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EDITORIAL

Differentiated Community Engagement Approaches but same mission: University Outreach programs in Africa

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ABSTRACT
The African Journal of Rural Development (AFJRD) is a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal with an ultimate purpose of sharing and increasing the depth of knowledge on aspects of sustainable rural development. The articles contained in this issue of the AFJRD, Volume 1 Issue 3 demonstrate the potential contributions of universities to uptake and diffusion of research outputs through well-structured outreach programs. Higher education is increasingly being recognised as a critical aspect of the development process, especially with the growing awareness of the role of science, technology and innovation in economic renewal. There is consensus that universities have immense potential to promote technological development and uptake through their three-fold mission of teaching, research and outreach/community engagement. These are noticeable variations in strategy and approach to outreach/community engagement mainly due to the traditional separation between research and teaching. Reforms that will entail a close linkage between the three-fold mission and promote integration of research and teaching using experiential learning approaches will no double facilitate significant attention and improvements in structuring as well as institutionalising outreach/community engagement programs.

Key words: Higher education, multi-disciplinary, research, rural development

RÉSUMÉ
La Revue Africaine de Développement Rural est une revue multidisciplinaire à comité de lecture, ayant comme ultime but de partager et d'améliorer les connaissances sur les aspects de développement rural durable. Les articles contenus dans ce numéro 1, volume 3 de la revue, démontrent les contributions potentielles des Universités à l'adoption et à la diffusion des résultats de recherche, à travers des programmes de sensibilisation bien structurés. L'enseignement supérieur est de plus en plus reconnu comme un aspect très important dans le processus de développement, en particulier avec la prise de conscience croissante du rôle de la science, de la technologie et de l'innovation dans le renouveau économique. Il est reconnu que les universités possèdent un immense potentiel pour promouvoir le développement technologique et l'adoption, par leur triple mission d'enseignement, de recherche et de sensibilisation/d'engagement communautaire. Il y a des variations importantes dans la stratégie et l'approche de la sensibilisation/d'engagement communautaire, principalement en raison de la séparation naturelle existante entre la recherche et l'enseignement. Les reformes qui engageront un lien étroit entre les trois missions et favoriseront l'intégration de la recherche et de l'enseignement en utilisant des approches d'apprentissage par expérience, faciliteront sans aucun doute, une attention significative et des améliorations importantes en matière de structuration aussi bien d'institutionnalisation des programmes de sensibilisation/d'engagement communautaire.

Mots clés: Enseignement supérieur, multidisciplinaire, recherche, développement rural

INTRODUCTION
Universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have three main responsibilities including; teaching, research and community outreach. Of the three, community outreach is traditionally the least served. This justifies current effort by African Universities slowly getting committed to community outreach programs as an important way they can connect to their communities. As institutions, they recognize that to increase opportunities for students to engage in their varying communities in academically-grounded ways that emphasize experiential learning and thereby benefit

them (students), the institutions themselves, and the communities, they must have strong external- and internal infrastructure that supports and sustains such activities and relationships. One of the ways universities can demonstrate the value of community engagement to internal and external contingencies is to work these mechanisms into already-existing structures that will support tracking by scaffolding outreach capacity building in higher degree training programmes (Juma, 2012). To actualize that capacity, universities must make their internal audiences aware of outreach opportunities, best practices in outreach, resources for outreach, and other growth-oriented information and opportunities. This builds interest and knowledge first internally, and then employs that knowledge and activity externally to larger communities.

The approach connects with transformational education, as outreach is a form of experiential learning—a high impact practice which benefits students by providing applied skills necessary for essential learning goals and future employment. As a best practice, it is integral to have institutional accountability when it comes to recognizing the work of outreach in university policies and procedures. It is also important to note that outreach increases the profile of the university within the community by putting students into real-world situations in which they can apply knowledge gained in the classroom and illustrate the value of that knowledge through civic and professional action in the community. In fact, some African universities have proven track record of providing quality education to a variety of students, and expose many of them to high impact practice (HIP) through independent research, experiential learning activities like internships, and field attachments.

