SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION ACTIVITIES BY NON-ACADEMIC UNITS IN GULU UNIVERSITY

Denis Thaddeus Ofoyuru
East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development,
Makerere University, Uganda
Corresponding Author email: dofoyuru@gmail.com

Ronald Bisaso
East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development,
Makerere University, Uganda

Anthony Mugagga Muwagga
School of Education,
Makerere University, Uganda

Abstract

The critical role of universities in contributing to societal transformation in the modern knowledge economy has been underscored, but support by universities towards this cause seems underreported. This study investigated institutional support by non-academic units towards community transformation in Gulu University, northern Uganda. The objective was to explore how non-academic units support activities for community transformation in Gulu University. A qualitative exploratory case study based on the relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology was conducted. Senior faculty and top management constituted the sample. Data were collected using in-depth interviews from fifteen participants in the hard and soft applied disciplines and analysed thematically. Findings reveal that support for community transformation activities are two main folds: managerial and logistical, however they are routine and non-distinctive in outlook. We conclude that, non-academic units support community transformation activities in a weak and co-incidental mode. We recommend deliberate support for community transformation activities with designated structures in a university which declares a community oriented stance.

Key words: Community Transformation, Disciplinary fields, Non-Academic Units

INTRODUCTION

The critical role of universities in contributing to societal transformationin the modern knowledge economyhas been underscored (Altbach, 2015; Boyer, 2016; Teferra, 2016). Universities through their three core functions: teaching, research and service (Chatterton, 2000; Kellogg Commission, 1999) are expected to consciously and directly solve societal problems and transform communities, but that has not always been the case (Boyer, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2016). The third function of the university has not enjoyed the kind of support it ought to have enjoyed (Boyer, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Although, some universities are now turning to institute distinctive and direct support to community oriented activities by disciplinary fields quite a number seem to be lagging behind. Whereas, Gulu University declares community transformation the support it extends towards activities for community transformation remains obscure. This study sought to explore how non disciplinary structures support activities for community transformation in Gulu University, a small regional public university in Uganda.

Background

The concept of community transformation is less used in the literature on university-community interaction, instead terms such as community outreach (Stanton, 2008), community involvement (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Bringle et al., 2007), community/civic engagement (Benneworth, 2013; Bloomfield, 2005; Boyer, 2016; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Bringle et al., 2007; Stanton, 2008), and engaged scholarship (Griffin, 2012; Rowland & Knapp, 2015) tend to pervade the discourse. We note that, these concepts do not contradict. A deep analysis reveal that they are in synch with each other. Whereas the latter concepts are defined by the degree of university-community interaction, with the purpose mostly implied, community transformation is premised on the purpose of that interaction which is bringing about real and discernible desired improvement in a defined community as espoused by authors such as Wint & Ngcobo (2000), Capraro (2004) and Brennan, King & Lebeau (2004).

Wint & Ngcobo (2000) describe community transformation in terms of moving from the state of socio-economic exclusion to that of inclusion. We note that this definition was coined and therefore suitable in the context of the post-apartheid South Africa. Capraro (2004) considers community transformation to mean improving the neighbourhood from a dull unwelcoming state

and economic decline to that of a welcoming and economically vibrant one through a range of consciously planned activities, a description which is also contextual. Brennan et al., 2004 depict community/societal transformation as a more fundamental change in society's core institutions, the polity and the economy which involves deconstruction of the old and reconstruction of new social order. We note that, more of the focus tends to be on the socio-economic aspects of the community, although Brennan et al. consider the political and aesthetic as well. Thus, community transformation in this paper entails a noticeable improvement in the socio-economic spheres of the community achieved consciously through a range of activities.

Indicative disciplinary activities for community transformation revealed by literature in different universities include extension education, student projects, lifelong learning and student placements; applied research, community based research and student research; patenting and licensing, creation of spinoffs and technology transfer; technical assistance, legal services, patient, clinical and diagnostic services; expert testimony, and consultancy (Boyer, 2016; Chung et al., 2016; Cloete, Bailey, Pillay, Bunting, & Maassen, 2011; Dan, 2012; Munk, 2010; Dobernneck & Schweitzer, 2017; Raditloaneng, 2015). We thus, define activities for community transformation by disciplinary fields, to mean and include all activities performed by academic staffs, students or both to directly solve societal problems based on the content and principles of their respective academic disciplines, which may include non-commercialised teaching, research, service activities.

