
Quality Partnerships

The community stakeholders' view

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*Gateways: International
Journal of Community
Research and Engagement*
Vol 3 (2010): 70–87
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ISSN 1836-3393

Universities the world over are developing smart partnerships with their communities in order to advance their core business of teaching and learning, research and community engagement (Bringle & Hatcher 2002). However, all too often, there is a tendency in academia to use the idea of engagement as an 'aerosol' term, sprayed over any interaction between a Higher Education Institution (HEI) and the community to give the relationship a politically correct facelift. Academic and research roundtables often focus on what constitutes a quality partnership but the voice of the community is generally absent from such discussions. Similarly, there is a voluminous amount of literature on how a university-community partnership should evolve, as well as tools to assist this evolution, but historical and contextual issues facing rural-based universities and communities in poverty stricken underdeveloped countries that are often troubled by paralysing levels of illiteracy, inequity and underdevelopment are rarely addressed in the literature. In such contexts, consideration of the community perspective is crucial to establishing a quality partnership.

This researcher would contend that in most cases a partnership is assumed to be in place, and to be working as intended, yet what is happening on the ground may not, in fact, represent a quality partnership. In this regard, I concur with Lynn (2000, p. 649) who indicates that existing partnerships between academic institutions and communities often lack trust and respect. As Nyden & Wiewel (1992, p. 43) point out, it takes more time than expected to implement a true partnership in which trust and satisfactory decision-making mechanisms are built. Understanding each partner's relationship objectives; improving coordination, access and service in order to be responsive to community needs; and working to ensure partnerships are sustainable are challenging demands – and mistrust in the community is often fed by a history of unsatisfactory projects.

Nyden and Weiwei (1992, p. 43) also suggest that academics and their students can be remarkably oblivious of deadlines, which render communities nothing more than teaching tools.

The Education White Paper 3 on the program for higher education transformation in South Africa (Department of Education 1997) stated that Higher Education Institutions have to be responsive to community needs, encourage broader participation and address issues of access in higher education, a position enshrined in the constitutional framework of South Africa, which places increased emphasis on addressing community needs in all sectors (Constitution 101 of 1996). This transformative agenda was found to be especially compelling in the case of rural-based South African universities, which often serve historically disadvantaged black populations in areas that are both under-resourced and underdeveloped (Nkomo & Sehoole 2007, pp. 235–36).

Yet, after more than a decade of community-university engagement in South Africa, one area remains crucially unexamined: the views and experiences of community members in their partnerships with Higher Education Institutions. This article discusses what is understood by the term ‘quality partnership’ from the point of view of community stakeholders, drawing on a study that was conducted during 2006–2007 by the researcher at the University of Venda (UNIVEN) in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. It first provides an overview of the national and local context of this study before turning to a discussion of community perspectives as revealed in the case study. The study posed the following two questions: ‘What would you regard as a quality partnership between the HEI and the community?’ and ‘What are your needs and expectations of a partnership with the university?’ Four main requirements emerged from the data:

- Balance the partnership objectives of both parties
- Ensure an unexploitative partnership
- Share power and control in the partnership
- Maintain and monitor the partnership.

The article concludes with some thoughts on what constitutes a quality partnership with some suggestions for achieving this.

THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Venda in Thohoyandou in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo Province of South Africa was established in 1982. Situated in the midst of a rural community, UNIVEN has identified its niche as a provider of higher education to the socially and economically disadvantaged. The history of the university dates back to South Africa’s apartheid past, which supported the establishment of homeland universities. These universities are currently often referred to as ‘historically black universities’ (HBUs). Thus the majority of students attending the University of Venda come from Limpopo, one of the poorest of South Africa’s nine provinces, and neighbouring Mpumalanga, as well as from

the South African Development Community (SADC) region. A significant number of students come from the surrounding rural communities, commuting to and from the university on a daily basis.

The key challenges facing the University of Venda, as well as South Africa as a whole and, indeed, Africa generally, include the following:

- poverty and deprivation
- unemployment
- illiteracy
- technological backwardness and inadequate infrastructure
- economic dependency
- preventable diseases such as HIV/AIDS
- violence and crime
- globalisation.

