Perspectives on community engagement from institutional audits: A weak link in the higher education quality chain

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ABSTRACT

Learning and teaching, research, and community engagement are considered central to the purpose and mandates of higher education institutions. The study adopted a qualitative documentary analysis in which 26 Council on Higher Education (CHE) institutional audit reports from the 2022-2024 cycle were reviewed to explore the meaning and emphasis given to community engagement (CE) in the CHE institutional documents.

The findings revealed that while CE is articulated in institutional rhetoric, visions, and missions, there is little tangible evidence of its implementation in institutional actions. The main issues include the absence of formal coordination structures, limited dedicated funding, minimal integration into core academic activities such as curriculum and research, and reliance on individual champions rather than institutional support. Additionally, the findings highlight the significant impact of the absence of monitoring and evaluation systems that measure developmental outcomes. Grounded in Community Development Theory and Decoloniality, the study shows that as a part of higher education, CE should not be marginalised if the sector aims for transformation and social justice. Against that background, the findings indicate that to secure transformative social justice objectives, CE must be systemically embedded in institutional structures and mechanisms of governance, funding and quality assurance. The study, therefore, recommends that CE, as a fundamental part of academic achievement, requires concerted institutional and national efforts and intentional leadership.

Keywords: quality, community engagement, institutional audits, transformation, decoloniality

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT

Community Engagement (CE) is increasingly recognised globally as the "Third Mission" of the modern university, complementing its traditional roles in Teaching and Learning and Research. In South Africa, CE is formally recognised alongside Teaching and Learning and Research within national higher education policy (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2023,67). The Education White Paper (1997) and the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997) highlight the transformative role of universities in promoting social justice and equitable

development. Within this framework, universities are expected to function as centres of knowledge creation and as civic actors responsible for addressing historical injustices. This relationship requires active, reciprocal engagement with surrounding communities, moving beyond one-way outreach to co-create knowledge and address societal challenges (CHE 2023). The CHE institutionalised this mission when CE was incorporated into national quality assurance tools, such as programme accreditation, qualification standards, and cyclical institutional audits (CHE 2023,68; Kelly and Given, 2024,441).

Despite the existing policy and regulatory framework, CE remains the least institutionalised of the three core mandates in South African higher education (Duong 2023,215). The CHE's audit cycle (2022–2025) exposes a persistent implementation gap between institutional rhetoric and operational reality (Mohale 2023,114). While many universities have adopted CE policies, established engagement structures and expanded community-based initiatives, research continues to suggest considerable variation in the extent to which engagement is integrated into institutional strategy, academic programmes, research, quality assurance systems and resource allocation (Johnson 2020; Saidi and Boti 2023; Schutte 2024).

Moreover, the dominance of global ranking systems, research productivity metrics, and teaching throughput targets perpetuates a hierarchy in which CE occupies a marginal position, often reliant on individual champions, operating within under-resourced units, and rarely rewarded through promotion or performance appraisal systems (Saidi and Boti 2023,72; CHE 2023,69). By and large, CE's marginalisation not only constrains its institutional legitimacy but also curtails its potential to advance the transformation and decolonisation agenda central to higher education's social purpose.

In this context, the continued marginalisation of CE represents a critical weakness within South Africa's higher education quality assurance system (CHE 2023,70; Kelly and Given 2024,442). Against this backdrop, this study interrogates how institutional audits have assessed the conceptualisation and operationalisation of CE within public universities. Based on a thematic analysis of 26 institutional audit reports of public universities, the study explores the implications of CE's marginalisation for the realisation of higher education's transformative mandate. The study advances the argument that, through the integrated lens of Community Development Theory and Decoloniality, reinforcing CE is both a quality assurance and a strategic and moral imperative for embedding social justice and equity within academic missions of higher education institutions. Accordingly, the central research question guiding the inquiry is:

HOW DO INSTITUTIONAL AUDITS REVEAL SYSTEMIC WEAKNESSES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION AND PRIORITISATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A KEY DIMENSION OF QUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community engagement in Higher Education

Community Engagement (CE) has become an increasingly prominent dimension of higher education internationally, reflecting a growing expectation that universities should contribute actively to addressing societal challenges through reciprocal partnerships with communities. Although teaching and research remain the traditional core functions of universities, CE has increasingly been recognised as the third mission of higher education, extending the role of universities beyond knowledge production to include social responsiveness, civic participation, and sustainable development (Welch and Saltmarsh 2023; Kelly and Given 2024).

