

Review

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Review

Opportunities and Challenges Impeding the Adoption of Community Engagement and Service Learning in African Higher Education Institutions: A Minireview and Perspective

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Abstract: The higher education sector in Africa has experienced remarkable growth over the past decades, enrolling and graduating millions of students annually. Despite this progress, high unemployment rates among graduates and pervasive underdevelopment have raised questions about the relevance of higher education in Africa. Critics have intensely scrutinized the quality of curricula, highlighting a significant mismatch between the skills offered and the demands of the job market. This disconnect is often due to curricula that are unresponsive to both job requirements and students' needs. Enhanced pedagogical approaches are essential to address this issue. Community engagement and service learning (CE&SL) offer promising solutions by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Recognizing the potential benefits, higher education institutions across the continent are gradually integrating CE and SL into their teaching and research frameworks. However, the adoption of these approaches has been slow. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges hindering the effective and widespread implementation of CE and SL in African higher education institutions and proposes practical strategies to overcome these obstacles. By embracing these innovative approaches, African universities can better prepare graduates for the dynamic job market and contribute more effectively to the continent's development.

Keywords: High-touch pedagogy; authentic learning; concrete experience; skills gap; real-world experience

1. Introduction

Perold and Omar (1997) define community service as “programmes linked to higher education that involve participants in activities designed to deliver social benefits to a particular community in ways that teach the participants to work jointly towards achieving the common goal. Participation in community service usually involves a degree of personal sacrifice in terms of time, remuneration, and convenience.” This broad concept encompasses interactions between students and the community—comprising community members, organizations, and service providers such as government agencies, companies, and non-profit organizations—working together towards common goals.

When students receive academic credits for these activities after credible assessment and the activities are integrated into their courses, it is known as service learning. Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that merges academic curriculum with service projects benefiting the community. It involves problem-solving and experiential learning in real-world situations, fostering the exchange of knowledge and producing various outcomes, including cognitive, social, self-confidence, and reflective skills.

Service-learning modules are credit-bearing, with well-defined, assessable outcomes. They are purposefully designed to facilitate the acquisition and transfer of skills and competencies, enhance exposure to community problems and concrete experiences, and build trust between students,

academic institutions, communities and service providers or industry partners (Bringle and Hatcher 1999; Eyler 2002). Furthermore, it fosters the exchange of knowledge, and cross-field outcomes, including cognitive, social, self-confidence and reflective skills (Hay 2003; Snyman 2005). Service-learning modules are credit-bearing have well-defined, assessable outcomes and are purposefully designed to facilitate acquiring and transferring skills and competencies, enhancing exposure to community problems and concrete experiences, and building trust between students, academic institutions, and community and service providers or industry.

Community engagement is not a new concept in Africa. Extramural activities and community development initiatives by universities began in the 1940s and continued through the independence era (Julia Preece 2013). Universities have long viewed community engagement as a vital mission, actively fostering mutually beneficial partnerships with communities and civil societies through international initiatives (Khanyile 2020). In South Africa, community engagement is one of the three core responsibilities of higher education, enshrined within higher education policy (CHE 2010). Despite the recognized importance of community engagement, significant obstacles hinder the implementation of service-learning projects by universities. Community engagement activities are not regarded as knowledge production activities; some academics do not fully understand the meaning of community engagement and confusion over the definition of community engagement is common; many institutions do not have well-articulated institutional systems of incentives, rewards; only a few case studies of good practice that could provide the basis for further scholarship development in community engagement have been published (Hall 2020).

I have been privileged to have served as a Faculty Research Ethics Committee Chairperson and departmental convener of community engagement and service learning and interacted with peers from other universities. Over the years, I have completed many service-learning projects involving various community partners and students from undergraduate diploma to Doctoral level. This paper draws on my extensive experience in African institutions, and I discuss the service-learning concept, opportunities and challenges and potential remedial actions.

2. Materials and Methods

The ideas and arguments presented are informed by my extensive experience as a service-learning convener, a chairperson of the faculty research ethics committee and acting faculty research manager, where I was fortunate to have implemented and reviewed service-learning projects and scholarly outputs. I also used the Google search database to collect a broad range of papers on the topic using a combination of keywords and search phrases. The search phrases included “community engagement and service-learning”, “service-learning challenges and opportunities”, “service-learning and environmental issues” and “community engagement and decolonisation of education”.

3. Discussion

3.1. Community Engagement and Service-Learning Opportunities

Community engagement and service learning hold immense potential to enrich applied learning experiences by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In the next few paragraphs, I present the multifaceted benefits of community engagement in enhancing applied learning, drawing upon scholarly research and practical examples.

