Student-perceived criteria for assessing university relevance in community development

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In sub-Saharan Africa, universities are increasingly being called upon to contribute more towards combating poverty and promoting development in rural areas. Yet, it is still argued that universities are ivory towers, and as a result, their contribution to finding sustainable solutions to issues hampering the realisation of improved quality of life of people in rural areas remains unsatisfactory. This perception emanates from the universities' apparent failure to articulate and demonstrate how they can achieve the desired goal stated above. Moreover, there are no universally embraced criteria for assessing the relevance of a rural area based university to the community it serves. This study was therefore carried out to determine the perceptions of University of Venda undergraduate students on what they believed were appropriate criteria for assessing the relevance of a rural area based university in community development in South Africa. Reflection circles, anchored on participatory research techniques, were used to engage the students. The results of the engagement were organised into sub-themes. The most prominent perceptions were: 'A university has active long-term community-based development initiatives'; 'A university is continuously addressing the real needs of the communities in question'; 'University initiatives are creating jobs for its graduates and community members'; and 'Continuous community requests for university assistance in solving the challenges militating against development'. The wide range of perceptions of students observed in this study is a useful input into initiatives seeking to develop an objective tool for assessing the relevance of a rural area based university in community development.

Significance:

- A set of criteria that students believe should be used to assess the relevance of universities in community development were generated.

- The criteria can be used to develop an index that might serve as a tool for ranking university relevance to their constituencies.

- The criteria can also be used to sharpen the business of community engagement directorates in rural-based universities.

Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, universities are increasingly being called upon to contribute more meaningfully towards combating poverty and promoting development in rural areas.[1-3] However, most universities continue to operate like ivory towers whose contribution to the improvement of the quality of life of people in rural areas is unsatisfactory.[4,5] Boyer[4] shares his frustration with the ivory tower persona and profession-orientation of universities, which tends to alienate them from the larger community and lead to the marginalisation of the most pressing civic, social, economic, environmental and moral challenges. Olowu[6] extends this argument by noting that most rural universities are disconnected from the community's needs and rarely take advantage of the strengths of their immediate societies. MacGregor and Makoni[7] recommend that universities should be 'citadels not silos, defending communities around them rather than being inward-looking…if they are to actively advance their development goals'. This situation highlights the need for universities to contribute to implementation of the transformation goals defined in the White Paper on Higher Education of 2014 and the National Plan for Higher Education 2015/16–2019/20, in particular in rural areas, so that universities take a lead in building a more just and progressive society.

Another view that is gaining prominence in the higher education sector is the need for universities to become effective engines for preparing students to apply their expertise in facilitating the development of grassroots communities, countries and regions.[8,9] In support of this view, Fullerton[9] believes in a system that benefits university researchers, students and the community. The author makes reference to benefits from community engagement through improving universities' core intellectual and academic work, in part, through giving students and faculty real-world experience which can positively impact both research and teaching. Fullerton[9] contends that through engaging communities when tackling the problems they face and also involving students in such processes, rural planning and development scholars can bring about valuable experiences for all role players. Anderson[10] expands this contention by pointing out that better insight and implications from the research are gained when they are developed in collaboration with those who live the life.

Both urban and rural areas face considerable developmental challenges, among which are social exclusion, citizen protests because of a lack of basic needs or services, inadequate income to meet household demands, inappropriate disposal of toxic waste, unsustainable farm and non-farm enterprises, and lack of sustainable industries, most often within the reach of local universities.[8,11,12] Despite the existence of this wide range of challenges, rural-based higher education institutions, particularly in developing countries, continue to operate in ways that do not reflect the aspirations and expectations of their constituencies.[8,9,13] Thus, interventions seeking to redefine their roles in community development and societal transformation in general are justified.

Some scholars share the belief that quite often universities descend on communities to carry out needs assessments[14,15] and then abandon them soon after writing research reports and or assignments that merely personally advance the investigators[8,14,16]. Bodorkós and Pataki[16] claim that lack of credibility of science today stems from the way it is currently institutionalised. Rarely do university researchers share the results of their work with the communities in which the research is conducted. Nor are the research outcomes implemented. It seems this lack of credibility is rooted in the universities' failure to articulate how they can effectively contribute to societal transformation and development.

