

## *Universities as change agents in resource-poor communities: A typology to assess current practice and inform future strategies*

### **Summary**

This policy brief addresses an important question for policy: How can universities act as change agents in their local contexts?

Engagement with resource-poor 'communities', such as those based in townships and rural towns, is one important channel through which universities can act as change agents in their local contexts. To catalyse social change, universities need to promote models of engagement that show greater potential for facilitating new trajectories, to disrupt path dependencies in both the university and local contexts. Rather than continuing to focus on conventional knowledge transfer activities, universities need to be putting in place non-traditional channels and mechanisms. But this requires new 'socially responsive' engagement models that are better aligned with locally embedded norms, values and practices.

This policy brief proposes a typology of engagement models<sup>1</sup> that academics, researchers, students, policymakers and others responsible for promoting academic engagement with communities can use to strengthen the role of universities as change agents in their local contexts. The typology can be used as a tool to assess current engagement practice and to inform future strategies.

### **Study findings**

#### ***Universities need to align with local norms, values and practices***

In a recent study conducted by researchers at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), it was found that informal traders, community leaders, community-based organisations, local government and other local-level stakeholders seldom identify universities as important knowledge partners. Knowledge and power asymmetries between the formal institutional context of a university

and the informal context of a local community have been highlighted as key challenges. Universities, particularly traditional research universities, tend to focus on traditional knowledge-transfer type engagement activities involving the exchange of factual and specialised scientific knowledge that can explain why something happens. Community-based actors tend to value practical knowledge, know-how and experiential learning. Both are focused on problem-solving, but tend to seek out different forms of knowledge and use different strategies for learning in order to find solutions.

These differences are to a large extent influenced by institutional asymmetries. University and community contexts differ in the norms, values and practices that serve to guide behaviour and that are acknowledged as legitimate by most. Together with path dependencies, previous decisions and outcomes shaped by a university's history, institutions influence the engagement activities

typically found at a university. For engagement to be a channel through which universities catalyse social change in their local contexts, a degree of alignment is required between the institutional underpinnings of their programmes and initiatives with those valued in the targeted local communities. For example, the importance of collective action in a township economy needs to be considered when designing entrepreneurship training programmes, to better align the kind of learning and entrepreneurship models promoted through the programme.

#### Four models of engagement

Extrapolating from in-depth case study research, we identified four types of engagement models, each related to different models of entrepreneurship and innovation, and thus different modes of learning. The case study explored the engagement activities of a research university with informal food traders in a large township located about 20 km away.

The typology of engagement models is illustrated in Figure 1. The four models of engagement include: 1) a traditional small business development model, 2) a traditional knowledge transfer model, 3) a socially responsive engagement model and 4) a demand-driven participatory model. The typology is populated by examples from the case study.

#### Traditional models

Type 1 can be described as a **traditional small business development model**. It is aligned with the dominant, necessity-driven model of entrepreneurship and innovation, as the focus is on addressing common challenges faced by the majority of informal traders. It is based mainly on a traditional knowledge transfer model that promotes individual agency and individual gain, more than collective agency and collective gain, and is typically promoted through dyadic relations, from an 'expert' to a beneficiary.

Figure 1: Typology of engagement models<sup>2</sup>



Note: The typology is based on the analysis of a South African research university's key mechanisms to promote learning and innovation in the informal food services local system in a nearby township area.

The model is more likely to foster innovation activities involving incremental and process changes, and experiential learning. Examples of this engagement model include mentorship and coaching received through engagement with students as part of their service-learning activities, such as those facilitated by an engagement co-ordinating unit or science shop. The walk-in services and training typically offered by small business development NGOs also tend to follow this type of engagement model.

Type 2, a **traditional knowledge transfer model**, similarly focuses on the individual, but differs in that it focuses mainly on promoting opportunity-driven entrepreneurship and innovation activities that involve significant changes, such as a change in business model. Programmes and initiatives based on this model of engagement tend to focus more on addressing knowledge challenges requiring specialised technical knowledge. The focus is on skills training and gaining knowledge to take up opportunities to upgrade, enter industry value chains, and so on, rather than on implementing incremental changes in order to survive. Examples of activities based on this model include tacit knowledge exchange through procurement relationships with informal traders, which is possible through community-based hubs or community-based science shops established by universities. Facilitating local networks and collective learning are not a strategic focus of engagement activities based on the traditional knowledge transfer model, even if the activities take place in the local community. The individual or the individual business is expected to use the knowledge to take action and benefit.