Unlike traditional outreach activities, contemporary conceptions of CE emphasise mutuality, reciprocity, and knowledge co-production, recognising communities as partners in the creation, application, and dissemination of knowledge rather than passive beneficiaries of university expertise (Ledwith 2020; Erasmus and Albertyn 2014). This perspective represents a significant departure from earlier models of university-community interaction that were often characterised by one-directional knowledge transfer and philanthropic service. Instead, CE is increasingly understood as an integrated academic practice through which teaching, research, and engagement reinforce one another in pursuit of socially relevant scholarship and sustainable societal impact (CHE 2010; Welch and Saltmarsh 2023).

Within higher education, CE encompasses a wide range of activities, including service-learning, community-based research, engaged scholarship, professional outreach, and collaborative partnerships with public, private, and civil society organisations. Although these activities differ in purpose and implementation, they share a common commitment to generating reciprocal value for both universities and communities (Kelly and Given 2024). Increasingly, scholars argue that the effectiveness of CE should not be assessed primarily by the number of engagement activities undertaken but by the quality of partnerships established, the extent of mutual learning, and the demonstrable contribution to social transformation (Talò 2024).

Despite broad consensus regarding the importance of CE, considerable conceptual ambiguity persists. The literature continues to distinguish between community engagement, community outreach, community service, and volunteerism, noting that these concepts are frequently conflated within institutional practice (Bender 2008; CHE 2010; Saidi and Boti

2023). Such ambiguity has significant implications for higher education institutions because it influences how CE is governed, resourced, evaluated, and recognised within academic systems. Where CE is perceived primarily as charitable service rather than scholarly practice, it is often marginalised within institutional planning, receives limited resources, and remains disconnected from teaching and research (Bangani 2023; Schutte 2024).

Equally concerning is the dependency of CE initiatives on isolated academic champions and externally funded projects, rather than on systemic institutional support (Ndlovu et al 2022,4699). This individualisation of responsibility breeds fragility and fragmentation. Despite their community-oriented missions, CE initiatives lack formalised coordination structures, dedicated funding streams, or robust mechanisms for evaluating community impact. Thus, such institutional neglect perpetuates a cycle in which CE is treated as peripheral, helpful in marketing brochures and compliance audits, but ultimately excluded, or substantially limited, from the intellectual and operational core of the university (Talò 2024). This erasure diminishes the potential transformative power of CE and undermines the university's legitimacy as a public institution meant to serve and co-create with society (Kelly and Given 2024).

Consequently, recent scholarship increasingly positions CE as an institutional rather than merely programmatic responsibility. Universities are expected to embed engagement within strategic planning, curriculum development, research agendas, quality assurance systems, and institutional governance, thereby ensuring that engagement contributes meaningfully to both academic excellence and societal development (Saidi and Boti 2023; Bawa 2018).

The significance of Community Engagement assumes particular importance within the South African higher education landscape. Universities operate within a society characterised by profound socio-economic inequalities, historical exclusion, and persistent developmental challenges. Consequently, higher education institutions are expected not only to produce graduates and research but also to contribute actively to social transformation, democratic participation, and sustainable development (CHE 2010).

Since the advent of democracy, South African higher education policy has consistently recognised CE as an essential component of the university's public responsibility. Policy developments, including the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework, and the CHE's Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), have progressively reinforced the expectation that universities should integrate engagement into their academic missions rather than treat it as an auxiliary activity (CHE 2022; CHE 2023b).

Although institutional commitment to CE has expanded considerably over the past two decades, implementation remains uneven across the sector. Research demonstrates substantial

variation in institutional approaches to governance, curriculum integration, staff recognition, monitoring and evaluation, and community partnership development (Johnson 2020; Mohale 2023; Saidi and Boti 2023). While many universities have developed dedicated CE policies and organisational structures, these do not necessarily translate into meaningful institutional integration or demonstrable societal impact.