One way of making universities relevant is to strengthen their interaction with local communities, civic organisations, businesses and industry partners for local development.[17,18] According to the then South African Department of Education (DoE)[17(p.4-5)], this would be achieved by 'contributing to the development of communities through application and extension of its knowledge and expertise'. Students who participate in such actions are exposed to practical and relevant training which equip them with the skills needed to improve local and national development.[1,9,19] Initiatives or programmes of that nature must reflect the voices of the students involved and community members concerned, in line with the adage, 'Nothing about us without us'[20]. Thus, taking this situation into consideration, an exploratory case study was carried out to 'harvest' the perceptions of students at the University of Venda (Univen) in South Africa on what they regarded as suitable criteria that could be used to assess the relevance of a rural area based university in community development. Before describing the study area, the context of a rural area based university in South Africa is clarified in order to build a better understanding of what necessitated the current study. Also, community development and engagement are briefly explained.

Conceptualising rural-based universities in a South African context

Since the first university (University of Bologna in Italy) was established in 1088, promotion of teaching, research and knowledge transfer have remained as the major roles of these institutions.[21-23] However, universities have continued to evolve in response to new challenges facing nations and availability of improved technologies. According to Etzkowitz et al.[24], in order to address the new challenges, universities are expected to improve regional and national economic performance. At the same time, they should also address their own financial challenges. In Africa, universities were promoted and established to assist decolonised nations to 'build the capacities of emerging governments to develop, manage resources, alleviate poverty of their people and close the gap between them and the developed world'[1(p.4-5)]. In South Africa, the potential of rural-based universities to play a significant role in facilitating sustainable development, especially in the communities within their vicinity, is not in doubt. This argument takes cognisance of: the universities' strategic locations within the rural communities which they are supposed to serve[25]; availability of relevant physical infrastructure for training and empowering of communities; and potential to promote teaching and learning and build strong partnerships[21]. However, poverty and underdevelopment remain rife in rural areas and residents often struggle to feed themselves.[26-28] These conditions present opportunities for action research and learning platforms for students as well as academics. Apparently, the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy of 2000 was designed in a way that enabled rural-based universities to direct their work towards building the capacity of individuals and local communities to champion their own development. It was assumed that they were strategically located to play a catalytic development role and would be easily linked to designated local industrial development nodal points. Community engagement activities were expected to emerge in the form of synergistic partnerships with local businesses, civic bodies, industry, and local and provincial governments, leading to meaningful socio-economic growth and development.

A conducive climate for mounting effective community engagement initiatives in the country does exist. Successive post-1994 govern- ments formulated various strategies and polices meant to redefine, restructure and transform the higher education system and society in general.[28-30] Among these were the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in which Chapter 2 is dedicated to the Bill of Rights, *Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997* and White Paper No. 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education notice 1196 of 1997. The White Paper identified the need for societal transformation and ways to address the development challenges facing the broader society.[30,31] Moreover, the Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994 had earlier outlined this challenge. The new mandate that the DoE[17], Bunting[28] and Badat[29] espoused provided an opportunity for rural-based universities to play a more meaningful role in promoting sustainable rural development.[28,30] However, as Nkomo and Sehoole[21] reveal, there is a dearth of research focusing on the contribution of rural-based universities to sustainable development. Clearly, this situation presents an opportunity for the universities to co-originate with the affected constituencies, practical solutions to existing challenges. This is likely to be a central pillar of relevance of a rural-based university to rural communities in South Africa.

Community development in perspective

Community development is a process in which residents of an area come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems.[32] According to Zadeh and Ahmad[33], it often takes place when community members genuinely participate in the development process. Rural communities have particular strengths and assets that can be harnessed in order to improve their quality of life. They might benefit from educational institutions such as universities through financial and administrative support.[9] Higher education institutions should strive to fill this gap so that they facilitate community-led planning and implementation of local development initiatives. It is imperative to note that participation of local people in their own social change is a fundamental tenet of community development. Therefore, any outside intervention must fall within the structures and norms of the community in question.

Community engagement clarified

Many definitions of community engagement exist. Community engagement is grounded in the principles of organising people in a particular locality and adheres to fairness, justice, empowerment, participation and self-determination.[34-37] A common denominator of the myriad of definitions is the role that university students and staff must play. For purposes of this paper, we have adopted the Maddison and Laing[38] view of community engagement – which is that it 'takes a particular form, and is context-dependent – arising for institutions from their individual histories and locations, and from their view about their strategic position'. There is also a need to highlight that although the engaged activities are in the local environment in relation to the campus, globalisation has virtually extended the sphere of influence of universities. Globalisation thus justifies the need to ensure that community engagement embraces stakeholders well beyond the campus.

