid era, and alongside the mainstream economy, was a marginalised economy of survivalist entrepreneurial attempts by the historically excluded, and as a result high levels of unemployment, highly unequal distribution of income, and low levels of growth and investment became and have remained deeply entrenched.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE 2004: 94) describes the higher education context during apartheid as follows:

One that was inherently inequitable, differentiated along the lines of ‘race’ and ethnicity... Institutional purposes were linked neither to the needs of the broader society nor to consistent conceptions of quality. The resources, and hence the capabilities, capacities, and outcomes of HEIs, were related to the social stratification of apartheid. Under apartheid, higher education teaching and learning practices and the curriculum tended to be as fragmented as the institutional structure in which they were located.

The impact of the apartheid design of higher education in South Africa directs the current national government’s transformation agenda of higher education, and the introduction of community engagement is one aspect of this agenda.

After the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the new government embarked on large-scale political and socio-economic reforms to redress the legacy of apartheid. These reforms were driven by a macro-economic policy known as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), symbolised by its ideology of ‘growth through redistribution’. This was followed in 1996 by the more conservative Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan which focused on stringent monetary and fiscal targets; based on post-Fordist lines, GEAR represented a shift to ‘redistribution through growth’ (Fataar 2003; Visser 2004). With the shift to GEAR in 1996, policy discourse emphasised human capital development as a ‘decisive driver’ to economic growth. In order to expand human capital accumulation, a proliferation of education policies was introduced, imposing high expectations on the agency of education in South Africa’s transformation, particularly in terms of social redress and economic growth (Muthayan 2006).

The National Commission on Higher Education (1996: 1) argued that ‘higher education can play a pivotal role in the political, economic and cultural reconstruction and development of South Africa’. It proposed a framework that included a more heightened responsiveness, within higher education, of societal interests and needs, indicating that this would entail higher education engaging with the challenges and problems of its social context.

The subsequent *White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education [DoE] 1997: 10) made specific reference to the role that community engagement could play; higher education institutions (HEIs) being called on to ‘demonstrate social responsibility ... and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes’. The White Paper further stated 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’ (ibid.). Indeed, community service, currently referred to as community engagement, is now one of the three core responsibilities, alongside teaching and research, of South African higher education.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

Community engagement existed, albeit in an informal and ad hoc manner, in a number of universities during apartheid. However, there were no national directives that mandated social and economic development as a purpose of the engagement. In the current context of democracy, formalised community engagement is seen as integral to teaching, learning and research, and is expected to contribute to the necessary transformation of HEIs (DoE 1997). Subsequent to the White Paper (DoE 1997), the Jet Education Trust launched, in 1999, the Community–Higher Education–Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative, which involved 12 South African universities (the University of Fort Hare was not part of this initiative). CHESP sought to assist universities in conceptualising and implementing community engagement. Lazurus et al (2008: 81) argue that the CHESP initiative ‘only scratched the surface of embedding community engagement in South African higher education’.

Furthermore, the more recent publication on community engagement by the CHE (2010: iii, emphasis added) argues:

Despite clear policy mandates that community engagement is an important task, it has been neglected. Universities are involved in many activities structured around research, teaching and outreach that entail engagement with a wide range of communities, but these activities are uncoordinated and are the result of individual initiative, rather than of strategically planned, systematic endeavours.

So while the White Paper (DoE 1997) may have stipulated the purpose of community engagement, clearly the CHE (2010) findings suggest a concern regarding the lack of strategic and systematic intent (and thus implementation) for community engagement.

In the Glossary of the HEQC’s Framework for Institutional Audits (CHE 2004: 15), community engagement is defined as follows: ‘Initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the HEI in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community.’ It is acknowledged that community engagement takes a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities such as

volunteerism to formal and structured academic programmes such as service learning and action research addressed at particular community needs (CHE 2004).

A further description arising from the 2006 community engagement conference in South Africa (CHE et al. 2006) is that of community engagement as a process of creating a shared vision among the community and partners (local, provincial, national government, non-governmental organisations, HEIs, business and donors) in society, as equal partners, that results in a long-term collaborative programme of action with outcomes that benefit the whole community equitably.