Community engagement and quality assurance

The growing recognition of CE as a core university function has important implications for quality assurance. If CE is to contribute meaningfully to institutional transformation and societal responsiveness, it must be subject to the same expectations of quality, accountability, and continuous improvement that apply to teaching and learning and research (CHE 2022).

Quality assurance frameworks increasingly conceptualise CE as an institutional capability rather than a collection of discrete activities. Consequently, attention has shifted from documenting engagement outputs towards evaluating governance systems, strategic integration, partnership quality, institutional learning, and evidence of societal impact (CHE 2024; Kelly and Given 2024). This reflects an important transition from compliance-oriented approaches towards developmental quality assurance that emphasises institutional improvement and organisational learning.

Within South Africa, the CHE's Framework for Institutional Audits (2021) represents a significant development in this regard. The framework requires institutions to demonstrate not only the existence of CE policies and structures but also evidence of implementation, integration, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous enhancement. Institutional audits therefore provide an independent assessment of how CE is embedded within institutional governance, planning, and quality management systems rather than simply documenting engagement activities.

Conceptual framework: Community development theory and decoloniality

This study is theoretically informed by Community Development Theory and interpreted through a decolonial lens. Community Development Theory explains the participatory and developmental dimensions of CE, while the decolonial perspective interrogates the epistemic assumptions and power relations that shape university–community engagement (Nickels and Rivera 2018,71; Gilchrist 2019,101).

Community Development Theory, as advanced by Gilchrist (2019,102), emphasises inclusive participation, capacity building, and sustainable development through collaborative partnerships (Nickels and Rivera 2018,72; Gilchrist 2019,102). It views development as a

participatory process in which communities are active agents (Blanke and Walzer 2020,314). In higher education, this positions CE as a reciprocal interface that integrates teaching, research, and community knowledge to address societal challenges while enriching academic learning (Gilchrist 2019,103; Ledwith 2020,23). This perspective enables the study to assess whether universities are engaging in transactional outreach or genuinely embedding CE as a core function that advances long-term, equitable partnerships.

While Community Development Theory explains the participatory and developmental dimensions of CE, the decolonial perspective interrogates the historical power relations that shape knowledge production and university–community engagement. Mbembe (2016,29) and De Sousa Santos (2015,63) argue that coloniality persists in the validation of knowledge, marginalising Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Decoloniality advocates an "ecology of knowledges" in which diverse epistemologies are recognised as legitimate contributors to scholarship (De Sousa Santos 2015,63). Through this lens, CE becomes a mechanism for epistemic justice, recognising communities as equal partners in co-producing knowledge rather than mere recipients of expertise (Hall and Tandon 2017,6). This disrupts hierarchical knowledge systems and contributes to the decolonisation of curricula and institutional practice (Mbembe 2016,30; Hull 2021,45), thereby requiring relationships built on reciprocity and mutual respect.

Against such a background, the combined adoption of Community Development Theory and Decoloniality provides a robust foundation for understanding the transformative potential of CE in higher education (Ledwith 2020; Hull 2021,46). The frameworks highlight the crucial role of CE in advancing social justice, epistemic justice, and educational equity. CE is positioned as a tool for community development and as an institutional responsibility for universities to engage with communities in ways that respect their autonomy and knowledge systems (Yountae 2020,947). This dual emphasis on capacity building and decoloniality reflects the moral imperative for higher education to contribute to dismantling historical inequities and to promote a more inclusive, transformative form of education (Blank and Waizwer 2020,315)

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, which posit that social phenomena are contextually situated and are best understood through the interpretation of meaning rather than objective measurement (Guba and Lincoln 1994,105). Accordingly, institutional audit reports were analysed as discursive representations of how universities conceptualise, institutionalise, and evaluate CE

within the broader academic project, rather than as instruments of compliance alone (Quinlan 2017,1).

The study analysed the complete population of 26 institutional audit reports produced by the Council on Higher Education during the 2022–2025 audit cycle, covering all 26 public universities in South Africa. The reports were selected because they provide independent, externally validated assessments of institutional quality assurance by integrating institutional self-evaluation evidence, documentary portfolios, and findings from external peer-review panels. The 2022–2025 audit cycle was particularly appropriate as it reflects the implementation of the CHE's revised Quality Assurance Framework (2021) and the Framework for Institutional Audits (2021), thereby providing contemporary evidence of how CE is institutionalised under the revised quality assurance system.