In South Africa, community engagement is defined from the perspective of the legislations and policies on the higher education system, which recognise it together with teaching and learning, and research as the key pillars of university business. South Africa's White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 calls upon universities to 'demonstrate social responsibility…and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes'. One of its key objectives is to 'promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community engagement'.

Description of the study area

Univen was established in 1982 and is a historically disadvantaged higher education institution located in Thohoyandou. Thohoyandou is the administrative centre of the predominantly rural Thulamela Municipality within the Vhembe District Municipality of the Limpopo Province

of South Africa. Other municipalities that make up this District are Makhado, Musina and Mutale. Several villages surround Thohoyandou and the university. A considerably high poverty rate, which Statistics South Africa[39] estimates to be 40%, and backlogs in service delivery (the worst being electricity, potable water and sanitation) characterise the area. The poverty evident in the Vhembe District and other areas in the rural areas of South Africa is rooted firmly in the discriminatory policies of the apartheid system implemented prior to 1994, when the country attained democracy. During the apartheid era, the entire Vhembe District was part of the Venda Homeland or Bantustan.

Univen lies about 180 km to the northeast of Polokwane, the capital city of Limpopo Province. In addition, Univen is located approximately 160 km southeast of the Beitbridge border with Zimbabwe and 60 km to the west of the Punda Maria gate that connects Thulamela Municipality to the Kruger National Park. The university lies at a latitude of -22.9° and longitude of 30.4°.

The university's core business of research, teaching and learning, and community engagement is run across eight schools: Agriculture, Education, Environmental Sciences, Health Sciences, Human and Social Sciences, Law, Management Sciences, and Mathematical and Natural Sciences. All the schools are further disaggregated into 66 departments, centres and institutes. Currently, about 14 000 students are registered for various undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications within the university. The university's vision, which was adopted in 2007, is 'To be at the centre of tertiary education for rural and regional development in southern Africa'. However, as Francis et al.[14] contend, most schools within Univen continue to grapple with how best to make themselves relevant to the mainly rural grassroots constituency that the university is expected to serve.

Research methodology

Research design, population and sampling

This study was carried out using an exploratory case study research design. A purposive sample of 42 students was selected; the students were aged 19–24 years and were registered for undergraduate degrees in various academic disciplines in the eight schools at Univen. The students were drawn from the 70 who actively participated in a rural community-based programme called 'Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality'.[14] An open invitation was sent to the 70 students to participate in this study if they were interested and willing. In the invitation, the purpose, benefits of their participation and what the results of the study would be used for were explained. A total of 20 male and 22 female students voluntarily participated in the research. More information on the study was provided on the day of data collection. The students were accorded the opportunity to ask any questions on any contentious issues they wanted clarified. Each participant signed a consent letter to confirm their willingness to participate in the study. They were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. Ethical clearance was secured from the University of Venda's Research Ethics Committee (certificate number SHS/11/PH/002). The study was conducted as part of the community–university partnership programme (grant 71 231), which was one of the four national initiatives the Department of Science and Technology piloted to enable historically black universities to contribute more to socio-economic development.

Reflection circles (Figure 1) were constituted for data collection purposes. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the number of students in each reflection circle. When constituting the reflection circles, the sex of the students was used as a stratification variable. It was assumed that the views of male and female students might differ. Six reflection circles were constituted: men (2 groups), women (2 groups) and mixed men and women (2 groups). Each reflection circle deliberated on the same question, namely: 'What criteria would you use to assess the relevance of a rural-based South African university in community development?'
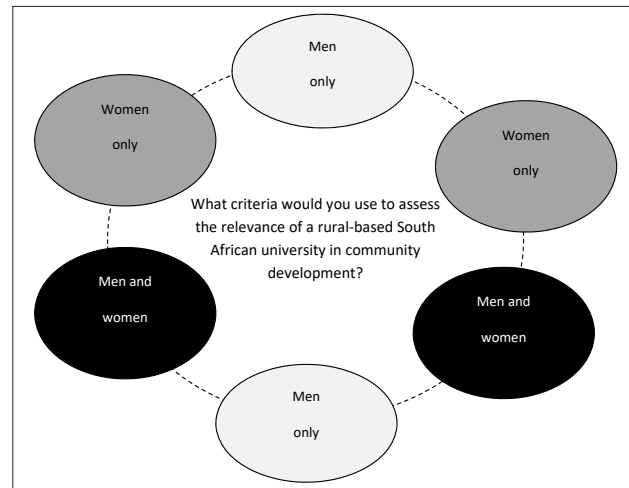