3.1.2. Enhancement of Applied Learning

Service learning provides students the opportunity to gain practical insights into real-world issues and challenges, such as food insecurity, and environmental and social injustice (Eyler and Giles, 1999). In the process, students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. Furthermore, as students engage with the communities and participate in these projects, they undergo personal transformation and develop a deeper understanding of the community's needs and empathy and compassion for others (Hartman & Kiely, 2014). These skills and competencies enhance their ability to navigate complex real-world issues.

3.1.3. Decolonization of Curriculum

During colonisation, the colonisers systematically suppressed cultural heritage and knowledge systems through education and practices. Schools were used to schools were specifically designed to promote the values, beliefs, knowledge, and ways of knowing of the colonisers. The school was used as the medium to promote self-hate and colonise the mind, the heart, and the spirit (Aurora Santiago-Ortiz 2019). Decolonisation of education focuses on connecting education to people, culture, and place. Hence, curricula and pedagogic methods are essential elements of decolonisation. Community Engagement and Service Learning is rooted in collaboratively designing curricula in partnership with communities to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, knowledge exchange and innovation. CE&SL empowers students and communities in many ways. Students gain a deeper knowledge of the concepts learned and their communities, including community needs, and develop an improved sense of self-awareness, and a good knowledge of cultural practices. Community members gain new relevant skills and networking opportunities and benefit from CE and SL projects. According to Wurr and Hamilton (2012), service-learning projects are uniquely positioned to foster leadership skills because students participate in the creation and implementation of the projects and co-production of knowledge. Many critics have questioned the relevance of African universities, and the critics argue that despite the increasing number of university graduates, high levels of unemployment and underdevelopment, perennial poverty, and incompetent and unempathetic leadership persist. Incorporating CE&SL into HEI curricula can help mitigate these challenges because academics and graduates would better understand the needs of the communities.

3.1.4. Alternative for Workplace-Based Learning (WPBL)

Many HEIs incorporate experiential training into academic and vocational programmes to improve the quality of training. Students spend time in organisations as interns during which they participate in the practice and process, or they are intentionally exposed to learning activities and industry practices integrated into the academic curricula and learning and teaching approaches (Atkinson, G 2016). In both instances, an effective HEI-industry partnership is crucial for developing and implementing high training (Snyman 2005). Unfortunately, in most instances, the number of students needing placement surpasses available spaces offered by industry partners. Hence, community engagement provides an interesting platform for integrating work-based and work-integrated learning. Service-learning projects can be designed to simulate industry by including some of the competencies and skills that interns are exposed to. For example, I have developed a service-learning project that involves cultivating and selling fresh vegetables. Students develop a business plan, organise training workshops, design the marketing materials, sell the vegetables to customers, and do the accounting. The unplaced WPBL students conduct extension visits to community partners to work with them in setting up their farms or gardens. This is a multidisciplinary project involving academics with diverse backgrounds.

3.1.5. Promoting Sustainability

Through CESL projects, universities can drive community self-reliance and sustainability in the community and HEI. The sustainability goal of achieving sustainable economic, cultural, social, and ecological well-being is achievable. If properly conceived and executed, CE&SL projects can build capacity, strengthen indigenous knowledge systems and university-community partnerships, and break down environmental and social injustices. According to Williamson (2022), CE&SL can help build transformative organizational policies and cultures within HEIs. Current societal problems are complex and require interdisciplinary solutions. Among these problems are environmental degradation, social inequality, and resource scarcity. HEIs have a critical role in equipping students with the competencies needed in a rapidly changing society, environment and knowledge-based global economy and environment (Wurr and Hamilton 2012).

HEIs are increasingly aligning their strategic goals with the Sustainable Development Goals ratified by the United Nations. They actively drive sustainable development globally by forming

future engaged leaders, collaborating with community partners to co-produce knowledge and adopting sustainability practices internally and externally (Aramburuzabala & Cerrillo 2023). Sustainability reporting in HEI is done through three pillars: environment, social and governance (ESG). The environment dimension deals with waste generation treatment, recycling and reuse, climate, and carbon emissions; social covers people, employees, students, collaborators communities labour laws, governance encompasses ethics, integrity, transparency etc. There are many frameworks or collections of standards for evaluating HEIs. The results are scored against predefined metrics. CE&SL projects provide the learning space for academics and students to gain real-life exposure and co-create solutions to the economic, social and climate issues of communities. Furthermore, CE&SL strengthens resilience and enhances adaptation to climate change by promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable natural resource management by involving local communities in conservation efforts and sustainable development initiatives, promoting community-based adaptation strategies, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders (Akuba 2004; Berkes, 2004;).