While the above conception of community engagement may appear overly ambitious, we can nevertheless gather from these two definitions that community engagement is expected to draw HEIs into a closer relationship with communities, such that the relationship would be of benefit to the community. This kind of relationship is expected to counteract the prevailing 'ivory tower' image of universities. Universities may be part of society, but they have been perceived as standing apart or aloof from communities, especially so during the apartheid era. What is a pressing challenge in contemporary South Africa is how universities define the term 'community'. Hall's (2009) comments on the notion of community illustrate the difficulties involved in seeking to identify a university's community.

Community, then, can be taken as a cluster of households or an entire region, as an organisation ranging from a provincial government department to an NGO, as a school, clinic, hospital, church or mosque or as part of the university itself ...[or] a loosely defined set of social organisations. But community also functions as an adjective, as a qualifier that indicates work that is socially beneficial. Understood in this way and in the South African context, community work contributes to social or economic justice. (cited in Favish 2010: 92)

It is accepted that individual universities' conceptualisations of community engagement (and, by extension, the definition of community) would be influenced by their particular history and context (CHE 2006). One such example is the University of Cape Town which, because of the difficulty of identifying a single community for the university as a whole, opted to use the term 'social responsiveness' rather than 'community' engagement (Favish 2010). In this instance, community may mean any of the above descriptions presented by Hall (2009). However, most universities, including the University of Fort Hare, generally adopt a geographic space in close proximity to the university as its definition of its community.

The CHE Community Engagement Conference (2006) acknowledged that students are the agents and beneficiaries of community engagement, but no mention was made of how students would be prepared as 'agents' of such engagement. Generally, there is a serious lack of discussion on the critical need to educate students in community engagement and relevant curricula. Indeed, a number of pertinent questions remain unanswered with regard to students' participation in community engagement. How, for instance, do students understand the purpose of higher education and community

engagement? How do they conceptualise community engagement, and how do they understand their concomitant role in the broader society post-university? How are students prepared for community engagement in complex post-apartheid communities? How does community engagement impact on students' development of self?

Given that a critical function of community engagement is to produce graduates who are socially and civically responsible, an equally critical requirement is the appropriate design, development and content selection of community engagement curricula that would prepare and educate students to engage effectively with community systems. This then raises a pertinent question: What philosophical and theoretical bases should guide curricula for community engagement?

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CURRICULUM: PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Knowing, acting, being

In *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education*, Barnett and Coate (2005: 53) mention that the current state of the world is characterised by heightened levels of complexity and uncertainty: fluidity, instability, fragility, unpredictability, turbulence and contestability are some of the terms that mark out the world of the 21st century. Of equal concern is the role of universities as institutions of higher learning. With the shift to mass education, where the purpose of universities is largely underpinned by industrial requirements operating in a competitive global economy, students are seen as commodities, economic units and consumers (Kane 1999).

Taylor, Barr and Steele (1997: 118) remark that 'higher education has become in reality dominated by the business culture and its assumptions ... [Curriculum] relevance is equated with uncritical acceptance of private sector market ideology and culture'. Higher education curricula have become more focused on providing students with employment-related skills deemed necessary for the economy. While we accept that it is necessary for students to be prepared for the world of work, we nevertheless contend that the economistic approach of higher education detracts from educating students as whole human beings.

Given the above scenario, Barnett and Coate (2005: 28) ask: How do curricula at the higher education level serve or prepare students as human beings for a complex and complicated world? Is there any place for a sense of students as human beings, as distinct from being enquirers after knowledge or as possessors of skills? What is it to be an 'accomplished' human?

The authors identify knowing, acting and being as the three building blocks of curricula. Knowing is viewed as different from knowledge, which has an active, dynamic component and is always in a state of flux, partly because knowledge is socially developed. Knowledge requires human minds coming together through an ensuing interchange. Knowing is described as a personal act; a claim to ownership and

an act of identity, because in claiming to know, individuals mark themselves out; they take a position. It is a personal relationship between the person and the intellectual field in question. Such personal engagement can often be enhanced through collaborative engagement, by students acting and working together (ibid: 59–61).