Figure 1: Schematic presentation of the reflection circles constituted in the exploratory study on the relevance of a South African rural area based university in community development.

Table 1: Composition of reflection circles of students formed to deliberate on the criteria to use when assessing the relevance of a South African rural-based university in community development

Respondent group	Number of students		
	Men	**Women**	**Total**
1	7	0	7
2	6	0	6
3	0	8	8
4	0	7	7
5	3	3	6
6	4	4	8
Total	**20**	**22**	**42**

Constituting two reflection circles per category was desirable because of the need for replication[40-42] and triangulation of perspectives[43]. This was also crucial in order to minimise the usually unavoidable bias that researchers often display.[42,44,45] Olsen[43(p.3)] defines triangulation as 'the mixing of data or methods so that diverse viewpoints or standpoints cast light upon a topic'. In this study, the meaning of triangulation was extended through replicating the number of cohorts of respondents.

Members of each reflection circle selected an individual from within the circle to facilitate their deliberations, focusing on the research question stated above. Also, each group selected a rapporteur or scribe. During the discussions, flipcharts and markers were used to record the results whenever consensus on a particular view was reached. Almost all the students who participated in this study were well-trained facilitators who had extensive experience of leading such deliberations, even at a village level at which literacy rates are generally low.[44] The main role of the facilitators was to ensure that the students who displayed domineering tendencies and also those who rarely expressed their views were appropriately managed in order to ensure that the collective voice of all members of the reflection circle was captured. An experienced principal researcher (J.F.) supervised the data collection. From time to time, the researcher clarified any issues that arose as data collection unfolded. It was important to supervise the data collection to ensure that the study was conducted as planned.

After about 1¼ hours of intense intra-reflection circle debates, the respective cohorts formed one reflection circle each for the purpose of consolidating their findings. For example, the two reflection circles

comprising only female students converged and shared their findings, resulting in the production of a consolidated set of results. The consolidated results were subsequently presented in plenary. The only male students and mixed students reflection circles followed suit. The principal researcher facilitated the discussions in the plenary session. As each group presented its findings, one of the participants wrote the various perceptions on a flipchart. In this way, the results of the reflection circles were consolidated and subsequently adopted as the composite set of the perceived criteria that should be used to assess the relevance of a rural area based university in community development. Post-plenary presentations, further discussion of the results ensued, leading to the adoption of the day's research output. The principal researcher thanked all the students for participating in the study, which took about 3 hours to complete.

Data analysis

The thematic content analysis technique of Cresswell[45] was used to consolidate the results of the study into sub-themes of criteria. This involved placing similar student perceptions into aggregate sub-themes. The number of reflection circles that identified each criterion was used as a measure of its popularity or importance. Therefore, this measure was adopted as the priority rank.

Description of results

The perceived criteria that the students identified for assessing the relevance of a university were classifiable into five sub-themes: (1) existence of active community-based programmes; (2) responsiveness to societal challenges; (3) strengthening social cohesion or capital; (4) community awareness of the university's roles; and (5) quality of programmes and graduates of the university. In Table 2, a more detailed picture of the various student perceptions per sub-theme is presented.

Across the sub-thematic areas, the most common criteria were:

- There are active long-term university-run programmes or projects in communities.

- University programmes addressing the needs of the community.

- Involvement of community members in decision-making regarding implemented projects.

- Improved social cohesion in the community mainly because of university development initiatives.

- Communities are aware of their developmental needs and the nature of the relevant support required from the university.

While arguing why his view on the latter criterion should be accepted, one male student remarked that:

> ….apart from having students renting rooms in most of the villages around this university, the communities do not feel the presence of Univen. So, can we surely say this university is relevant? I do not think so.