Empirical studies reveal that activities for community transformation by disciplinary fields thrive when and where they are supported by the non-disciplinary units in distinctive ways such as: strategic support (Griffin, 2012; Munk, 2010; Laninga, Austin, & McClure, 2011), policy support (ElHadidi & Kirby, 2016; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013), funding and grants management (Plankans *et al.,* 2016; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013), quality assurance (Cash, Bhadury, McCrickard, & Weeks, 2010), liaison/publicity, (Bisaso, 2013; Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamat, 2008), and central coordination support (ElHadidi & Kirby, 2016; Laninga, Austin, & McClure, 2011; Paton, Reith, Harden, Abaurre & Treblay, 2014; Wander, Hefferan, & Panddenburg, 2015; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). These support tended to boost community transformation activities in those respective universities. However, where support was thin, distributed and informal (Purcell, 2014), activities for community transformation were

not robust, implying that support for community oriented activities were essential for academic staff to effectively and efficiently pursue community oriented activities.

Institutional Context

Gulu University was established to specialize in agricultural mechanisation with the mission to provide access to higher education, research and conduct quality professional training for delivery of appropriate services directed towards community transformation and conservation of biodiversity (Gulu University, 2013). On May 14, 2003, the government established Gulu University as a public university in northern Uganda under Statutory Instrument number 31 of 2003 with view to uplift the socio-economically depressed northern Uganda, particularly after the two decades long Lord's Resistance Army war. The university has now established a number of academic faculties and enrollment has been increasing exponentially, however no one knows how the university is supporting the ultimate cause for which it stands, community transformation activities (Gulu University, 2017) by disciplinary fields proclaimed by the founders of the university in 2002 and thereafter.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

We used the qualitative exploratory case study design. We purposively chose Gulu University for its avowed community transformation oriented stance. Its post war context situated it in an environment where expectations were high and having declared a community oriented stance, stakeholders have continued to believe than Gulu university would contribute to the socio-economic reconstruction of the proximate community. We used the Biglan classification of academic disciplines to stratify academic disciplines into hard applied (HA) and soft applied (SA). We did not use the life dimension. Choice of applied disciplinary fields was made on the ground that they are more amenable to pursuing community/societal oriented activities or more outward looking (Murfo and Langstone, 1981). A total of fifteen participants, six from the hard applied and, soft applied disciplinary fields each; and three from the top management constituted a purposive sample.

To conceal the identities of the participants for ethical reasons, we improvised alphanumeric pseudonyms HAAD1, HAAD2, HAAD3, HAAD4, HAAD5 and HAAD6 to represent the participants from the hard applied disciplines and SAAD1, SAAD2, SAAD3, SAAD4, SAAD5, and SAAD6 to represent participants from the soft applied disciplinary field.

Pseudonyms TOPM1, TOPM2 and TOPM3 were used for participants from central administration. We drew participants from Faculty of Agriculture (FAE); Faculty of Business and Development Studies (FBDS); Faculty of Education and Humanities (FEH); Faculty of Medicine (FM); Faculty of Science (FS) and Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies (IPSS) based on seniority and perceived participation activities for community transformation.

We collected data using in-depth interviews and documents check, and analysed using thematic analysis. Although, we used other related documents, annual reports were the main documents used.

RESULTS

To assess how non-disciplinary units support community transformation activities by disciplinary fields, we posed the question "how do non-academic units in Gulu University support activities for community transformation by academic staffs?" Findings revealed two major themes: management and logistical support. Management supportinvolvedgrants management, ceremonial support and authorisation of activities. Logistical support included provision of transport, provision of space and provision of welfare.

Management Support

The theme was developed from three categories. We included categories under "management support" when they (a) involved application of management skills as opposed to academic expertise (b) involved indirect support to aid the pursuers of activity for community transformation (c) involved staff and not line members. Management support included: grants management, ceremonial support and authorisation of activities.

Grants management

This was explicitly and boldly reported by two participants, never-the-less, the tone and emphasis lent to it substantial. HAAD1 succinctly argued:

> And the support goes as far as for example, you have the money, the money is banked with the university. You write you indicate what you are going to do, the university just gives you the money because you are the Principal Investigator. Nobody hinders you. It is your project, the university is just a custodian. So that in itself promotes us to do more. And also the university has been very helpful in managing and accounting for the money. The support in terms of managing the

funds is also there. . . But one thing I also want to mention is that when you talk about the administration of this project, I think the officer in charge is actually the US [University Secretary], because he is the guy who actually endorses before the funds come in. And then for this African Development Bank, they chose a coordinator to be the Office of the Directorate of Planning but all our small small projects have to go through the US because he is the manager and he controls the funding and all those things. (HAAD1)

HAAD1 points at two major forms of support in terms of the university taking grants management related to project activities and releasing funds without encumbrance while at the same time participating in accounting for the money. SAAD5 submitted:

Well you know you cannot operate in isolation, like finances is always channelled through the office of the University Secretary and as we talk now the University Project manager is the Deputy Bursar. So you really, need their support they come in when there is audit query, engagement with the auditors and so on, the University Bursar has to come in. (SAAD5)

SAAD5 indeed corroborated the views by HAAD1 more concretely by pointing to specific offices that are involved in management of grants for community oriented projects, including audits which are critical in issues of managing funds.