The dimension of acting, which is a central concept of community engagement, refers to students' experience of practical activities which are often related to their degree programmes and implemented in the community, as required by professional degrees and community engagement in the South African context. Such activities may offer opportunities to students to apply their growing knowledge and understanding. Each discipline or field of knowing has its own practices which call for skills that the student is expected to develop (ibid: 61).

Being, the third set of building blocks, is referred to by the language of 'self', 'being', 'becoming', 'self-confidence' and 'self-understanding'. It is a language that speaks to a student's developing inner self. The authors contend that in a world of complexity and uncertainty, knowledge and skills are not going to provide students with sufficient wherewithal to enable them to flourish as human beings. However, they concede that 'being' is not an easy concept to include in the education of students. Unlike 'knowledge' and 'skills' its meaning is obscure; the idea of 'being' simply does not fit with the dominant discourses of an age that is performance oriented and instrumental, and 'being' also does not translate easily to course or module aims and objectives (ibid: 63–65). All is not lost, though, as Barnett and Coate (ibid: 108) point out that even if the language is unfamiliar, the concept of 'being' is embryonically already present in teaching practices, but largely in an unconscious manner. They support this claim by pointing out that 'many academics ... are familiar with students – and even their parents – saying on graduation days or even some years later that their [students] higher education experience changed them as "persons" and even "transformed" them' (ibid: 64). The intent is to make 'being' more explicit in higher education curricula.

An enormous challenge confronting universities in South Africa is that on the one hand, their dominant focus is that of educating students for the labour market. On the other, universities are expected to meet the objectives of community engagement, which include contributing to the social and economic development of communities and developing student social and civic responsibilities. How, then, are universities to deal with this apparent tension between educating students as individuals for the competitive job market and preparing them as socially responsible individuals contributing to the collective good? We contend that preparing students for life necessitates a holistic education which lends itself to a sense of critical awareness, self-knowledge and self-understanding in students.

Holistic education of students for community engagement

Holistic education challenges the current economistic approach to higher education and the prevalent individualistic notion of knowledge development that is enshrined in the

higher education system (Taylor, Barr & Steele 2002). In adopting a holistic approach to education, we attempt to link discipline-specific knowledge with students' knowledge of self, as derived from their interaction with communities outside of the university system. Community engagement provides the space for the merging of discipline-based knowledge, divergent realities and self-knowledge. Through community engagement the knowledge, action and being aspects of the student can be located in a broader social system, and not only within the confines of the university system. This tendency can be seen as an attempt to find meaning in the actions of the student, within the context of the whole.

Theron (2008) writes that holism put the spotlight on relationships, interconnectedness and process, unlike the linear, deterministic relationship of parts and whole in Newtonian mechanics. The ideas of general systems theory and the ecosystems perspective underscored the holistic approach to community development and, by extension, to community engagement (Bopp, Bopp & Lane 1998; Ife 1995). Systems are regarded as synergistic; the focus is on the interaction within and between systems and on the patterns of the interaction (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1997). From a holistic view and the general systems theory, human functioning is studied in terms of the interactional patterns within and between systems (ibid; Pillari 2002).

The two interacting systems focused on in this article are the student and the community, within the context of higher education. Students are viewed as intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual human beings engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the political, economic, social, cultural and spiritual lives (albeit to varying degrees) of communities. Holistic education is required to focus on the interaction within and between the student and community systems, and on the patterns of their interaction – this, to assess the nature of their functioning and relationship. We concede that this is an enormous challenge for higher education community engagement, but strongly believe a holistic approach warrants ongoing debate and investigation if community engagement is to achieve its intended purpose for higher education.