In 2002, the Department of Education mandated UNIVEN, along with other HEIs in South Africa, to make the transformation to a comprehensive university offering career-focused programs. By the end of 2006, UNIVEN had adopted a new vision: *to be at the centre of tertiary education for rural and regional development in Southern Africa*. The university's mission reads: *As a comprehensive institution, the University of Venda offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in fields of study that are responsive to the development needs of the Southern African region, using appropriate learning methodologies and research*. During each stage of transformation the university aligned its vision and mission to the needs of the community at local, regional, national, continental and international levels.

In 2009, the university established a new directorate of Community Engagement (CE). Prior to this, although community engagement had been embarked upon by the university – and some research conducted into the success or not of these partnerships – there had been no coordination, institutional conceptualisation or framework for community partnerships, nor had there been an office that dealt specifically with these partnerships. The mandate of the Community Engagement Directorate at UNIVEN is to ensure that community engagement is integrated into the core business of the university, focusing on partnerships for sustainable rural development and poverty reduction through teaching, learning and research. Through the directorate UNIVEN is seeking to ensure that a qualitative, symbiotic and reciprocal relationship exists between itself and its community stakeholders.

In South Africa more generally, research and debate is occurring, among other means, via the Kagisano series and the Higher Education Monitor series, published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which also produces institutional audit, conference and colloquia reports. Many of the CHE publications document that there is very little evidence in South Africa to suggest that partnerships between HEIs and the community have

been monitored, resulting in difficulties in sustaining long-term partnerships. As well, the organisation for such engagement is largely left up to individual institutions. Questions remain to be answered as to what extent does a university department attempt to address the problems of the community and in what form can this be done (for an overview of recent discussions, see Kagisano nos 6 & 7 – Council on Higher Education 2010). Chapter 7 of the 2004 CHE review report into South African higher education 10 years after the introduction of democracy looks at community engagement. It notes that the ‘perception that community engagement and service are merely add-on, nice-to-have and philanthropic activities remains a key challenge to [their] integration as a core function in the academy’ (CHE 2004). However, research is underway, including several case studies of partnerships by this researcher and colleagues at UNIVEN, as well as the recent publication by Francis, Dube, Mokganyetji and Chitapa (2010).

Considering the Community

In a partnership it is expected that stakeholders will share their needs and expectations of each other and establish common ground from which to operate. Indeed, the process of finding a common vision for the partnership can establish the basis for ongoing commitment and define how progress will be measured and recognised (Overton & Burkhardt 1999). When the traditional leaders of a local community approached the University of Venda in 2006, neither party had a framework from within which to engage as partners. Since then, several other proposals for partnerships have been put forward. The ad hoc nature of this early engagement work prompted the researcher to conduct a qualitative study into what community members regarded as a quality partnership with a HEI. The research was also useful in terms of her professional discipline – community health nursing. In 2000, the Department of Advanced Nursing Science had decided to adopt a model of engagement with the community under the banner of community-based education and problem-based learning, the implementation of which would also benefit from greater knowledge of community perspectives.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Study Group (1987), in its report *Community-based education of health personnel*, refers to a community as a social group determined by given geographic boundaries and/or common values with interested members who know and interact with one another. It functions within a particular social structure and exhibits norms, values and social institutions. According to this definition, a community is a group of people united by at least one common characteristic. Sociologists, too, emphasise social interactions and networks in their definitions of community (Kumar 2005, p. 276).

The study discussed in this article has therefore drawn upon definitions of community from the sociology and health sciences

literature and has defined community characteristics in this instance as ‘ruralness’, limited resources and poverty, as well as shared experience or traditions.

Of critical importance to any partnership, but especially those with vulnerable communities, is a rigorous appreciation of the ethics and responsibilities involved on the part of facilitators from institutions that are often much better resourced than the surrounding communities. Although the concepts of trust, respect and transparency are generally covered in the literature, the question of how these concepts relate to partnerships with the communities under discussion here is largely absent. The need for students to be properly prepared, the need to appreciate communities’ knowledge, and the need for constant reflection are synonymous with conducting meaningful research on university-community partnerships. These issues are at the heart of quality partnerships – as was demonstrated by the responses to the two questions in this case study.

THE CASE STUDY: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

A qualitative case study research method was used to describe the views of community stakeholders on quality partnership. A case study is an integrated system best used to access the thoughts, feelings and desires of the subjects studied (Patton 1980). The questions addressed in this study were:

- What are your needs and expectations of the partnership?
- What do you regard as a quality partnership between the HEI and the community?

