



SA UNIVERSITIES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Universities in South Africa are required to engage with the communities in which they operate, but how do they do this and to what end?

According to the [1999 Kellogg Commission Report](#) entitled *Returning To Our Roots: The engaged institution*, higher education institutions worldwide make substantial contributions to human resource development and knowledge production by the nature of their status as teaching, learning and research institutions, but they have made little progress in the area of building meaningful

partnerships with their local communities other than simple “outreach and service”. The same report maintains that there is a need for universities to reconsider their role and purpose in society.

In South Africa, community engagement is informed by the 1997 SA Higher Education Policy White Paper which requires higher education institutions to demonstrate social responsibility while the Education Department’s 2001 National Plan for

Higher Education maintains that universities need to be responsive to local, regional, and national needs. Most universities in South Africa acknowledge the role that social responsibility and active citizenship play but have different views about the extent and development of such programmes.

A [project](#) undertaken by a team of researchers from Nelson Mandela University and funded by the National Research Foundation took a look at what it means to be an engaged university through a three-year long engagement with a rural secondary school and the surrounding community. The main question of the project explored how a dialogic engagement of the university community and the community it serves enable agency towards active citizenship in the context of education. Underpinning the engagement were three key concepts – dialogic engagement, community, and active citizenship with a view to addressing complex social issues that require collaborative interventions to facilitate social transformation.

Year 1

The first year of the project saw the research team explore their own understanding of the key concepts of the project through drawing and discussion. Two workshops were held with educators and the school’s governing body to open up a dialogue, using photovoice (a research method where participants are equipped with cameras and take photos which are used as reference in the interview process) and participatory visual method to generate data to guide the research team and community members in their dialogue.

The engagement project was then structured around four independent nodes negotiated and prioritised by the community – school improvement; multi-literacy and multilingual practices; digital spaces using ICT to promote learning; and gender-based violence.

Year 2

During the second year of the project the learners in each node utilised various methods such as drawing, photovoice, video and performance to engage in thinking about the issue being studied; deepen their understanding of and to think of how they could take action as active citizens.

Year 3

By the end of the second year and in the third year of the project the learners engaged in dialogue with the educators and school governing body as well as with members of the community to consider how, as a collective, they could take action.

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From the results garnered during the project, the research team made four propositions for universities looking to develop socially just community engagement projects:

1. An engaged university should endeavour to nurture and develop the multiple systems of community which it serves, not only the individuals within these communities.
2. Engagement is mindful of negotiated and renegotiated power dynamics, both within and between the multiple

communities and contexts.

3. For meaningful engagement to ensue scholars must be authentically engaged themselves with the concept and process of engagement.
4. Engagement requires constant, critical reflexivity within, and between, the communities involved.

The hope is for universities to adopt a dialogic approach to their community engagements in an effort to ensure that the processes of engagement provide opportunities for participants to share their experiences and realities as well as to guide participants towards action plans which should be shared with the school and community. 