Importantly, the principles of social justice, human dignity, equality and actions guided by basic/universal human values such as love, compassion, honesty, peace, humility and respect, are essential qualities that students are required to inculcate in order to sensitively engage with fragile and vulnerable communities, some of them still grappling with the effects of the past. All of the above values are collectively encompassed in the notion of *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu

The philosophy of *ubuntu* views the individual not as an isolated being but in interdependent relationships with others. The general understanding of *ubuntu* is that an individual is only human through other humans, and that an interdependent relationship is what holds the community together (Broodryk 2002; Mbiti 1969). This interdependency is known as *ubuntu*. As a concept, *ubuntu* may be described as the 'quality of being human to be

a good moral character, to show goodwill, kindness, charity and mercy to one's fellow human' (Coetzee 2001: 113).

Ubuntu is a central value of the humanist perspective. As a value system, it has a significant role to play in the furtherance of people's development and 'is often used along with other concepts such as human rights and nation building' (ibid.). *Ubuntu* can therefore be viewed as a philosophy of co-existence, reconciliation, cooperation and integration.

There has been much criticism about the idealism of *ubuntu* and its practical applicability (Nabudere 2005). However, it should be noted that while some disciplines may be challenged to incorporate this philosophy into their curricula, disciplines related to the human and social service professions are more readily inclined to include some or many of the values of *ubuntu* in their curricula (Maistry 2010; Patel 2005). We contend that community engagement cuts across all disciplines and as such curricula for community engagement education, underpinned by the philosophy of *ubuntu*, will provide the space to inculcate (or attempt to) these values in students involved in community engagement. Currently, UFH's Life Knowledge Action/Grounding Programme (LKA/GP), implemented in 2010 with all first-year students across all disciplines, espouses the philosophy of *ubuntu*.

THE CASE STUDY: UFH

Established in 1916, UFH was a thriving home for black intellectual activity and the training of professionals. Located in the Eastern Cape, one of the poorest and most underdeveloped provinces in South Africa, the university's biggest campus, based in rural Alice, is also located in one of the most underdeveloped municipalities in the province. Unemployment and poverty levels within Nkonkobe Local Municipality are high – out of an estimated population of 133 434 (source: Census 2001) approximately 74 per cent of people living in the municipal area are classed as indigent. Ninety-three percent of the inhabitants earn less than R800 per month.

With the restructuring of higher education, the Rhodes University East London Campus was incorporated into UFH in 2004. The rural and urban campuses have a combined population of some 12 000 students; most come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. UFH's curricula renewal process of 2006 resulted in the establishment of the LKA/GP, which was piloted in 2009 and fully implemented in 2010. The programme can be described as a transdisciplinary teaching and learning experience, based on a just, humanising and collaborative pedagogy that builds on students' knowledge as a way of developing compassionate, socially engaged, critical and responsible citizens. The objective of the programme is to provide a transdisciplinary experience for all undergraduate students, allowing them to engage with societal issues from different perspectives.

The research process

The university's community engagement directorate was established in the latter half of 2009. The process of developing a database of community engagement activities at both the rural and urban campuses revealed that student groups/organisations (albeit a small number) were involved in community engagement as volunteers. Further, professional degrees, such as social work and nursing, entailed the involvement of students in service learning as part of their degree programme. However, the university does not have a programme to prepare students for community engagement prior to their actual engagement.

The exploratory study, therefore, attempted to answer the following question: What did students think the nature and form of education/preparation of students should be for the different kinds of community engagement activities and scholarship undertaken at UFH? This question was based on the assumption that it was necessary for HEIs in South Africa to educate and prepare students for engaging with communities, otherwise the potential to cause harm (albeit unintentionally), specifically to previously disadvantaged communities, is real. For instance, community engagement as part of community development requires that students adhere to the principles of community development in their engagement with communities. If principles such as participation, sustainability, learning, ownership, holism and equilibrium are not well understood and respected by the students, then the prospect of them leaving communities worse off following their engagement, is high (Ife 1998).

Three *iincokos* (conversations) were held with students selected from groups that were involved either in community engagement research or volunteer programmes: Student Representative Council (SRC)/Student Societies, Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) (funded by the national Department of Science and Technology) bursary holders, and LKA/GP student facilitators.