For this case study, a definition equating quality with ‘fitness for purpose’ was used, although this was not without complications. While it may not be difficult to measure the quality of education, it is difficult to measure the quality of community engagement in relation to development issues (Kegler, Twiss & Look 2000, p. 760) and to document the quality of partnerships between the HEI and the community generally (Lasker, Weiss & Miller 2001). The difficulties are attributed to a lack of accountability, short engagement periods, insufficient intensity and contamination of communities, as well as to an emphasis on traditional education methods. Further, differences in social, cultural, educational and professional backgrounds both among community members and between community members and representatives of the HEI may lead to a diversity of views and multiple interpretations of what is meant by ‘quality partnership’. This could encourage power imbalances between the HEI and the community, which would then undermine the partnership.

In addition, it was imperative to address the often controversial question of community stakeholders and representation. Knowing who to include among community stakeholders, and limiting the number of participants, is not easy. Additionally, one must be mindful not to choose processes that will exclude some groups by default. Methodological problems may

also arise in studies that aim to hear the views of stakeholders – a common problem highlighted by Brosius, Tsing and Zerner (1998) being generalisation – and thus meticulous stakeholder analysis is vital.

It is argued that the safest way of identifying community stakeholders is to pinpoint the most obvious participants (as in providing systems and functions) without ruling out any groups. In addition, the process of selection has to be open and transparent so that people are at least aware of the procedures being put in place. It was noted in the current study that opinions on education, health, research priorities and community development were likely to differ, and that the view of one group or one member was just as important as that of the others. Different individuals and groups evaluate situations differently, which leads to different actions. Everyone's views are heavy with interpretations, biases and prejudices, and this implies that there are multiple possible descriptions of any real world activity (Kegler, Twiss & Look 2000). It was therefore important to avoid reducing the question of stakeholder representation to the notion of a generic community upon which policy-making can be based. In this case study, the choice of research design and methods and consensus discussions meant that the accuracy of the interpretations made by participants could be constantly assessed to minimise bias and prejudice.

In qualitative research an attempt is made to interpret 'phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' for the purpose of theory-building (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p. 2). Participants in the study included community members who reside in the historic Venda homeland, the furthest located 60 km (37 miles) from the university. A non-probability purposive and snowball sample was used for this study. First, a stakeholder analysis was done to determine those local community groupings served by the University of Venda that should have a voice in the study. Previous research on stakeholders has resulted in a number of definitions of stakeholders; however, in this study, stakeholders were regarded as groups or individuals who could affect or be affected by the accomplishment of the organisation's mission. In addition, stakeholders included all participants involved in the study as well as those who may not have been directly involved in the study but whose activities could in some ways be changed as a result of the study (Freeman 2002).

Sample Selection

Purposeful sampling techniques were used in this study – typical case, convenience and maximum variation sampling for small cases as defined by Patton (1990). Purposeful sampling allows most to be learned from the sample selected about the issues that are central to the research. Typical sampling cases represent 'average' examples. A form of maximum variation sampling was also used, as described by Patton (1990) for small samples. Since the community was and still is patriarchal in nature, care

was taken to ensure that the voices of women and youth were also heard.

The community groupings or strata were determined by first requesting the community leaders who approached the university to identify people or groupings in the communities who would contribute by answering the research questions. Once identified, the researcher approached these individuals and/or groupings to request participation in the study. The initial engagement with these individuals led the researcher to several others who were identified by them. For example, the following input came from Dan who was identified by the chief to be the most appropriate person to engage with (Dan was a retired education official of the former Venda homeland and an elder in the kinship of that community):

Women in our communities are the most affected by poverty. They are mostly unemployed and are left at home to witness poverty around the clock. There will be no other food except pap [a traditional porridge made from maize meal]; babies and elderly in the family will be sick requiring her attention. They definitely need assistance.

And:

Youth these days are affected by different disease and you find that there is a lot of teenage pregnancy. Today there is HIV/AIDS. Youth are very vulnerable. If you look at their behaviour you will realise that they have not yet received enough and sufficient information regarding issues of HIV/AIDS. There is a great need for youth education.

The study did not seek to generalise to other settings. Data saturation was the main determinant of the size of the sample. According to Patton (1990), key informants or knowledgeable participants can identify who is typical; however, from this and other inputs, the researcher uses his/her judgement to extend the sample size beyond data saturation by allowing the many other voices, for example, those of women, the elderly and youth, also to be heard. Those potential participants who gave informed consent eventually constituted the sample whose size was determined by data saturation.