Evidence of Integrating Experiential Learning into Curricula to Support Community Engagement Programs

Experiential learning is a high-impact practice that benefits students by providing applied skills necessary for essential learning goals and future employment. It also increases the profile of the university within the community, serving a secondary goal of outreach and engagement. Experiential learning also demonstrates the utility and value of university education, by putting students into real-world situations in which they can apply knowledge gained in the lecture theatre. Many African universities are now making efforts to be able to produce "fit-for-purpose" graduates that the development industry and most importantly the agricultural sector expects. It is assumed that a well designed community engagement program should deliver on this expectation.

University community engagement and outreach programs stimulate students' perspectives to develop the interdisciplinary skills that will make them better problem solvers and creative thinkers. Many contemporary problems require the knowledge and approach of multiple disciplines, enabling students to work effectively with others whose disciplinary approach and skill set differs are currently in demand and will continue to be well into the future. These skills prepare students for a lifetime of learning, and are among the most valued in future employment. Generally, higher education institutions can be a place for all students to have transformative educational experiences and should therefore, promote transformational education.

Most universities in Africa unlike the Land Grant Universities (Goldman, 2016) use the "University-Farm Model" which entails an effort to impart skills within the convenes of the university at a farm established and managed by the concerned university. However, evidence indicates that owing to lack of contextualized scenarios, the "University farm model" of practical training is inappropriate for training professionals who are expected to work with smallholder farmers. This is because smallholder farmers' farms, especially in Africa barely mirror the University farm set up. In addition, the "University farm model" does not provide opportunity for students to access ecological knowledge (EK) to complement what is conventionally imparted to them (students) at the university. Ecological knowledge represents a body of "native science" acquired by communities over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment.

As observed by Stephens (2000) people in a community who are closely connected to the local surroundings are often the first to notice environmental change. This is because their knowledge is derived from long-term observational data maintained through an oral tradition. It is for this reason that the knowledge held by the community needs to be reflected in local classrooms. The continued failure to recognize this fact is probably in part the reason why development and adoption of otherwise best-bait technologies remains elusive. This underscores the importance of contextualizing training programs as a way of equipping HEIs to produce graduates that are responsive to smallholder settings.

The student-Centered Outreach (SCO) model and the Supervised Student Enterprise Project (SSEP) at Gulu University and, the Farm attachment program at Egerton University are examples of such University

Figure 1. The shared characteristics of ecological knowledge and scientific knowledge, Adopted with slight modifications from Stephens (2000)

outreach programs. The Universities envision graduates that are grounded with the right mix of competencies including; knowledge (both theoretical and practical), skills and attitudes for serving as change agents in communities, contributing to rural transformation. In addition, such a graduate would be equipped with the requisite entrepreneurial skills to be able to start, own, manage and sustain smallholder agribusinesses. The Zimbabwe Open University uses the student internship programmes in both its undergraduate and postgraduate studies (Bukaliya, 2012). The Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) and the Participatory Learning and Action Research (PLAR) at the polytechnic of Namibia are a different approach compared to Gulu University and Egerton University. The University of Venda (Univen) operates a directorate on Community Engagement (CE) which ensures the existence of a qualitative, symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between itself and its community stakeholders – a relationship of mutual benefit. It is the intention of Univen to excel in Community Engagement programmes that are both scholarship-based and community oriented, embedded in the academic work of the institution. The Directorate of community engagement supports interdisciplinary community engaged teaching and learning, community engaged research geared towards addressing community poverty-related challenges and development needs of the communities.

From the foregoing, there is evidence that many African universities are increasingly seeking ways of innovatively remodelling curriculum to provide entrepreneurial and agribusiness skills to their students while at the same time using this to reinforce outreach. As demonstrated in this issue, universities use different approaches (see Table 1). The approaches as presented (Table 1) are very variable but aim at fulfilling the mission of university-community engagement that involves the sharing of knowledge generated with communities. Practical training for students is increasingly being used as a means to deliver innovations to communities as well as articulate research problems.