The sample comprised 43 students. While not representative of the total student population of the university, this small group was nevertheless considered a significant start to community engagement research focusing on students at UFH. Data were gathered from focus group discussions held on 23 February, 11 March and 4 April 2011 (separate sessions per student group). Table 1 shows the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students of the three sample groups. The data collection session with each group took between three and four hours. The research sample comprised the following participants:

Table 1: Participants in the research sample

Student sample group	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
SRC / student organisations	22	2	24
LKA/GP facilitators	10	3	13
CUPP bursary holders		6	6
Total	32	11	43

Drawing from the philosophical and theoretical framework, an interview guide was utilised for collecting data and questions were based on the following five main sections:

1. Meaning and purpose of higher education
2. Meaning and purpose of community engagement
3. Community engagement at the University of Fort Hare
4. *Ubuntu* and holistic education
5. Curriculum for community engagement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Meaning and purpose of higher education in South Africa

The economic view of education was the dominant response to the meaning and purpose of higher education in South Africa. The majority of students (41) were of the view that the aim of higher education was to prepare students for the labour market. One respondent noted that it was *‘to develop, prepare and train students for future careers’*. Two students, however, focused on the social purpose of higher education. One said that the purpose of higher education was to redress the legacy of apartheid, while the other mentioned improving the relationship between higher education institutions and communities, *‘where the walls and gates of universities disappear and communities can make use of university facilities to improve livelihoods particularly for the majority of black people’*.

While for the majority the purpose of higher education was to prepare them for the labour market, their vision of South Africa focused more on human and social development using community as the common denominator. As an example, one student’s vision for South Africa was *‘a place where students studied for knowledge to bring about peace, unity, social responsibility and practise ubuntu as opposed to studying for monetary gain only’*.

The majority of the students’ thinking is in line with the current neoliberal economic policies of the South African government: economic growth is the pathway to social development and improved quality of life for historically disadvantaged

communities. Most of the student population of UFH come from economically poor and disadvantaged communities, and so it is not difficult to comprehend why economic aspirations dominate their thinking.

Meaning and purpose of community engagement

While the students understand community engagement from the perspective of teaching, research and aspects such as public use of higher education physical infrastructure, the majority of responses placed emphasis on relationships and partnership-building as the meaning and purpose of community engagement. There is also a general understanding that community engagement has an important role to play in socio-economic development.

The thread of economic aspirations and the link between the classroom and the economic world is a continuous one (see above), yet a clear disconnect exists between students' understanding of, and involvement in, community engagement. For example, while students responded that the purpose of university–community engagement and collaboration was predominately socio-economic development, they did not see themselves as beneficiaries or change agents within that context.

Community engagement at UFH

Students agreed that they do not have a good sense of past and current practice of community engagement at UFH, and highlighted that it is probably not well known amongst most students. There was recognition of some student societies conducting volunteer and outreach programmes; other students 'do' community engagement as part of their degrees. However, it was perceived that the level of interest in community engagement for the professional degrees extended only as far as it enabled students to obtain their degrees, not for any other reason. It is important to note that this perception may not be true for all students undertaking a professional degree.

Interestingly, the majority saw community engagement as events-oriented, such as the Mandela Day celebrations, and were aware of visible community engagement initiatives such as the university's dairy farm and Agri-Park.

Students acknowledged that their own participation is disorganised and lacks cohesion; corroborating their experience with the CHE statement that nationally, in general terms, 'activities are uncoordinated and are the result of individual initiative, rather than of strategically planned, systematic endeavours [of the university]' (CHE 2010: iii).

The postgraduate community engagement bursary students felt strongly that students' participation will continue to be poor unless, as one respondent pointed out, '*students got something for it*'. As an example, one postgraduate student stated that '*if there were no credits in the Life, Knowledge, Action/Grounding Programme, students would not participate in it*'. The postgraduate bursary students felt strongly that students needed to be selected and trained to participate in community engagement.