Another student said,

> It is unfair and unethical for any university to enjoy taxpayers' money without ploughing back. Anyway, even though there are so few of us trying to make a difference in the communities we are working in, one should see this as a positive sign of the direction this institution is taking. Maybe soon, we might find people having greater confidence in our university.

Table 2: Criteria for use in assessing the relevance of a South African rural-based university in community development

Criteria	Focus group of students			Total
	Women only	Men only	Mixed men and women	
Existence of active community-based programmes				
There are active long-term university-run programmes or projects in communities	••	•	•	4
Programmes or projects run by the university creating jobs for its graduates or other members of the community		••	•	3
Responsiveness to societal challenges				
University programmes addressing the needs of the community	••	•	•	4
Regular requests for university assistance from the community		•	•	2
Provision of bursaries or scholarships, specifically targeting students from surrounding communities		••		2
Strengthening social capital or cohesion				
Involvement of community members in decision-making relating to implemented projects or programmes	••	•	•	4
Improved social cohesion in the community mainly because of the university's development initiatives	•	••	•	4
Acceptance by society because the university understands and respects the culture of the community			•	1
Community awareness of the university's roles				
Communities are aware of their developmental needs and the nature of relevant support required from the university	•	•	••	4
Community members giving positive testimonies regarding the university work	•		••	3
Quality of programmes and graduates				
Increased interest by local school-leavers in being admitted into university programmes		•	•	2
Employers increasingly interested in and recruiting graduates of the university	•		•	2

•, affirmative for identification of that indicator

Discussion

Some interesting criteria to use when assessing the relevance of a rural area based university in community development were unearthed in this study. However, before explaining the results, it is important to restate that a university is expected to play a role in societal transformation and development through generating and disseminating knowledge to potential users.[13,30,46-48] In addition to this understanding, utilisation of the knowledge is of paramount importance because it helps the users to expand their work beyond traditional boundaries.[47] Universities provide both general and specific skills required to enhance societal transformation and development.[49] Moreover, they create an enabling environment for collective action via engaging in civic conversations with the concerned communities or beneficiaries.[16] This clarification is crucial because it helps to put into perspective the student-suggested criteria that should be used to assess the relevance of a university in rural community development.

The students who participated in this study pointed out that establishing long-term community-based programmes was an important criterion of relevance of a rural-based university. Presumably, the fact that the existence of active community-based programmes helps to build long-term relationships[49-51] informed this view, apart from improving the image of the university and related support. Students involved in such programmes tend to become more creative and energetic[52] – which are positive qualities that enhance the chances of recruiting and retaining these students. However, Butterfield and Soska[5], Torres and Reyes[13] and Bridger and Alter[15] caution against universities striving to serve their own interests and in the process use grassroots communities as subjects of their research. Smart partnerships with communities of place would ascertain enhanced relationships and justify implementation of long-term local programmes. Such programmes must benefit members of the community of place and the university and enhance the latter's relevance to its constituency.

Ideal and successful partnerships in community-based programmes should focus on mutual benefits[53], co-learning[54] and a strong sharing of knowledge[11,52]. The students' line of thinking was consistent with these views. Furthermore, other considerations seemed to have influenced the students' views on the criteria of relevance of a rural-based university: increased interest by local school leavers in being admitted into the university's programmes; university programmes or projects creating jobs for its graduates or other community members; and communities being aware of their developmental needs and the nature of relevant support required from the university.

Manzuri and Rao[53] rely on the work of Alderman[54] to base their argument that:

> The cornerstone of community-based development initiatives is the active involvement of members of a defined constituency in at least some aspects of project design and implementation. While participation can occur at many levels, a key objective is the incorporation of 'local knowledge' into the project's decision making processes.

However, some aspects of this assertion are contestable. For example, 'participation of members of a defined community in at least some aspects of project design and implementation' does not nurture genuine and fruitful partnerships. Such limited involvement is unlikely to yield sustainable community development. It is also not clear how the decision on the 'at least some aspects of project design and implementation' is made. Ruhiiga's[49] view of promoting the involvement of community members in all the programme's processes and activities should be embraced. This paradigm promotes co-learning and sharing of various perspectives and also develops transformative leadership for sustainable development among students, grassroots communities and academia. Possibly, when such collegial relationships are developed, there is a strong likelihood of 'increased interest by local school leavers in being admitted into the university programmes'. This might explain why the students viewed 'employers increasingly interested in and recruiting

graduates from the university' as important. The student-distilled criteria provide valuable evidence of what to consider when assessing the quality of programmes and graduates of a rural-based university. When this happens it would not be surprising to find, as revealed in this study, 'community members giving positive testimonies' on the roles that an engaged university plays.