Upon gaining approval to conduct the interviews, the first stage of data collection began. All interviews were conducted at a venue determined by the participants. The two questions mentioned above were canvassed and subsequent conversation was prompted by probing, clarity seeking questions and paraphrasing by the researcher to encourage participants to say more in response to the theme questions. A tape recorder was used to record information that was later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken during the proceedings (Talbot 1995, p. 479). Consensus discussions were generated in a feedback workshop, which was conducted with the community representatives, to confirm the findings.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 19), there are four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in research: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Strategies used to ensure trustworthiness are summarised here: prolonged engagement with participants was ensured by interactive, dialogic, one-on-one interviews with stakeholders, as well as by focus group meetings; workshops were conducted with potential participants about their views; consensus discussions were held with community members and co-coders; peer examination and member checking was carried out; and feedback workshops were conducted with community members. Finally, triangulation was ensured through the use of these varied methods of data collection.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to the highest possible standards of research planning, implementation and reporting, with particular focus on the partnership principle (DENOSA 1998, pp. 3–6). The researcher ensured that the anonymity of all participants was protected in the report by not mentioning real names. Informed consent was obtained from participants in written form. Participation was voluntary. The researcher served as contact person for any participants who had questions or complaints about the research.

Data Analysis

A constant comparative method was used simultaneously with data collection to analyse and code the data. Using Tesch in Creswell (1994), data was reduced and categorised. A sense of the whole was obtained by reading through each transcribed recording of participants' inputs. Notes were jotted down in the margins of each transcript and compared as the researcher coded and developed theoretical categories. Significant patterns emerging from the analysis of participants' responses were synthesised and related to discussions in existing literature on quality partnerships. Discrete acts of participants and expressions of attitudes were examined and then coded into theoretical categories, a process referred to as open coding (Creswell 1994; Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Limitations

The study was qualitative and contextual in nature and therefore did not seek to generalise the findings. In any natural setting it is difficult to replicate circumstances. There are many changes that can be due to effects, frequencies, and the researched and researcher differences in background, etc. In this regard, it was left to the judgement of the reader to determine what is referred to as applicability (Newman & Benz 1998). Applicability also means that the reader can look at the characteristics of the sample in the study and make logical judgements about whether the sample is comparable to other samples. If the samples are similar, the results

of the study can be applied to the similar sample (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Patton 1990).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Several themes emerged from participants' views of what quality partnerships entail, which are now discussed and illustrated with quotes from the participants. The following quotations from participants affirmed the decision of the researcher to conduct the study: 'Communities have their own understanding of how things should be done, which institutions hardly find out'; 'Find out what the people need to know and let them know'; 'Maybe one last thing that I want to emphasise is the issue of community involvement from the word go, so that they feel to be part of the project. Do not decide what their needs are. Ask them what they will feel more comfortable with. They know and understand their needs better than you do.'

Balancing the Partnership Objectives of Both Parties

Need for education and training as well as empowerment emerged as central to what participants regarded as quality partnership between a university and a community. With regard to education and training, participants felt that they needed to be educated about various aspects of life with due consideration given to improving problems of poverty, ill health and unemployment. Some of the participants thought the university had a lot of money and therefore could provide resources for the community, while others understood that the university might not have the necessary resources and capacity to address all their needs. However, the latter still felt that the university had the potential to raise funds on their behalf: 'I want to say to you the community does not know who the funders are but the university knows. Why can't the university teach the community in writing fundable proposals?' In this regard, the researcher observed that the appropriateness of these expectations were to a large extent influenced by the level of education of the community members and thus their understanding of the system and the changing role of the HEI. Those who were educated focused more on education and training, while those who were not educated, and most probably unemployed, focused more on the expectation that the university could address their most pressing needs of unemployment and poverty.

Participants also emphasised the need for economic empowerment through job creation and sustainable projects. They also saw the university as a resource centre: 'The university should be able to reach any community member in the village, not only the visible members of the community on top like chiefs and civic leaders. To do that, the university should be able to have an office or a university community liaison/resource centre within the community where anybody can come for help. The university must make itself visible to the ordinary citizen in the community.'