The students attributed the lack of student participation to a lack of information about community engagement activities, and so recommended the following for UFH:

- Create awareness among the university's students and staff about the community and within the community about the university (community refers to people living outside the physical boundaries of the university);
- Equip and develop students for the outside world (spaces outside of the university's physical boundaries) and enhance social and community cohesion and productiveness;
- Conduct research to find out the needs of the community and to sensitise students and academics on these needs, and work with communities to promote their development in accordance with their identified needs; and
- Promote knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition as well as student learning.

Understanding *ubuntu* and its relevance for community engagement

Students have a very good understanding of *ubuntu*, with respondents noting the relationship between the individual self and community; a feeling of connectedness between the individual and the collective; unity and co-existence with other individuals; and values which include acceptance, being non-judgemental, sensitivity, respect, caring, honesty, willingness to help, dignity and confidentiality.

All the students were of the view that *ubuntu* has relevance for community engagement, and that as a concept *ubuntu* should be the cornerstone of community engagement in South Africa. One student was of the view that *'without ubuntu community engagement is possible but it would be very shallow. Given that ubuntu does not exist in practice, community engagement could help us to move towards a better place as a society where we contribute to development through the values of ubuntu.'*

Being human and holistic education

The question on what it means to be human was asked to further extract students' understanding of 'being' and the humanism of *ubuntu*. Eighteen students stated that 'being' human means giving back to the community as a token of appreciation for its contribution to their growth and development. Six students understood that 'being' human means more than physical or mental beings, while four students indicated that being human includes having values of *ubuntu* and continuously striving for the betterment of all the groups of humanity by understanding that the individual lives to serve others. As one respondent surmised:

Being human means that people are taught values as they are raised to be human, not merely existing as machines but to experience life, its challenges, experiences as physical, emotional,

mental and spiritual beings, living, thinking, breathing human beings who do not exist in isolation, but as humans who play various, sometimes complex, roles as teachers, mothers, partners, students, researchers, fighting against social ills or contributing to social ills.

The majority agreed that higher education does not address the student as a whole human being. The respondents in the different sample groups indicated that educating students as whole beings entailed not only academic education, but should include seeing them as ‘spiritual beings’ who have to be educated to be socially responsible; to contribute to the community; to reduce individualism (such as striving for success at the expense of others and promote being part of the collective); to involve students’ growth in cognitive social, emotional, physical and moral areas of their lives and encourage the ability to be dynamic, flexible and adaptive in changing situations, so that they may become functioning, engaged and responsible global citizens. The respondents felt that principles of anti-sexism and anti-racism should be entrenched in students’ education.

One respondent highlighted the rationale for the introduction of the LKA/GP at UFH as follows:

Curricula generally at the higher education level does not make room for humanising education, only academic discipline-based knowledge. Therefore a programme like LKA/GP was instituted as part of the curriculum renewal process at UFH to make the paradigm shift from students’ merely acquiring knowledge towards educating them holistically.

Only one student noted that higher education prepares students as ‘whole human beings’ because certain academic courses ‘*deal with spirituality and higher education introduced community engagement to address educating students as whole beings*’.

In response to whether students are prepared for community engagement at UFH, there was a difference of opinion between the community engagement postgraduate bursary recipients who felt that students are not, and the LKA and Student Representative Council (SRC) students who believed that students are prepared. The LKA and SRC students thought students are prepared because they are involved in student societies; residential students engage in projects as volunteers (which contributes to community development); and social work students conduct fieldwork practice. They equated student involvement in the various forms of community engagement with preparation for community engagement.

It may be discerned from the majority response that students clearly lack an understanding of the connection between knowledge, action and being, and the preparation required to gain the full benefit of this connection.

Curriculum for community engagement

Students’ input into the curriculum framework indicated that their responses leaned more towards the goal, process and methodology (workshops, seminars, conferences)

rather than the nature and kind of preparation that was necessary. Notably, the goals of the community engagement curriculum mentioned by the students strongly relates to the study's proposed role of community engagement: to develop the student as a whole human being; to prepare students to become socially responsible citizens; to sustain graduates' involvement in community development; and to build partnerships between various community engagement actors.