Table 1: Community outreach approaches in selected Higher Education Institutions in Africa

SN	Institution	Approach	Description
1	Gulu University	Student-Centred Outreach, and the Supervised Student Enterprise Project (SSEP)	The novelty of the Student-Centred Outreach lies in the placement of the undergraduate students to work with smallholder farmers within a 10 km radius of the university, for a period of up to one year. The complimentary practical approach of Supervised Student Enterprise Project (SSEP) is designed in such a way that students while still on the study programs at the University develop and present well-researched business plans (BPs). The most innovative and economically feasible BPs are provided with a start-up capital so that the BPs are actualized. Upon implementation for one year, the students pay back the start-up capital with a modest interest for purpose of continuity
2	Egerton University	Farm attachment program	Farm attachment program is designed in such a way that students are attached to the same farm(s), continuously for at least three consecutive years. Each cohort of students builds on and follows up on the recommendations of the previous group
3	Polytechnic of Namibia	Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Learning and Action Research (PLAR)	Combining student training, action research and community service in a synergy. The PRA and PLAR present an approach for community university partnerships to foster and maximize the rewards of university engagement with communities for collaborative research and problem solving. This approach has been well documented in Brown et al. (2006) and Kearney et al. (2013)
4	University of Venda	Institutionalized community engagement streamlined in training programs	The University of Venda established a Community Engagement directorate which provides intellectual and community informed leadership on community engagement programmes in schools and centres. The directorate mobilizes, organizes and interacts with staff, students, rural communities and other stakeholders for responsive teaching and learning, research and social responsibility projects. It also serves as a nerve centre for engagement on issues of community interest such as Water, Health, Local Economic Development, Social development, and Creates platforms and or facilitates the creation of knowledge co-creation and development. Additionally, it facilitates the creation of platforms and opportunities for work-based learning, service learning and other forms of experiential learning for students at various schools. Community Engagement activities rest with the schools and centres through individual staff members, Deans and Heads of Departments while the directorate provides support and coordination functions
5	Zimbabwe Open University	Student Internship programmes	The University engages students in service activities primarily for the purpose of providing them with hands-on experience that enhances their learning or understanding of issues relevant to a particular area of study. The internships are supervised with students leaving their institutions and getting engaged in work related programmes, during which period they are closely supervised by experienced job incumbents. Students are monitored with an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what she or he is learning throughout the experience or duration of attachment

Student field attachments and internships have taken on an increasingly important role in higher education in recent years presenting students with many advantages, ranging from gaining experience and obtaining career-related direction to networking with other students from various institutions (Tackett *et al*., 2001), as well as supervisors at the organisation providing the internship and the general community in which the internships are conducted. However, this may put the student intern in a difficult position to balance between the requirements of full time employment and the new role as an intern (Mohamad, 2009) especially in open and distance learning. The University offering the internship programmes benefits through increased cooperation and rapport with the industry (English and Koeppen, 1993) and local community.

The philosophy underpinning the community-connectedness orientation is premised on two key foundation pillars: (i) the need for students to interact with outside stakeholders to enable them (students) understand and appreciate circumstances and challenges within the community that they would be expected to face upon graduation; and (ii) the need for outside stakeholders and graduate uptake market players to participate in producing graduates that are relevant to the labour market. The benefit of combining student training, action research and community engagement is synergistic, being greater than the sum of their individual benefits, because students learn more effectively through the stimulating experience. The community benefits through the participation of energetic students (Defour, 2002) and the results of action research are owned and controlled by the community and are therefore more likely to put it to good use. This model of learning therefore benefits students and farmers, as well as development organisations working with the farmers.

Thus, Higher Education Institutions and policy decision makers should consider strengthening and supporting the integration of field-based practical approaches of training. They need to integrate entrepreneurial practical approaches in their curricula to develop young people's creative thinking and innovation capacity to be able to build small scale businesses that enhance job creation. Institutions in which such community engagement approaches are not yet employed in student training curriculum can pick lessons through experience sharing and cross-learning amongst African universities. One way to institutionalize university outreach programs is to have a central office that deals with community outreach, advocating for and promoting faculty and students with regards to the work being done in the community, assessing outreach practices and services.

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