For community partners, a quality partnership should maintain a balance between academic and community development needs. They described community development in terms of the ability of the community to do things for itself as a result of the interaction with the university. For example, participants talked about a partnership that would enhance their ability to initiate and manage projects that would give them opportunities for employment, fundraising and the means to sustain themselves. 'Ja. maybe the university can help us with fundraising for the projects. I know that the university is a well-established institution. You should look at how you can help us fundraise.' '... Maybe after teaching them [the women], you can encourage them to initiate health projects that will enable them to have employment, like starting a vegetable garden or an orchard for the community. These will generate employment and also income while at the same time making provision for the well-balanced diet in the families.'

Increasing the focus on education and training for sustainable community development was, according to participants, another indicator of a quality partnership, in which the gap between each of the partner's needs was bridged.

Whenever there is a partnership, there are expectations from each partner. In most instances of university-community partnerships, the assumption that academics know what communities expect from the partnership is evident in their initial interactions. This situation is not unique to academics at the University of Venda (Buys & Bursnall 2007, pp. 73–86). On the one hand, academics are often busy, adhering to timeframes and deadlines that are not always negotiated with the community (Nyden & Wiewel 1992, p. 43). On the other hand, it is the author's view that communities' expectations may not be in sync with the mandate of the HEI or may go unexplored. As one participant said: 'Empower our people with knowledge and skills and involve them when initiating this project so that they can feel that they own the project.' Communities also felt that the approach of HEIs was disempowering and encouraged dependency: 'If you are not committed to developing our communities do not include our names when asking for funds. Do your things alone.'

Furthermore, community participants referred to the role of educators and researchers in empowering the students to understand the needs of the community, to respect the knowledge that the community has and to appreciate the circumstances of the community: 'I believe they [the students] do not know everything because they are students. I believe you are going to ensure that they respect what the family members are telling them.'

Unexploitative Partnerships

According to participants, a partnership that does not seek to bridge the gap between the needs of the HEI and those of the community is exploitative and will result in community fatigue. Obviously, this is problematic for communities. Lack of cohesion in

a HEI also creates confusion and community fatigue (Maurrasse in Smith-Tolken 2004, p. 116): 'It is as if you [researchers] do not come from the same institution and it is tiring.' Uncoordinated partnership activities also result in many cases in duplication of services in one sector of the community and lack of services in others. Participants felt that a holistic, multi-disciplinary and comprehensive approach to teaching and learning, training and education were central to a win-win partnership.

Community participants indicated that past experiences with academics left them with the impression that academics were often untrustworthy because they did not devote time to the relationship, but instead visited the community to address their own needs, not those of the community. In this regard they indicated that most of the relationships they had had with academics were exploitative because they came and went without any structured form of commitment or consultation: 'We agree on a thing and people disappear.' 'After getting what they wanted they left without even a warning.' Another participant asserted: 'Ja ... Isn't it when people do research, they collect information, get their degrees, write their papers and then disappear.'

Furthermore, participants felt that quality partnerships entailed a guaranteed long-term relationship in which stakeholders felt responsible for honouring appointments and meetings to ensure the smooth running of the partnership. This stemmed from the feeling that HEIs and other research organisations had a tendency to move in and out of the community as they wished and therefore did not care when, how and what they left the community with: 'You must have a year program indicating when you will be doing what and how you will be coming to our communities'; '... previously people have come and stole our information and used it to their benefit without a thank you.'

'Quality partnerships respect community members' time and have some level of organisation that is considerate of community wellbeing.' Participants felt that community fatigue was often not considered, hence the uncoordinated manner in which academics visited the communities: 'Today is the Department of Agriculture visiting us with some projects, tomorrow is health, and next day is environmental science ...' Partnership efforts must be based on a deep appreciation of the participants' needs as a complex set of factors that influence wellbeing.

Participants also felt that a quality partnership required institutional commitment. Those participants who had previously interacted with the HEI spoke of the serious delays and frustrations encountered and the unsustainability of initiatives that did not have one central coordinating point. A reason for this delay was described as follows: '... you speak to this individual today, make commitments and promises and tomorrow he is gone and no one remaining knows anything about it.' Inherent in a quality partnership are principles of honesty, reciprocity and transparency: '... The university should rather indicate what they

will be able to provide or assist the community with since it is the one that possesses the expertise. In other words, from the needs that the community has laid down, the university should indicate whether it would be possible for it to assist the community or not. The university must outline where they can help and where they cannot help.' In a quality partnership, stakeholders should feel accountable for its existence and its success. And each stakeholder should feel the need to do something about his/her situation (personal accountability): 'We will not work if we are taken as bandit of those who are educated. If we work together and respect each other, I believe that even the punishment that we are getting from God will go because he will realise that nobody undermines the other. He will bless us with even more energy to heal the disease if we work together.'