Ceremonial support

Another category of support considered important by some participants from disciplinary fields was ceremonial support. For instance, SAAD5 reported:

Yeah we would invite the Vice-chancellor, the University Secretary to Officiate functions, they were all positive. So the university management itself was very positive of what we were doing. You know we have challenges, we remained very small but some of those little things we do make us relevant they can't say you have lost out and so on. . . When we call on them for instance the Academic Registrar, to come and preside over our functions they do come and give us support. But I would say most of the initiative is ours. I mean we are the project implementers so we have that (laughs) we get support (SAAD5)

SAAD5 considered official appearance of top management members such as the Vice-Chancellor, the University Secretary and the Academic Registrar during or at their disciplinary

function important and thus a form of support. This kind of meaning making was shared by SAAD6 from the same disciplinary field and academic unit, who reported:

> The students are also there and willing to listen and talk about their experience, also the university is never negative sometimes when you call them and say come and give a closing speech or before they always come. (SAAD6)

The codes identified from the data extracts from the two participants are "they are positive", "officiate", "preside", and "give a closing speech". Interestingly, this category was derived from two participants from the same disciplinary field and academic unit. It is implicit that meaning making by members of this disciplinary field could have been underpinned by a common denominator, therefore, the category "ceremonial support" was upheld. It is also possible that when TOPM4, reasoned that "the systematic levels have to play their respective roles", the ceremonial role could have been implied, in which case the views of the disciplinary members were triangulated.

Authorisation of Activities

The category authorisation of activities also emerged from the data reported by the participants. In effect, this category was developed from three participants: TOPM1, HAAD1 and SAAD2. Next, we present data extract from TOPM4:

> But it is using the existing traditional structures for running the university academic programmes and other associated programmes, because as the coordinator the outreach or academic programmes make their plans, they have to seek for approval and send to central administration to grant authority. Otherwise they don't do things on their own. (TOPM4)

Indeed TOPM4 insinuates that authority for implementing community transformation activities is derived from and granted by the central administration, implying that without this support the members of the disciplinary fields would not implement activities despite having their conceivably fluent and robust expertise. This flowed well into the submission by HAAD1 thus:

> You write you indicate what you are going to do, the university just gives you the money because you are the Principal Investigator. Nobody hinders you. It is your project, the university is just a custodian. So that in itself promotes us to do more. (HAAD1)

The views of HAAD1 affirm those of TOPM4, that authority for implementing community oriented activities, within the complex schedule of the university is normally sought from and gets granted by the members of the central administration. While SAAD2 makes it louder:

> Okay, one of them is the fact that there is room to go and freely do the outreach.
> So it so happens that going out do an outreach is a "do" in Gulu University.
> (SAAD2)

As if to amplify the views of TOPM4 and HAAD1, SAAD2 puts it in a way that depicts a kind of open permission or policy allowing and certainly not disallowing community transformation activities by members of the disciplinary fields.

Logistical Support

The theme logistical support embraced the categories "provision of transport", "provision of space" and "welfare". The three were deductively developed and from them a common theme "logistical Support" was thus developed.

Provision of transport

Another category emerged to the effect that the university has been supportive in providing transport to students or staff participating in any form of community transformation activity whether within the teaching, research or service function. This was evident in submissions by HAAD1, SAAD2 and TOPM4. HAAD1 put it this way:

> . . . support in terms of transportation for example I have been using the university
> vehicle to move from point A to point B especially in this African Development
> Bank Project. (HAAD1)

HAAD1 was indeed spot on, mincing no word in respect to the support related to transport afforded by Gulu University in promoting community transformation activities, although without pointing to a particular office. Related to HAAD1's views, SAAD2 said:

> The support, after the Association has been formed for example they would wish
> to go and collect rubbish, do town cleaning, or participate in national functions
> then the university has been supportive . . . they are able to give them transport for
> that. (SAAD2)

SAAD2's views are corroborative to those of HAAD1 with regard to provision of transport for community oriented kind of activities. The foregoing views by members of disciplinary field were triangulated by that of TOPM4 from central administration:

They are supported by the central administration through financing and logistics. Yeah, hum. The structure supports community transformation process in the sense that in order to engage with the communities, the systematic levels have to play their roles. (TOPM4)

The views of TOPM4 seem to be all embracing "financing" and "logistics". Both financing and logistics could imply "provision of transport".

Provision of space for activities

Provision of space for activities by academic staff was reported explicitly by some participants. As such, we found it worthy to present it as a category though with not a considerable salience. HAAD1 observed:

I think one of the things is the support that university gives staff, it is enormous. Hum, we have been doing most of our projects without hindrance. Support is in terms of space . . . (HAAD1).