As the study relied exclusively on publicly available documentary sources, formal ethical clearance involving human participants was not required. Nevertheless, ethical integrity was maintained by anonymising institution-specific identifiers throughout the analysis to minimise reputational bias and ensure that the emphasis remained on sector-wide patterns rather than institutional comparisons. Consequently, the study sought to understand the collective state of CE institutionalisation across South African public universities instead of evaluating the performance of individual institutions.

The reports were analysed using a combination of qualitative content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006,77). The analytical process involved repeated familiarisation with the reports, systematic coding of relevant text, the development and refinement of themes, and interpretive synthesis across the dataset. Codes were iteratively grouped into themes to identify recurring institutional practices, governance arrangements, quality-assurance mechanisms, and challenges related to CE. This approach enabled both explicit patterns and underlying meanings to emerge, allowing the study to identify common sectoral trends while recognising contextual variation across institutions.

Consistent with the interpretive nature of documentary analysis, the study treated institutional audit reports as both administrative records and institutional narratives reflecting how universities understand and perform their social responsibility. Rather than evaluating institutional compliance with audit standards, the analysis examined how CE was constructed, prioritised, and integrated within institutional quality assurance systems (Shay 2017). Interpretation of the findings was guided by Community Development Theory and the decolonial perspective, providing complementary analytical lenses through which patterns of participation, reciprocity, knowledge co-production, and epistemic justice could be examined.

Given the interpretive nature of the research, reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process. The researcher remained conscious of potential assumptions arising from professional experience in quality assurance and public sector governance and continuously reflected on how these perspectives might shape data interpretation (Creswell 2021,808). This reflexive stance helped ensure that the findings remained grounded in the documentary evidence while being interpreted through the complementary theoretical perspectives underpinning the study (Creswell 2021,811).

FINDINGS FROM THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF AUDIT REPORTS

The thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes that collectively illustrate the uneven institutionalisation of CE across the South African higher education sector: integration into core academic functions, formal structures and strategic alignment, staff and student participation, developmental impact, and policy and quality assurance gaps. Each theme is discussed below with illustrative examples drawn from the audited institutions to highlight both systemic challenges and emerging best practices.

Integration into core functions

This theme examines the degree to which CE is embedded within the university's primary academic missions of teaching, learning, and research. Integration reflects whether CE is treated as a *core*, *coequal* function or remains marginal and project based.

Data indicate that several universities rhetorically position CE as a central element of their strategic missions, often framed under the rubric of "engaged scholarship" (Ndlovu et al 2022,4699). In some examples, CE was conceptualised as an integrating mechanism connecting teaching, research and institutional responsiveness rather than as a separate collection of outreach projects. This conceptual positioning signals a growing recognition of CE's potential as a transformative academic practice rather than mere outreach.

One audit panel, for example, found that engaged scholarship was consciously embedded in credit-bearing teaching, research directed towards societal impact and co-curricular citizenship activities. The report listed examples such as an architecture module drawing on indigenous building techniques, health sciences students providing physical and mental health screening in schools, postgraduate research conducted through a rural collaborative learning platform and community members presenting jointly with academics at scholarly conferences. Such examples demonstrate that CE can generate learning opportunities, academic outputs and community benefit within the same institutional processes.

At another institution, the audit panel found that engaged scholarship appeared in the strategic plan and CE had an identifiable organisational home and budget. However, implementation remained uneven across faculties. The panel found only “pockets of excellence”, limited curricular integration and an institutionally acknowledged need to train academics to understand how CE connects with teaching and research. The institution itself recognised that communities should not be approached merely as sources of research data.

Consequently, the findings reveal a persistent rhetoric–practice gap (Johnson 2020,87), in which CE is consistently recognised in institutional strategies yet remains weakly operationalised (Mutambara and Cele 2023,21304; CHE 2023b,41). This reflects enduring epistemic hierarchies that privilege conventional academic outputs over relational, community-engaged scholarship. Consequently, CE remains more symbolic than substantive in many institutions, highlighting the extent to which its institutionalisation signals organisational maturity and commitment to transformation (Welch and Saltmarsh 2023,79).

