Eleven Theses on Community Engagement and Universities

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I am going to speak about community engagement at two levels: at the theoretical/conceptual level but also at the practical, organizational, logistical level.

If we are going to embrace community engagement at our universities, we have to engage critically with a number of issues. These issues include, firstly, and you will see why, the very *idea of the university* itself: what are the core purposes of the university? What are their functions and responsibilities? We really cannot approach community engagement without having a conception why a university exists.

We also then, secondly, and often this is not understood well, have to start to engage the issue of *knowledge*: whose knowledge; where knowledge comes from, who constructs knowledge, and for what purposes. And as far as this is concerned, I want to argue that you have to debunk some myths - like knowledge only comes from Western Europe or North America. Or, that when it comes from somewhere in Africa it is 'indigenous' knowledge.

Thirdly, we have to be clear about the *rationale* for undertaking community engagement. Fourthly, what is the *value basis* of community engagement? It is not possible, in my view, to undertake community engagement without addressing the issue of values.

Fifthly, what do we understand by *engagement*? And lastly, who is the *community*? How do we define the 'community' in community engagement?

And so in my twenty minutes, I want to address four issues:

Firstly, how do we conceptualize community engagement? If we don't have a conception of community engagement, if we don't theorize community engagement, I'm afraid it's not likely that we are going to able to practice community engagement effectively. What are the different approaches to community engagement? What are the implications for community engagement of our concepts or theories?

Secondly, none of us I think will disagree that learning and teaching and research are two core purposes of universities. Do we want to add community engagement as a third core purpose? Or rather, do we want to reserve for community engagement just one of the roles of university, rather than make it a core purpose? You will see why this is an important issue.

Thirdly, we know that there is a relationship between teaching and learning and research. What is the relationship between community engagement and learning and teaching? What is the relationship between community engagement and research? Is there any? What does community engagement mean for learning and teaching or research?

And lastly if we want to undertake community engagement effectively, if we want to institute community engagement within universities, what are the necessary conditions? And what are the implications of institutionalizing community engagement on the different

areas of our university? What does it mean for institutional governance and management, for finance and other areas?

I have sought to address these issues in my paper through eleven theses, not all of which I will mention in in this presentation.

First, if we are going to interrogate critically the concept of community engagement rather than just assume it is a good thing, then we have to clarify what universities do.

The first purpose of universities is to produce knowledge to advance our understanding of our natural and social words and, on that basis, to intervene in the world to make it better place. The second purpose is to disseminate knowledge and form and cultivate inquiring and critical minds. Those are the two fundamental purposes of universities.

Alongside those fundamental purposes roles, universities play at least five roles. Firstly, they produce knowledgeable, competent, and skilled graduates. Secondly, they undertake different kinds of scholarships – of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Thirdly, they contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship. Fourthly, they actively engage with the pressing economical and social development needs and challenges of our society; and fifthly they proactively engage with our society at the intellectual and cultural level. Now if these are the purposes and roles of a university, where does community engagement fit in to this?

My second thesis is that we must make a clear distinction between the social and economic *responsiveness* of a university to its political, economic and social context and *community engagement*. Community engagement in my view is different from simply being socially responsive as a university, being alive to our historical and contemporary conditions and our challenges, and so on. Being socially responsive doesn't necessarily mean that a university is engaged in community engagement. Being sensitive to economic and social issues and challenges is a necessary condition for community engagement but it is not a sufficient condition. Far more is involved in community engagement than just being alive to the challenges of our context.

Third thesis: we have to address the issue of the status are we going to accord to community engagement. Do we want to consider it as the third purpose of universities? Or do we want to see it simply as one further key *role* of our universities. I don't want to go into this important issue. Let me just make the point, and it's a point that was made by the previous speaker with respect to research, that the value and quality of community engagement undertaken by university depends fundamentally on the quality of teaching and learning and research. That is to say, ultimately, any meaningful community engagement on the part of universities, any mutually beneficial partnerships we are going to have with communities, requires universities to be characterized by high quality research and teaching and learning. Let me put it in a different way: unless there is high quality teaching and learning and research you cannot undertake any real high quality community engagement. Communities deserve only the best – otherwise we show disdain for communities.

