



The scholarship of university-community engagement: Interrogating Boyer's model



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ABSTRACT

Albeit with different conceptualisations, the engagement between universities and external communities continues to gain significant currency. While the emphasis has been on more socio-economic relevance in a period of significant financial constraints and a changing clientele, a more significant area of engagement has been on promoting the scholarship of engagement towards regional/local development. The praxis and outcomes of community engagement continues to be surrounded by strong debate on issue such as its impact on the core functions of the university, teaching and research. This article sheds light on the community engagement practices from a case-study university in Africa. Using Ernest Boyer's proposed scholarship of engagement model as a framework, findings provide evidence that, different contextual specificities affect the way university-community engagement practices evolve. The methodology involved an analysis of primary and secondary data collected through interviews with policy and academic staff. The article concludes with an argument that the success of university-community engagement in fostering social and economic development significantly relates to how much the practices of engagement is foregrounded in the universities' core policy and practice. But also on how much academic scholarship draws on engagement activities. The challenge lies in ensuring this balance.

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1. Introduction

The idea of community engagement (CE) has remained a central, though contentious discourse in higher education (HE) milieus over the last half-century (Benneworth et al., 2008; Farrar and Taylor, 2009). Albeit the wide agreement for universities to contribute to society beyond teaching and research, the conceptualisation of this third function has varied across regions, type of universities and even academic disciplines (Kruss, 2012; Benneworth and Sanderson, 2009). The ideological versus instrumental debate continues to dominate the engagement discourse (Martin and Etkowitz, 2000). Embedded in the historical thinking, it is argued that CE models have increasingly witnessed a shift from the one-way to a two-way model. Where the former emphasises the delivery of knowledge and service to the public while the latter focuses on the interactive exchange of knowledge between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their communities in the context

of partnership, reciprocity and mutual learning (Weerts and Sandmann, 2008). Arguably, CE is increasingly shifting from merely being seen as supporting communities to being located in the university knowledge function.

Against this background, a number of definitions and theoretical positions on the relationship between universities and their immediate and extended communities have been proposed and adopted. This paper adopts the definition proposed by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET), which defines CE as

...a systematic relationship between Higher Education [institutions] and [their] environment [communities] that is characterised by mutually beneficial interaction in the sense that it enriches learning, teaching and research and simultaneously addresses societal problems, issues and challenges (Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET, 2003: 4).

This definition emphasises CE to be embedded in the process of knowledge exchange between universities and communities through co-inquiry (jointly undertaking research activities), co-learning, interdisciplinary, and use of knowledge, which benefits academia while solving real world problems (Bender, 2008).

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Regarding its practical implementation, the vast and different interpretations are associated with the debate on what constitutes CE (Kruss, 2012; Jongbloed et al., 2008). The debate remains on the question “to what extent are CE activities undertaken in the context of knowledge exchange?” In trying to answer this question, this paper uses the four scholarships of engagement proposed in the Boyer’s model to interrogate the process of CE at the Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA), in Tanzania. Using empirical evidence, the paper presents the complexities around CE within a different context from Boyer’s and how the contextual specificities influence the conceptualisation and practices of CE within the case study university. The next section presents a brief review of the literature on CE. Section three unpacks the Boyer’s model, as a conceptual tool for understanding CE. Section four and five provides a background to higher education in Tanzania. Section seven presents key findings from the study and implications for CE at SUA and beyond.

2. A recap of the literature

CE is conceptualised and even operationalised differently within many HE systems. Bender (2008: 86) argues that “different theorists and practitioners of CE propose different definitions and interpretations of their . . . , framework and strategies-many of them permissible, but none fully definitive”. Some view it as the university’s service to the communities through among other things transferring or disseminating knowledge to the communities (Weerts and Sandmann, 2008). Others conceptualise CE from entrepreneurial perspectives in which universities engage in external activities with the aim of generating income in this era of stringent financial conditions (Clark, 1998). There is also a view that CE should be mutual and collaborative process of knowledge exchange between the universities and communities (Holland and Ramaley, 2008).