Formal structures and strategy

The institutional audit reports revealed that although some institutions have specific units for CE or special directorates, links between these units and the strategic direction for change at the institutional level are often very weak. In many cases, CE directors were not even represented at important governance meetings, such as the Senate or Institutional Planning Committees, and therefore lacked a seat at the table in discussions on resource allocation and academic prioritisation (CHE 2023b,17). For instance, several reports noted that CE units might be employed without an official mandate from the Institutional Council, and in such cases, this led to a *“*structural disconnect”*,* with engagement activities not linked to the university's key strategic objectives. This renders CE units powerless because they lack the institutional authority to promote cross-faculty agendas.

Additionally, there are widespread reports of unreliable, short-term funding for these units, which hampers their ability to plan long-term due to dependence on irregular sources such as external grants or internal reallocation. The audit panels consistently found that, despite frequent mentions in mission statements, CE lacks dedicated budget lines, resulting in 'resource starvation,' regardless of resource commitment (CHE 2024,26). This advanced the view that CE initiatives are managed by isolated departments rather than being integrated into a university-wide strategy. In this regard, the "formalisation" of CE remains mostly symbolic and fails to establish meaningful links between structure, governance, and financing. The audit reports highlight a structural gap of insufficient political commitment or resources to challenge the dominance of traditional teaching and learning and research agendas. The CE framework

remains largely conceptual and insufficiently equipped to address entrenched higher education practices.

Against this background, structural fragility is corroborated by broader scholarly critiques of the sector. Zama and Mashiya (2022,1089) suggest that this 'non-recognition' is embedded within a broader institutional ambivalence. Thus, recognition is posited rhetorically but not in material resources, through which the impact of CE can be realised. Similarly, Mutambara and Cele (2023,21304) attested that if CE units are not empowered to make decisions, they end up serving only as coordinators in administrative matters and are unable to lead the change envisaged in the national policy. Therefore, there is an operational deficit that extends beyond a governance framework that consistently undervalues community-engaged scholarship, thereby reinforcing operational epistemologies of decolonial theorists interested in the decolonisation of scholarship (Hull 2021,89; Mbembe 2016,32).

Developmental impact

The audit reports emphasised a wide gap between the rhetoric of placing a high value on students' participation in CE and the institutional structures in place to ensure successful implementation. The majority of participants welcomed service-learning as an important pedagogical tool, although many service-learning programmes are disjointed. For example, reports stated that *"*service-learning modules are only offered on an ad hoc basis, not in the curriculum of the faculty and hence are not equally good in quality and not formally recognised for academic credit for students" (CHE 2023b,22). In some instances, Universities of Technology (UoTs) strongly integrate service-learning into their pedagogy, especially in vocational degrees such as Nursing and Social Work, where community placements are mandatory and are assessed and credited according to clear criteria. In contrast, at traditional research-focused universities, CE in the humanities and social sciences tends to be an optional activity rather than being formally aligned with institutional policies. Thus, these activities are often left to individual lecturers' judgment, typically without clearly defined learning outcomes or institutional backing.

Another panel noted that participation levels are good, but ″institutions have difficulty offering proof of the impact of these encounters on the achievement of graduate attributes, with the majority reporting an ambiguous effect through mere number of participants instead of extended pedagogic efforts in the attribute″ (CHE 2024). This stems from a lack of uniform frameworks; hence, the level of engagement will vary from lecturer to lecturer.

Notwithstanding these examples of promising practice, the sector as a whole continues to grapple with measuring the developmental impact of CE (CHE 2022, 38, Zama and Mashiya

2022). The audit reports highlight widespread deficiencies in monitoring and evaluation (M and E) frameworks, with limited institutional capacity to track outcomes beyond short-term project deliverables (CHE 2023b,91). In the absence of robust impact metrics, CE's contributions to social and institutional transformation remain under-documented and undervalued, especially compared to learning, teaching, and research.