3.1.6. CE&SL Can Enhance the Process of Stakeholder Mapping, Public Relations and Institutional Cultures

HEI stakeholders include government entities, local and international organisations, networks, and communities. These stakeholders can influence the goals of HEIs. A stakeholder can be classified as an internal or external stakeholder. Internal stakeholders include personnel, contractors, and registered students, while external stakeholders include prospective students, secondary and high schools, communities, partners, funding agencies, local and international organizations, government and politicians. Every HEI should be capable of correctly identifying its stakeholders and linking the stakeholders with the strategic goals of an organization, which can be achieved by integrating the scorecard approach into stakeholder mapping (Ketunnen 2014). Ketunnen (2014) further proposes four broad perspectives for classifying the balanced scorecard for HE: external impact, finance, processes and collaboration and organisational learning. Although HEIs desire to be socially accountable, and in theory, community engagement features prominently in the mission and vision statements of many African universities, in practice, surrounding communities are not adequately represented in the governance of universities.

In many instances, HEI interactions with the communities occur during advisory board meetings, community-based research projects, workplace-based learning, and community engagement and service-learning projects. However, these interactions are limited and unlikely to create sufficient community value. Jongbloed et al. (2008) used the stakeholder salience theory to classify and give priority to HE stakeholders based on three attributes: the stakeholder's power to influence the organization, the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the HEI and the urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the HEI. In Africa, an average of 50.8% (in 2019) of the population lives in rural areas (Jobarteh 2024), and 62% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lives in slums (Amegah et al. 2021), which implies that most students in HEIs, in the continent, come from rural areas and slums. Prioritising student interactions with communities in educational settings will improve knowledge creation, exchange and acquisition (Pontecorvo 1993; Wurr and Hamilton 2018).

Hastings et al. (2018) proposed that "services," an interaction between service-learning and professional internships, can better prepare students for socially responsible leadership, create good value for the community and HEI, enhance HEI's corporate social responsibility footprint, and promote equality and sustainable development. Giving students the spaces, resources and opportunities to integrate their values, academic studies, and issues that are important to them, and their communities better prepares them for leadership roles and civic engagement in their communities (Wur and Cathy 2012). CE&SL goes beyond social responsibilities. By engaging in CE&SL, HEIs are not only addressing and solving societal problems but are nurturing future public-minded alumni first-hand experiences of engagement for both the actors (students and the community) (Coelho and Menezes 2021)

3.2. Challenges Hindering Successful Implementation of Community Engagement and Service Learning

The successful uptake and implementation of these CE&SL practices and initiatives in HEIs face numerous challenges that can impede their effectiveness and sustainability. The challenges are multifaceted and complex. These issues include poor leadership, inadequate institutional support and resource constraints, complexities in building sustainable community partnerships and ethical practices, and inadequate training for educators and practitioners.

3.2.1. Clarifying Definitions and Understanding

A major issue is the lack of clarity and understanding among academics and community members regarding the concepts of community engagement and service learning. Often, community engagement, service learning, and community service are used interchangeably. Community engagement activities are not always regarded as knowledge-production activities, leading to confusion. Many academics do not fully grasp the meaning of community engagement, and institutions often lack well-articulated systems of incentives and rewards for these activities. Additionally, few case studies of good practice have been published, which could otherwise serve as a basis for further scholarship development in community engagement.

By addressing these challenges and fostering a clearer understanding of community engagement and service learning, higher education institutions can better harness the potential of these initiatives to benefit both students and communities.

3.2.2. Building Trust between Partners

Establishing trust between community partners and higher education institutions (HEIs) is often challenging. Many community members perceive HEIs as arrogant, elitist, and dismissive of their opinions. There is a common belief that universities use communities for public relations and social responsibility accolades, leaving genuine collaboration by the wayside. Conversely, some academics involved in service-learning feel that community members lack commitment, as projects are often abandoned once the academics and students move on. The short-term, episodic forms of engagement do not adequately address the complex community problems. Some communities are sceptical of these service-learning projects. These trust issues often stem from the power dynamics between communities and HEIs. There will be a few instances where students will not be motivated because they do not see the value of service-learning projects to their academic goals. These students tend to manifest resistance to service-learning activities including assessments.

To overcome these challenges, partnerships must be built on a foundation of respect, tolerance, equality, competence, and ethical principles. Institutions should develop guidelines based on institutional, national, and international frameworks for interacting with community members. Increasing the frequency of communication between partners and listening to all voices is crucial. Discussing implementation challenges and successes openly helps build a partnership approach.

Broad-based consultation and participation enhance the sense of ownership for new initiatives, thereby increasing accountability (Gundling 2009). During the planning phase, it is important to consider and integrate the needs and expectations of all partners and formulate a tailored communication strategy compatible with the specific culture. By adopting these strategies, we can build stronger, more sustainable partnerships that benefit the communities and higher education institutions.