Thesis four: we must appreciate that community engagement is not a static concept. It has evolved historically over the decades, and there are different 'generations' of community engagement. These are related to notions of civic duty, community service and community development and, more recently, service learning. We can also distinguish between community engagement undertaken as volunteer activities by students and academics, which has been happening for many years, and community engagement as a matter of conscious institutional policy and practice, which is more recent.

Historically, community engagement has been approached in two different ways. On the one hand, teaching and learning, research and community engagement are conceptualized as entirely separate and distinct activities. On the other hand, they are seen as related and connected activities. In the latter case, firstly, they are seen as *intersecting activities*, and where teaching and learning and community engagement overlap, and where research and community engagement overlap that's where you get something called service learning. Secondly, community engagement is seen as a *cutting across* activity – it runs across learning and teaching and research. Some people argue this is the most engaged university, as compared to a university where teaching and learning, research and community engagement are seen as separate activities.

Service learning represents inquiry, discovery and learning on the part of students and academics through mutually beneficial and respectful engagement with communities. It is embedded in the core knowledge production and dissemination activities of the university.

The first generation of community engagement did not rest on teaching and learning and research. Service learning depends fundamentally on research and teaching and learning.

That's why you cannot have good quality service learning unless you have good quality research and teaching and learning. Very importantly, service learning becomes a curriculum innovation within the universities by virtue of the fact it becomes infused into the research we undertake and the teaching and learning that we undertake. Academics and students engage and learn from those activities. It's not charity. It's something that is mutually beneficial to universities and students and academics and also communities. In fact sometimes people argue it's more beneficial to students and scholars than to communities.

Thesis five is that in so far there are different ways of approaching community engagement - as separate activities, as intersecting activities or cutting across activities - we should not prescribe to a university the way they should do community engagement. There is room for the different approaches, and it depends on how the university sees its role in a national system of higher education, what its mission is and what its values are. What is good or appropriate for a university in the United States doesn't mean it's good for a university in Saudi Arabia or South Africa. Let each university decide what kind of community engagement is best in relation to its values, its mission and its place in the higher education system.

Thesis six: the Taillores declaration makes a very important point as far as community engagement is concerned: universities carry an obligation to listen, understand and contribute to social transformation and development. Higher education must contribute to the good of society and to the public good rather than just bestow private benefits. So, of course, this raises issues of ethics and values in relation to community engagement. Who does community engagement ultimately serve? And yes, to the extent that a university embraces community engagement, it can help to translate our values into concrete actions and deeds. It can become, in Amartya Sen's terms, part of the promise and process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy.

Thesis seven: many virtuous claims are made for community engagement by the evangelists that proselytize for community engagement. We must, however, interrogate critically the claims that are made for community engagement and not underestimate the challenges. How do you forge an institutional consensus around community engagement? How do we define community engagement? How do we develop curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and research methodologies related to community engagement? These aren't simple issues. There are profound epistemological and ontological issues involved here. Let's not trivialize these issues. Also, how do you factor community engagement into academic program development, academic planning, and institutional planning? Who is the community? How do we define this community? How do we recognize and reward academics for community engagement? At the moment we reward our academics who produce research. How do we reward those who undertake community engagement at universities? And so on and so on.

Thesis eight: if we want to institutionalize community engagement in our universities, don't imagine that you can sit in the vice chancellor's office and issue a decree that from tomorrow there will be community engagement at the university. It doesn't work like that. There has to be a process of continuous engagement and persuasion around community engagement. You have to persuade academics and students about the benefits of community engagement.

Thesis nine: like everything else, community engagement involves dilemmas and choices. How are we going to formulate the available choices? How are we going to argue over them within the university? And through what just mechanisms will there be an opportunity to choose and make decisions around community engagement.

Thesis ten: as much as we need commitment and passion for community engagement, we also need theorization and dispassionate reflection as befitting the university. It is very important to develop the scholarly knowledge base through research and writing on community engagement and ensure that community engagement also becomes an area of scholarly and professional development within our universities. I think increasingly we are realizing that if you have a PhD it does not mean that you will be a good teacher. So in the same way we need to professionalize teaching and learning we also need to professionalize community engagement.

Last thesis: community engagement has to inspire academics and students and we have to effectively communicate, manage, and implement initiatives related to community

engagement if we want it to be successful. Ideas are good and important but effective implementation is equally important. And so the challenge is to map a deliberate, bold and resolute yet sober path in relation to the challenges and context of our university.

Thank you.