These discussions led us into the issue of power and control within partnerships.

Shared Power and Control in Partnerships

Power dynamics are often realised in the manner in which partners regard each other. Respect is generated by the partners' understanding of social, political and cultural structures.

As mentioned above, participants indicated that their past experiences with academics were usually not trustworthy because the academics were more focused on their needs than those of the community. The following quotation attests to the experience: '... and please, when one person is tasked with the responsibility he/she must honour the promise or commitment. We agree on a thing and people disappear.' In addition, the researcher noted with interest that participants alluded to power dynamics within the community as well: '... Remember that the fact that you have been given permission by the leaders does not mean that you must impose on any other person in that community.' Participants were concerned that some academics claimed to have spoken to the community when in fact they had just spoken to one or two people who claimed to represent the community.

Participants' arguments on the question of power can be summarised under three main concepts: empowerment, equity and respect. Of the first, the participants' view was that empowerment had to do with the sharing of power. It was to them both the dynamic of a quality partnership and an outcome of such a partnership. This implied that engaging in an empowering manner required an empowered community that sought empowerment and vice versa. Academics needed to be empowered to learn about those areas in the community that they did not know about. Participants were of the opinion that an ivory tower mentality, whereby academics defined the terms, was to be avoided since it rendered the academics invalid as partners. Empowerment also meant that intellectual property rights of both parties were respected in areas where knowledge was generated. An assertion that academics 'stole information' exemplifies this view.

Secondly, from the participants' point of view, a quality partnership is characterised by the adoption of equity principles: 'A huna nanga ino fhira inwe'. In this quote, literally meaning there is no one healer who is superior to another, a participant who is a traditional healer expressed in a Venda idiom that recognising the need for each other suggested that each had something to offer the relationship and therefore no one should be bigger than the other. Equity entails sharing of resources – finance, money, community knowledge, networks, personnel, and political and social power. These are all forms of power that have value in the partnership and must be shared: 'The partnership must be managed by a team who should look at the whole issue of resources, personnel that are going to be involved eh, and the money that we are going to spend in the partnership.' Each partner must participate in the evaluation of equity over the duration of the partnership.

Thirdly, regarding respect, the following quote makes participants' feelings clear: 'We know that we have been disrespected before. We do not want to be disrespected again now in a democratic country. We no longer trust any relationship with people who come to us to say we want to work with you because previously people have come and stole our information and used it to their benefit with no thank you.'

While Quinlan, Blumenthal and Fishman (2000, p. 39) acknowledge the presence of an inherent tension between low-income communities and large institutions, they also argue that such tension can be ameliorated over months and years:

The university should rather indicate what they will be able to provide or assist the community with since it is the one that possesses the expertise. In other words, from the needs that the community has laid down, the university should indicate whether it would be possible for it to assist the community or not. The university must outline where they can help and where they cannot help.

The feelings of participants were that these three aspects were disregarded by the HEI, which led to a lack of long-term commitment. Academics therefore must be critically aware of their power in the development dynamic and its potential for abuse.

Maintenance and Monitoring of Partnerships

Participants were of the view that establishing a set of shared objectives was never considered by the university: 'No one seems to care. It is always about the university or the funder. When they come they look at the money or the number of degrees awarded, not at the impact out there.' Participants argued for strategies to engage in long-term relationships, which would also address the issue of sustaining whatever the students left behind while they completed their studies. The termination of a partnership, they argued, should be based on a consensus that both parties no longer had a need for the other and that the continuation of any projects and/or activities could be managed by those remaining

who would have been capacitated in the process of the students' learning.

Participants felt that the services and resources of the HEI were fragmented because of power struggles over ownership on the part of academics and had little to do with the interest of communities. One participant summed up the solution: '... Work together!' If parties are in a true partnership, resources can be shared for maximum mutual use and benefit. Resources in this context include knowledge and ideas, as well as material resources such as physical infrastructure, funds, equipment and supplies.

To participants, a quality partnership was one in which processes and outcomes were monitored and evaluated:

You should also make sure that you put strategies in place for follow up on what you have started with the community. Set dates where you are going to come to check on the people you have trained, for example, once a month, and also invite people's inputs on the progress of the projects. You should not just leave the community after teaching them.