Policy and quality gaps

The institutional audit reports show a general weakness in the institutionalisation of CE regarding its inclusion in quality assurance and performance management (QAPM). One of the findings is that most Universities have CE policies that are integral to their strategic plans, but these policies are not followed through in practice, with insufficient monitoring and evaluation systems in place. The audit panels often reported that the way CE is tracked is mostly output-based rather than outcome- or benefit-based, as it would take into account long-term developmental outcomes and/or benefits for students and partner organisations. For example, some reports pointed out that ″tools which could be standardised across institutions to measure the quality of community partnerships and provide accountability and progress over time across faculties" (CHE 2023b,30).

In addition, the analysis has revealed that CE indicators are often not treated as a primary element of quality in institutional audits. The audit results suggest that most institutions rely on departmental reports, with only limited provisions to verify the validity or effects of this report. Thus, the institution's current monitoring and evaluation framework for CE is less robust than that employed in teaching and research, and the framework is fragmented, with the critical question, as stated by one of the audit panels, being ″whether the engagement activities are delivering on the transformative goals set for it?" (CHE 2024,103). This disconnects positions CE outside the mainstream quality assurance environment, leaving insufficient opportunities to connect CE engagement opinions to institutional performance reviews and quality requirements.

Moreover, the practical application of CE policies remains inconsistent, even at institutions that acknowledge its importance (Eresia-Eke and Boadu 2019; Zama and Mashiya 2022,1090). Although some universities have made progress in embedding CE within their strategic framework, the day-to-day implementation of these policies lacks coherence and accountability. Without robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of CE initiatives, the potential for these programs to contribute meaningfully to institutional transformation remains limited (Mutambara and Cele 2023,21306). The absence of clear accountability structures undermines the ability to assess CE's role in improving educational

outcomes or contributing to broader social change. Consequently, without a consistent and systemic approach to policy integration, CE's capacity to impact the academic community and society at large is constrained, failing to fulfil its transformative potential (CHE 2024,110).

CHALLENGES IN PRACTICE

The institutional audit reports revealed persistent structural and operational barriers that continue to constrain the institutionalisation of CE across South African higher education. Although universities increasingly acknowledge CE as a strategic priority, the audit findings consistently demonstrate that this commitment is seldom supported by adequate institutional resources, governance structures, or quality assurance mechanisms.

A recurring challenge identified across the reports is inadequate and unstable funding. Audit panels observed that many CE units rely on short-term project funding or external grants rather than dedicated institutional budget allocations. For example, one audit panel reported that

> "the CE Directorate has no strategic plan in place due to lack of a dedicated budget line as the entire budget comes from other faculties in an ad hoc manner, which significantly hampers the ability to plan for the future and partnerships with the communities around the institution" (CHE 2023b,43).

Similarly, another report noted that "project continuity is affected by the end of external funding, as the university of technology does not have financial resources to sustain its project commitments in the community" (CHE 2024,115).

Therefore, such funding instability undermines long-term planning, weakens sustainable partnerships, and reinforces the marginal status of CE within institutional priorities (Welch and Saltmarsh 2023,56; Walton and Engelbrecht 2024,2138).

The audit reports also identified fragmented governance and weak institutional coordination as significant constraints. In several institutions, CE activities remained decentralised, with faculties operating independently and without strategic oversight. One audit panel observed that

> "The lack of a centralised CE office with executive authority has created a lack of coordination, with three different faculties conducting similar community health programmes in the same municipality without knowing each other's initiatives" (CHE 2023b,49).

Similarly, another report described persistent "structural silos" in which CE initiatives depended largely on individual departments rather than institutional strategy (CHE 2024,113).

Thus, the findings suggest that the absence of coordinated leadership results in fragmented implementation, duplication of effort, and inefficient use of limited resources (Johnson 2020,87; Welch and Saltmarsh 2023,57).

Quality assurance and impact evaluation emerged as another systemic weakness. While most institutions monitored participation and project completion, relatively few assessed educational outcomes, community impact, or the long-term effectiveness of engagement initiatives. Audit reports highlighted an overreliance on attendance records, anecdotal evidence, and self-reporting, with limited use of systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks (CHE 2023b,89; CHE 2024,114). Against such backdrop, institutions are constrained in demonstrating the scholarly and developmental value of CE or using evidence to strengthen institutional practice (Walton and Engelbrecht 2024,2140).