### **Socially responsive models**

Type 3 and Type 4, a **socially responsive engagement model** and a **demand-**

**driven participatory model**, are based on bottom-up processes of engagement that promote forms of knowledge exchange involving bi-directional flows of different forms of knowledge. Collective agency and collective learning are crucial for implementing the bottom-up processes, and collective well-being is an important outcome. These engagement models require greater attention to considerations about who is included in the processes through which knowledge is generated, and how knowledge is transformed into more easily acceptable forms and circulated within the local system. These models of engagement show greater potential for facilitating new trajectories to disrupt path dependencies in the local context.

Type 3 and Type 4 differ in the main type of entrepreneurship and innovation model promoted, and thus also the main modes of learning fostered. Programmes and initiatives based on the **socially responsive engagement model** focus more on promoting opportunity-driven entrepreneurship and innovation. Similar to the traditional knowledge transfer model, this usually involves the application of specialised technical knowledge to address challenges experienced by community-based partners, but the process through which solutions are identified and applied is driven more actively by the agency of community-based partners. Emphasis is placed on facilitating opportunities for building local networks, and the exchange and circulation of knowledge among the community-based actors. In this way, the potential for social inclusion and the promotion of collective agency and collective learning can be increased.

Type 4, the **demand-driven participatory model** focuses more on promoting necessity-driven entrepreneurship and innovation. Emphasis is on supporting experiential learning rather than a science,

technology and innovation (STI) based mode of learning and innovation,<sup>3</sup> which involves the application of specialised technical and codified knowledge. Examples include participatory research projects conducted with NGOs active in the area.

The **socially responsive** and **demand-driven participatory** models of engagement show greater promise for bringing about social change. Emphasis is on promoting collective agency and collective learning towards collective entrepreneurship.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, the research shows that for socially responsive and participatory engagement models to work, they must be strongly informed by the kinds of 'purposive action' or 'institutional work'<sup>5</sup> of those driving an engagement agenda able to disrupt the path dependencies that keep universities stuck in traditional knowledge transfer models.

### **Policy implications**

How can universities act as change agents through their third mission activities (that is, towards addressing societal challenges, beyond the two traditional missions of research and teaching)?

University programmes and initiatives in communities need to go beyond traditional knowledge transfer to adopt more non-traditional, socially responsive models based on bottom-up understandings and approaches. In this way, university–community engagement practice can be shifted towards catalysing transformative social change at the local level.

Some specific recommendations:

1. University leadership, engagement co-ordinating units, engagement champions, academics and others responsible for engagement practice need to reconsider the basic assumptions underpinning

their programmes and knowledge production processes in general. Purposive action is required, within the university itself, to break path dependent patterns of knowledge production and engagement practice.

2. The community engagement agenda promoted at universities, and through higher education as well as science and innovation policy, should continue to emphasise and put into action the creation of new normative values, standards, framings and networks that redefine the purposes and boundaries of 'the university' to include community-based partners. This requires a process to redefine academic identity.
3. Decision-makers in universities, and the departments of higher education and science and innovation, should promote mechanisms such as science shops or community-based hubs that foster long-term institutionalised engagement with community-based partners. These kinds of mechanisms show potential for catalysing social change as they bring the university closer, physically and in orientation, to addressing the specificity of local knowledge needs.
4. Academics and students require specialised skills and resources to engage in socially responsive, bottom-up, participatory engagement processes. University decision-makers and others responsible for curriculum development need to take this into account when designing training programmes for academics and students.

## Endnotes

1. See Petersen and Kruss (2021) for a description of the methodology and more detailed analysis. (Petersen I & Kruss G (2021) Universities as change agents in resource-poor local settings: An empirically grounded typology of engagement models. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120693>
2. Il-haam Petersen and Glenda Kruss (2021) Universities as change agents in resource-poor local settings: An empirically grounded typology of engagement models. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 167, 120693.
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