Monitoring and control mechanisms should therefore be put in place to ensure that follow-up and feedback occurred: 'You should not just dump the community after using them'; 'No feedback, no reports, another one comes with his own agenda.'

Participants were of the opinion that academics never wanted to learn from previous experience: 'They come and go, all in the name of the university; in the end no one is accountable to what takes place in the community.' While a lack of evaluation and monitoring of partnership activities may not be a problem with the HEI per se, participants raised serious questions regarding the university's ethical and moral responsibility towards the public good, which was also raised in the literature. It is documented that for various reasons academics do not want to reveal all the information relating to their community projects. An audit study conducted by Smith-Tolken (2004, p. 115) confirms this. Debate about the implications for HEIs of the lack of monitoring and evaluation of community projects is underway. It is likely that such debates will underscore the negative impact on community wellbeing of this deficiency and the need for more discussion in this regard.

WHAT, THEN, IS A QUALITY PARTNERSHIP?

While there are problems in contextualising the construct 'quality partnership', these should not be used as an attempt to avoid establishing the criteria, quality measures and processes of a true partnership when engaging with communities. A community's perspectives ought to be heard and integrated within a quality improvement mechanism. One way of doing this is to form 'quality circles' that consist of community members. Currently, several best practices exist at the university where some research teams consist of various levels of community members, and teams of research assistants and students include volunteer community members

who are trained and participate in data collection and mapping. Such practices will be reported on in future research articles. The emphasis should not be on 'doing to' the community, but 'doing with' that community out of a sense of social responsibility, empowerment and the need for social change.

To participants, partnership is a reciprocal, outcomes-based relationship between the HEI and the community, which consists of initiation, execution and sustenance phases and has three dimensions: interactive learning and education; community development; and project management. Stakeholders strive towards meaningful lifelong learning through a project management process. Furthermore, partnership is the interdependence of different people with different roles engaged in the pursuit of a shared goal, implying that the desire for community development is inherent in the expected outcomes of the partnership process. If clarity of role, purpose and relationship is not articulated and 'lived out', then it is not a partnership. This is often a challenging and daunting task, which requires reflective and reflexive exercises – and should include an honest process of researching the researcher.

Any process that consciously or unconsciously fosters dependency undermines the partnership. In addition, when the partnership objectives are set, it is important that the partnership management adopts a team management and participatory management approach (Waddock & Walsh 1999). After elaborate discussions and engagement, the directorate at UNIVEN is currently steering a policy framework, which seeks to embrace such principles as equity, reciprocity and 'ubuntu' – an ancient African word, meaning 'humanity to others', and interconnectedness: 'I am what I am because of who we all are.'

Finally, the ethics and politics of all these dynamics and processes are a cause for concern. Discussions about community partnerships in academic forums need to include deliberate and informed discourse on the ethical and moral obligations in the partnership. Discussions in this respect are both challenging and problematic, especially as regards accountability. More often than not when the directorate raises questions about the ethics and protocols of partnering with communities, the responses are often along the lines of 'Who are you to start questioning my relationship as an academic with community X?' While this issue requires a separate article, it is important to note that the community stakeholders who participated in the study questioned the ethics of our engagement with communities. The question is therefore whether HEIs are working towards addressing these areas and, if so, in what way?

CONCLUSION

Perspectives on quality partnerships between HEIs and communities need to be further deliberated upon. Inclusive debates (consisting of a reference group that includes community

representatives) are necessary to reach consensus about what constitutes quality partnership practices. Competing objectives of both parties need to be constantly unpacked. The partnership context cannot be removed from its processes. In some contexts, determining the partnership objectives and understanding the roles of each party in the partnership are constricted by the most pressing needs, in this case the need for poverty alleviation and development activities, and those of transforming the university to be in line with the mandate and directives of the government of the time. What this may imply is that there will continue to be a tension if academics' understanding of a quality partnership does not include efforts to be rigorous in its consideration of the ethics and responsibilities of working with vulnerable communities and to elevate the voices of community members. Experience teaches us that there will be no clear-cut answers because circumstances differ and compete. Thus, a constant and deliberate, as well as participatory, search for best ways is necessary.

While the researcher acknowledges the complicated nature of embracing the community voice in the concept of quality, she wishes to open the debate so that the determination of what quality is, its criteria and its indicators, includes both sound processes and the perspectives of community partners.

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