Key dimensions of the curriculum

The students' responses were grouped into the following key dimensions:

- Conceptualisation of community engagement and key terms related to community engagement, such as social and civic responsibility;
- Purpose and forms of community engagement;
- *Ubuntu* as philosophical base for community engagement, including ethics and values;
- Developmental issues;
- Practical skills for implementation, including cultural diversity and organisational and management skills; and
- Community engagement education specific to each faculty/discipline.

The majority of students were of the view that preparation should be compulsory, for two reasons: first, the students clearly understood that without adequate preparation for community engagement the potential to cause harm was great. Students creating expectations of the socio-economic development advancement of communities, which neither they nor the university would be able to meet, is one of the most harmful or dangerous consequences of community engagement. Preventing such harm was seen as a necessary part of preparing for community engagement. Second, the need for compulsory preparation was linked to course credits that would serve as an incentive for students' participation in community engagement. One student commented: *'Preparation must also be compulsory because having credits will serve as an incentive to make students work harder at community engagement.'*

Two students suggested that the LKA programme may be used to prepare students for community engagement at UFH.

CONCLUSION

The insights and imperatives highlighted here are a small, though important, part of understanding and constructing knowledge on, and for, a curriculum in community engagement. While further exploration and dialogue are required, involving university staff (both academic and non-academic), communities, community-based organisations, industry and a wider sample of students, the study nevertheless confirms the potential

need for students to be prepared and educated for community engagement. Much work still needs to be done at UFH, in particular, and also on a national level, towards conceptual clarity, as well as philosophical, theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for community engagement. The journey is a challenging but necessary one (CHE 2009).

UFH (2007) acknowledges that producing graduates with discipline-based knowledge is a necessary, though insufficient, function of higher education institutions in South Africa, in the context of democracy and transformation. Therefore, the establishment of the LKA/GP as a foundation to some extent addresses the ‘being’ dimension of higher education curricula. However, it should be noted that this is a recently implemented ‘tried-but-not-tested’ programme, and is confined to first-year students only.

As a starting point, the findings of this research provide several options for curriculum design, in that students can begin to be educated for community engagement not only at UFH, but also at other universities that share similar historical circumstances. The following options may be considered:

- A community engagement module to be integrated into existing academic programmes (either a generic or a differentiated module for each discipline);
- Review of the LKA/GP to determine the possibility of including community engagement in the programme for all first-year students;
- A module located in the community engagement directorate and delivered across all faculties.

The question of whether the module should be credit-bearing or not, voluntary or compulsory, can only be determined after further research, which will provide more clarity on curriculum content for the effective preparation of students in community engagement at UFH. The success of a community engagement curriculum embracing holistic education and a supportive relationship with academic knowledge will depend on its level of open-endedness. Barnett and Coate (2005) write that the open-endedness comes from genuine human engagement with the material environment, with the conceptual and symbolic environment and with other human beings – there will be aspects at play that cannot be captured fully in advance or reflected in a template. The tolerances and disturbances have to be achieved in situ, in the felt constraints and possibilities of the particular context. Therefore, any community engagement curriculum would have to focus on the holistic education of students. As Nussbaum (1998: 14) points out:

Becoming an educated citizen means learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning. But it means something more. It means learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination. We may continue to produce narrow citizens who have difficulty understanding people different from themselves, whose imaginations rarely venture beyond their local setting But we have the opportunity to do better, and now [we need to] seize the opportunity. That is not ‘political correctness’; that is the cultivation of humanity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge the financial assistance provided by the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) for research in Community Engagement, and the SARCHi Chair in Social Change, University of Fort Hare.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, R. & Coate, K. 2005. *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Bopp, M., Bopp, J. & Lane, P. 1998. *Community Healing and Aboriginal Social Security Reform: A Study Prepared for the Assembly of First Nations Aboriginal Social Security Reform Strategic Initiative*. Lethbridge, Alta: Four Worlds International Institute for Human and Community Development.
- Broodryk, J. 2002. *Ubuntu: Life Lessons from Africa*. Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy.
- Coetzee, R.D. 2001. 'Ubuntu and Nation Building in South Africa.' *South African Journal*, 24(2): 113–118.
- Council on Higher Education (CHE). 2004. *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Council on Higher Education. 2006. 'Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and Jet Education Services Community–Higher Education–Service Partnership (CHESP).' Community Engagement in Higher Education Conference, 3–5 September, Cape Town.
- Council on Higher Education. 2009. *Final Audit Report on the University of Fort Hare*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Council on Higher Education. 2010. *Community Engagement in South African Higher Education*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Education. 1997. 'Education White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation.' *Government Gazette No 18207*, 15 August. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Edwards, J.B. & Richards, A. 2002. 'Relational Teaching.' *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 22: 1, 33–48.
- Fataar, A. 2003. 'Higher Education Policy Discourse in South Africa: A Struggle for Alignment with Macro Development Policy.' *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 17(2): 31–39.
- Favish, J. 2010. 'Towards Developing a Common Discourse and a Policy Framework for Social Responsiveness.' In *Community Engagement in South African Higher Education*. Pretoria: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd.
- Ife, J. 1995. *Community Development: Creating Community Alternatives – Vision, Analysis and Practice*. Sydney: Addison Wesley Longman Australia (Pty) Ltd.
- Kamwangamalu, N.M. 1999. 'Ubuntu in South Africa: A Sociolinguistic Perspective to a Pan-African Concept.' *Critical Arts Journal*, 13(2): 1–9.
- Kane, J. (ed.). 1999. *Education, Information and Transformation: Essays on Learning and Thinking*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

- Lazurus, J., Erasmus, M., Hendricks, D., Nduna, J. & Slamat, J. 2008. 'Embedding Community Engagement in South African Higher Education.' *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 3(1): 57–83.
- Maistry, M. 2010. 'Community Development.' In L. Nicholas, J. Rautenbach and M. Maistry, (ed.). *Introduction to Social Work*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Mbiti, J. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Publishers.
- Meyer, W.F., Moore, C. & Viljoen, H.G. (1997). *Personology: From Individual to Ecosystem*. Sandton: Heinemann.
- Motulsky, S.L. 2010. 'Relational Processes in Career Transition: Extending Theory, Research, and Practice.' *The Counselling Psychologist* 38(8): 1078–1114.
- Muthayan, S. 2006. 'Social Transformation and Education.' In L. Lawrence & G. Moyo (eds.). *Education and Social Transformation: An Eastern Cape Study*. East London: University of Fort Hare Press.
- Nabudere, D.W. 2005. *Ubuntu Philosophy, Memory and Reconciliation*. Retrieved from <http://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/4521>
- National Commission on Higher Education. 1996. *An Overview of a New Policy Framework for Higher Education Transformation*. Pretoria, South Africa: NCHE.
- Nussbaum, M.C. 1998. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Patel, L. 2005. *Social Welfare and Social Development in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Pillari, V. 2002. *Social Work Practice: Theories and Skills*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Taylor, R., Barr, J., & Steele, T. 1997. *For a Radical Higher Education: After Postmodernism*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Theron, F., (ed.). 2008. *The Development Change Agent: A Micro-Level Approach to Development*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- University of Fort Hare (UFH). 2007. 'Grounding Programme Proposal.' A document presented to Senate in August 2007.
- Visser, W. 2004. 'Shifting RDP into GEAR: The ANC Government's Dilemma in Providing an Equitable System for Social Security for the 'New' South Africa.' Paper presented at the 40th ITH Linzer Konferenz, 17 September.
- Watson, D. 2007. *Managing Civic and Community Engagement*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr **Margie Maistry** is a Postdoctoral Fellow under the South African Research Chair: Social Change, University of Fort Hare. Her professional background and research interest are in social work, community development and community engagement.

Ms **Jayshree Thakrar** is a full-time doctoral candidate under the South African Research Chair: Social Change, University of Fort Hare. Previously she was employed at the University of Fort Hare as Director: Community Engagement.

Copyright of South African Review of Sociology is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.