3.2.3. Mitigating Funding and Resource Challenges

Many community engagement and service-learning (CE&SL) projects, especially those conducted off-campus, pose significant financial challenges for higher education institutions (HEIs). Transporting students to project sites is costly, and with increasing enrolments, most HEIs in Africa prioritise their limited resources towards pressing needs such as staff remuneration and operational expenses. Additionally, many African universities serve poor communities and students who face numerous societal challenges and have limited resources to contribute to CE&SL projects.

Consequently, academics often need to secure external funding and other resources for these projects, applying for highly competitive grants from a limited number of international funding agencies. This process can be particularly daunting for young academics who may lack experience, collaborators, and partners, leading them to focus more on classroom teaching and assessments.

To address this, academics should plan and seek funding or institutional support in advance, rather than treating service-learning modules as an afterthought. Some universities provide limited funding to support these projects. In the absence of sufficient support or funds, lecturers can organise on-campus service-learning projects and invite community and service partners, which significantly reduces costs and mitigates the risks associated with off-campus activities.

3.2.4. Heavy Workload and Limited Time

Building effective partnerships with community members requires substantial time and effort. Identifying suitable projects and partners that align with students' curricula can take months or even years. The process involves in-depth needs assessments, collaborative project planning, and budgeting. Once a project is identified, activities must be aligned with course timetables and learning outcomes. Other crucial aspects include securing ethics approval, addressing occupational health and safety concerns, ensuring security, arranging transport, and obtaining funds.

Academics in African HEIs often face heavy workloads, exacerbated by high student enrolments, extensive assessments, and the preparation of learning resources and activities. Additionally, they have administrative duties and are expected to conduct impactful research. The lack of an effective workload management system that accurately measures academic inputs and outputs and links performance to rewards further compounds the problem (Parsons & Slabbert, 2001).

Department heads can alleviate the burden by reducing teaching loads for lecturers involved in service learning. Collaboration among lecturers teaching the same students but different subjects can also improve service-learning project outcomes. Lecturers could reduce duplication of assessments by organising integrated projects assigned to the students.

3.2.5. Ethical Compliance

Ethical principles are crucial in community engagement and service learning. HEIs typically have ethics policies and compliance standards administered through research ethics committees and compliance offices. Partnering with community members is classified as high-risk due to the involvement of often vulnerable populations. It is essential to treat community partners with respect, tolerance, honesty, dignity, decency, and cultural sensitivity.

Effective ethics review and monitoring processes can mitigate mistrust and curb elitist tendencies in the education sector (Hughes, 2021). Academics must seek ethical approval from the appropriate institutional body, even though some may not be aware of this requirement. To address this, working closely with research ethics committees during the conception and development of service-learning modules is crucial. Preliminary ethics approval can be obtained, followed by full approval once the module is finalized in collaboration with partners. Academics should also be mindful of how data collected will be stored, managed, and published.

3.2.6. Leadership and Leadership Training

Effective leadership is essential for inspiring employees and creating an environment conducive to aligning actions and professional goals with the organization's vision. However, in many HEIs, leadership is a buzzword often used superficially. Poor leadership can lead to governance issues, mismanagement, toxic working environments, and a stifled culture of creativity and motivation.

Despite these challenges, many African universities provide leadership training and support staff professional development, particularly in South Africa. Because leadership is widespread and tends to perpetuate itself, it destroys organizational cultures and employees focus on survival rather than committing to transformative change. Community engagement and service learning may

become sidelined, gaining importance only near tenure promotion reviews. Where training is provided, the training is often generic and theoretical and not effective. Many academics are not even aware of the training opportunities or have bordered to attend the training.

Universities should create an enabling environment and develop collaborative leadership training programs that offer practical and experiential learning on an ongoing basis. Efforts should be made to tailor the programmes to meet the individual needs of their academics (Grajfoner et al. 2022). This approach will help reduce leadership skill gaps in key performance areas such as teaching, research, and community engagement. Universities can adopt a distributive leadership approach that fosters collective governance and collaboration, involving academics, executive and professional staff, rather than individual power and control (Jones et al. 2012). However, ultimately, the responsibility for personal and professional growth lies with the academic. There is an abundance of freely available leadership development tools and resources online that academics use. Moreover, CE&SL presents a great opportunity for early-career academics to pursue personal and professional development and lead from a non-positional leadership position. It enables the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and experiences that enhance individual capabilities and contribute to success in personal and professional endeavours.

5. Conclusions

Community engagement and service learning offer African universities a powerful platform to drive transformation and sustainable development while cultivating conscious and capable leaders equipped to navigate a complex and dynamic world. Embracing innovative approaches will be essential to enhance its adoption and fully leverage its benefits.

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