Badat[29(p.5)] highlights the need for a university to be 'responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and community engagement'. In this study, the context of responsiveness that the students seemed to have in mind was the ability of a functionally relevant university to respond to a request from a community in need or to transform its operational focus and character in order to deal with an existing or emerging local, national, regional or international challenge. The three measures of responsiveness that the students identified seemed one-sided because all of them suggested that the grassroots community was always the beneficiary. Taking into account their experience in community development practice as academics, Francis et al.[15] point out that establishment of sustainable partnerships builds a clearer understanding of the roles and hence the relevance of a rural-based university. Moreover, Judd and Adams[50] contend that university–community partnerships provide the opportunity for practical learning where students gain realistic experience. This prepares students to assume political roles in their communities.[55] Hunter and Mileski[56] add capacity-building and collective learning as the major benefits in the partnership, which enhance the relevance of a rural-based university to its surrounding rural communities and the broader society.[28]

Social capital or cohesion-related issues that the students identified highlighted the need for creating strong bonds between a community and the university in question. Netshandama[55] contends that the existence of a social contract between universities and the society is a clear indication of the commitment to work together. She argues that because the society requires scientifically generated knowledge, there exists a social contract between it and the institutions that produce it. Therefore, it is important for the two parties to work closely.

One of the most popular criteria cited in the current study regarding social capital – improved social cohesion in community principally due to university development initiatives – deserves special recognition, because there is considerable evidence of the existence of tensions and at times conflicts among traditional leaders, municipal ward committees, community development workers and civic structures in most communities in South Africa.[15,57,58] In the year 2008, the South African government launched a national strategy that recognises social cohesion as one of the nine critical pillars upon which efforts made to combat poverty should rest. Furthermore, the country adopted *A National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and a Cohesive South African Society*[59] in 2012 whose overall goal is to create a caring and proud society, anchored on 13 indicators. All these national government efforts confirm that lack of social cohesion remains a challenge that pervades the country. For this reason, it is not surprising that the students who participated in this study highlighted various social cohesion-related criteria that they believed should be used to assess the relevance of a rural area based university in South Africa.

Based on our own personal experiences and observations, it can be concluded that academics involved in community-based work tend to shy away from tackling inherent tensions and conflicts in favour of focusing on the primary objectives of the research or community engagement they implement. The students' suggestion of including contribution to strengthening social cohesion should be applauded because communities that are not 'healthy', in particular as a result of infighting among its leaders, will always find it difficult to marshal sustainable energy to achieve self-driven development. Thus, inclusion of activities that seek to achieve and/or strengthen inter-leadership institutional bonds within grassroots communities is worth considering.

The arguments presented above resonate with those of Hobbs[60] and Manzuri and Rao[53]. These scholars cite the importance of Putnam's[61(p.167)] views, namely 'features of organisation such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by

facilitating coordinated actions'. In this regard, social capital or cohesion refers to the ability of individuals to build 'bonds' within their own group and 'bridges' that link them with others. All this is deeply tied to the belief that the quality and quantity of group activity are key sources of a community's strength and its ability to work for its own betterment.[61,62] Based on the results of this study, it is prudent for a rural area based university such as Univen to deploy resources for use in efforts that strengthen social cohesion or capital so as to enhance the chances of achieving sustainable community development.

Conclusions

Various criteria that might be used to assess the relevance of a rural area based university in South Africa were unearthed in this study. The criteria were categorised into the following sub-themes: existence of active community-based programmes; responsiveness of the university to societal challenges; social capital or cohesion; community awareness of the university's roles; and quality of programmes and graduates of the university. These results have laid the foundation for further research that should guide the development, in partnership with rural communities and other stakeholders, of a tool to use when assessing the relevance of a rural-based university in South Africa and even beyond.

Acknowledgements

Authors' contributions

J.F. conceived the study, led the data collection and analysis process as well as the preparation of the research article. B.K. participated in the data collection and co-authored the article. P.N. finalised the writing and submission of the article.

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