A further observable pattern from the analysis of the audit reports is the limited recognition of CE in workload, performance management and promotion systems. One institution, in terms of the audit report, formally recognised CE as a core academic activity in its workload policy. However, the panel found that it carried little, if any, weight in performance and workload management and therefore provided little incentive for staff participation. At another institution, the workload model did not include CE, despite an expectation that all staff should participate.

Finally, the reports revealed persistent conceptual uncertainty regarding the purpose of CE. Several audit panels observed that CE continued to be understood primarily as community service or charitable outreach rather than as an academically integrated and reciprocal form of engaged scholarship. For example, one audit panel found that "the dominant belief about CE is that it is charity, not engaged scholarship, with the majority of reported CE projects being one-way service delivery" (CHE 2023b,91). Another institution demonstrated an inability to distinguish community service from community engagement (CHE 2024,114). Therefore, the findings reinforce concerns that the continued perception of CE as voluntary or extracurricular undermines its legitimacy as a core academic function and limits institutional commitment, investment, and integration (Saidi and Boti 2023,82; Bangani 2023,101271).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The findings indicate that ongoing marginalisation of CE diminishes the University's ability to achieve its civic and transformative role in South African higher education. Thus, the lack of effective and sustainable cross-sectoral collaboration reflects a lack of institutional integration, governance and quality monitoring. This depicts that universities are in danger of

compromising graduate civic development, social justice and epistemic justice. Four systemic interventions are thus suggested.

Structural integration and leadership commitment

The implementation of CE at universities should be made institutional through governance, fund allocations, workload, promotion and performance management systems. Dedicated CE portfolios need to be created in senior leadership to coordinate resources and hold to account the cross-faculty coordination. The integration of CE into institutional governance principles will help to decrease the reliance on individual champions, establish greater accountability for CE and facilitate sustainability (Bozalek and Leibowitz 2012,211; CHE 2023a,16).

Quality assurance

Robust monitoring and evaluation systems are central to legitimising CE as a quality dimension. The importance of changing the approach by which universities assess their contributions to CE, so that they are assessed in a multidimensional view, over time, with a focus on educational, developmental and community outcomes, and consequently rendering them visible and accountable (Eresia-Eke and Boadu 2019,534; Moja 2022,6). The CHE can reinforce accountability through using CE-specific metrics in institutional accountability audits (Hall and Tandon 2017,10).

Epistemic reorientation

Universities should adopt a decolonial approach that formally recognises community-engaged scholarship and Indigenous Knowledge Systems as legitimate forms of knowledge production. Ensuring this will take institutional recognition and curriculum change with staff training to enable academics to engage in reciprocal community centred scholarship. Co-creation can therefore be financed as central academic work, overturning this dominance of “traditional” disciplinary knowledge, based on the epistemology of Euro-American universities (Moja 2022,12).

National policy leverage for accountability

The DHET and CHE must use funding and accreditation as levers for change. This involves making part of the state funds conditional on evident outcomes achieved in CE, ensuring capacity for evidence of impact in institutional auditing, and creating a national CE innovation fund to spread successful practices. National policy should incentivise reciprocal partnerships, such as community co-governed skills hubs, while discouraging extractive "helicopter

research" that generates little community benefit. These policy instruments would improve and hold people more accountable in institutions and would promote a shift from talking to concrete steps.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the conceptualisation, institutionalisation and quality assurance of Community Engagement (CE) in South African higher education through a thematic analysis of the 26 Institutional Audit Reports produced during the Council on Higher Education's second audit cycle. The findings indicate that while CE is widely recognised as a core institutional function aligned with universities' social mandate, its integration into teaching and learning, research, governance and quality management remains uneven across the sector. Interpreted through the lenses of Community Development Theory and Decoloniality, the analysis suggests that strengthening CE requires deeper reciprocity between universities and communities, greater recognition of community knowledge as a legitimate source of scholarship, and stronger institutional integration through governance, quality assurance and academic reward systems. The study concludes that although South African universities increasingly acknowledge CE as central to their academic and societal responsibilities, its transformative potential will only be fully realised through sustained institutional and sector-wide commitment to embedding engagement as an integral dimension of higher education quality and transformation.

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