The widespread adoption and implementation of CE centred on two-ways exchange of knowledge has been transforming many HEIs across the globe. In fact, Matthews (2010) argues that more HEIs are making commitments to introduce forms of CE into their teaching and research practices. The CE concept has gradually replaced pre-existing terminologies and practices such as service, outreach, extension, community development, community based education as well as clinical practicals (Bender, 2008; Roper and Hirth, 2005). More importantly, it is noted that CE emerged as counterweight of the traditional one-way in which academic experts transferred their wisdom to the masses in inequitable manner (Ibid). As such, there has been strong emphasis towards more interactions or partnerships built around a mutually beneficial process of knowledge creation and exchange between the university and the outside world (Holland and Ramaley, 2008).

However, due to various interpretations of the CE, universities are grappling to articulate what counts as ‘engaged practice’ (Kruss, 2012). The list of CE activities or practices is long and it cuts across issues of knowledge generation and transmission; myriad partnerships; entrepreneurship initiatives; cultural, political and social development; as well as links with local and international donors and other institutions (Farrar and Taylor, 2009; Jongbloed et al., 2008; Clark, 1998, among others). As such, CE practices are not definitive because of the contextual dimensions coupled with changes taking within and beyond HEIs. Therefore, they vary according to HEIs’ strategic framework, geographical location, capacity, expectations placed on them, the level of the country’s economy as well as the articulation of their role at the level of national policies (Goddard and Puukka, 2010).

Inasmuch as CE is broad, the main argument remains to be on the nature of relationship between ‘inward’ vis-à-vis ‘outward’ orientations. On the one hand, an overemphasis on basic

knowledge activities of teaching, learning and research aimed at strengthening the core functions only, could results to an inward looking university, usually referred to an ‘ivory tower’ (Cloete et al., 2011; Etkowitz et al., 2000). A long standing criticism associated with the inward view is that universities have for a long time distanced themselves from their immediate communities. On the other hand, an overemphasis on the engagement activities (i.e. an outward) may weaken teaching, learning and research (Cloete et al., 2011). Embedded in the latter observation, this paper argues that the core functions of universities can and should not be weakened if CE is understood and practiced in the context of knowledge production and exchange (Muller and Subotzky, 2001). Through such framework, CE may be informed by and conversely informs teaching and learning, and research (Bender, 2008: 89). This paper uses the Boyer model described below to interrogate the process of CE within an African university.

3. Revisiting Boyer’s model for university-community engagement

The Boyer’s model of CE emerged in the early 1990s as a critic of the traditional, monolithic, constricting and rigid academic silos of research, teaching and engagement or service to community (Boyer, 1996; 1990). The model presents four interrelated dimensions of CE as a form of knowledge exchange between universities and communities (Holland, 2005). In developing this framework, Boyer (1996, 1990) suggested that the academy should commit in searching for answers to the most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems through the use of four domains of engagement. Broadly, Boyer emphasises the discovery, integration, application and teaching (transmission) of knowledge for the benefit of external audience (communities) and the development of the academia (Boyer, 1996).

The scholarship of discovery as described by Boyer (1996:26) insists, that “... universities, through research, simply must continue to push back the frontier of human knowledge”. In all disciplines, this scholarship lies at the core of new knowledge production in order to add to the stock of knowledge (Boyer, 1990). In CE, the scholarship of discovery pushes the agenda of collaborative research between universities and communities. As such, it elevates research as one of central outcomes of CE. Arguably, Boyer is of the opinion that any healthy engagement activity should be founded on the production of new knowledge for either the community or the academe. The scholarship of discovery is closely related to another important aspect of Boyer’s model—integration.

Boyer (1990:18) defines integration as “giving meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective . . . making connections across the disciplines, placing specialists in large context, illuminating data in a revealing way, and educating non-specialists”. The integration aspect is essential component in an era where strong emphasis is on cross-disciplines convergence. Put more succinctly, Boyer (1996) argues that there is an urgent need to place discoveries in a larger context and create interdisciplinary conversations. In CE context, integration might play an important role in connecting expertise from different disciplines but also in bringing together various types of knowledge in communities. Furthermore, integration could lead to providing theoretical understanding of local/indigenous knowledge whilst packaging complex issues in more comprehensible manner for local stakeholders.

The scholarship of teaching according to Boyer (1990) is about how the academia is understood by others and the impact it brings to them. For Boyer (1990:33), “the work of professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by other”. As such, reading widely and being intellectually engaged are seen by Boyer as

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