Without elaboration, HAAD1 reported explicitly provision of space as a form of support for community transformation activities. This was triangulated by views of SAAD6, who said:

I think we have the Institute of Research and Graduate training, which is the structure that supports community outreach. It has a platform for reaching out to the communities, for example on Wednesdays we have the hall open any community member can come and listen to any discussion that is taking place, so community driven issue can be brought out, students come, anybody from the community can come and listen. (SAAD6)

In her submission, SAAD6 was specific on the kind of space provided. The participant's submission is implicit of a routine arrangement inherent in the expression "on Wednesdays, we have the hall open . . .", which makes this submission noteworthy and the development of the category "provision of space for community transformation" appropriate.

Provision of welfare

Based on data, the category welfare included food and accommodation only. Some participants from the hard applied and soft applied fields as well as top management alluded to provision of such items this occasioning the inductive development of the category. For instance, SAAD2 stated:

They are able to give them meals while out there; they are able to give them transport for that. They tend to create an environment which is engendered and so on. So I can say that the university has taken some of the national policies that they are able to implement. That is one of them.

SAAD2 considers provision of "meals" as a form of support provided by the university to her group when going out to perform community related activities. Similar to that were the views of TOPM3:

For example the students going for those activities, they support them by facilitating them. They give them money, transport, accommodation, the staff go there to supervise them to see that what they are doing is correct. (TOPM3)

TOPM3 therefore pointed out that the university gives the students money for accommodation and other things as they go out to execute activities for community transformation, which the participant construed as a form of support.

In respect to provision of welfare, few but striking codes were identified thus: "meals" (SAAD2) and "accommodation" (TOPM3). These were supported by document data which revealed that students and staff going out for community transformation activities are normally provided food and accommodation in terms of allowances.

The three categories: provision of transport, provision of space and provision of welfare were scrutinised for their similarities and found to speak to the theme logistical support.

Whereas majority of the participants alluded to one type of support or the other, we note that there were some participants with dissenting voices which were very categorical about lack of support by non disciplinary units for community transformation activities in Gulu University. For instance, HAAD3 said:

The no is, I don't think there is anybody sitting and thinking what is the next best thing we are going to do in Gulu town. How can we participate actively in a visible way, in a way that we will have sustained impact. So there is a no, is a big no.

Another participant (HAAD4) who believed that there was no support at the institutional level added that support is there at the faculty level. We present views of HAAD4 from the Hard Applied field in the next paragraph:

At the level of Gulu University, I don't know. There was time I think some staff were appointed to craft a policy on outreach. I am not sure how far they have gone. But structurally, I don't think there is any structure for outreach. I am not sure of that because I have never been made aware of it. All I know is that at the faculty level here we coordinate activities for community outreaches. We coordinate those activities at the departmental level. (HAAD4)

Like the previous participant HAAD4, HAAD5 out rightly refute any knowledge of active support by the university in respect to community transformation activities, thus:

There is no active support because, well okay we do not know what they do with the data they collect from us on those projects. They have never come back to tell us what they do with that data. So I don't know whether there is any office particularly concerned about this community outreach in the university, okay management of the community outreach in the university. I am not sure, but given that the Directorate has been collecting data, maybe they are but probably they may not just be empowered financially, I don't know. (HAAD5)

HAAD5 expresses ignorance of any active support towards community transformation and adds that he was not aware of any office designated for that. Participant SAAD3 elaborates how he thinks there is no direct support for community transformation activities, thus:

May be I can talk about structures in the faculty whose activities I am more familiar with. But when you look at Departments and look at the faculty and what they do to influence community transformation, hum, a lot of emphasis has been put on issues of examinations. A lot, at the expense of attention to other issues which equally affect performance and therefore quality of the graduates. You know that most of our meetings here even at the faculty level are on the issues of exams, issues of research supervision, marking, what and what, you know we are not looking at other issues. Are the staff available, are they doing what they are supposed to do? Do they have facilities to help them do what they are supposed to do? and so on and so on. We are not focusing on that, Denis. (SAAD3)

Based on the foregoing participants, it is construed that there is no support for community transformation in Gulu University. However, it should be noted that this was the sheer minority

views which did not disqualify the themes generated from views of those who believe that some kind of support for community transformation activities were existent in Gulu University.

Overall, three themes: management support and logistical support emerged. These were developed from six categories: grants management, ceremonial support and authorisation of activities; provision of transport, provision of space and provision of welfare.

DISCUSSION

Support for community transformation activities were considered to be routine because they manifested in form of usual administrative activities which exist in bureaucratic structures and processes of universities generally. For instance custody of funds, authorisation of activities, provision of transport, provision of space, and provision of welfare were not in any way distinct and were therefore mundane functions which the different structures of the university had to perform. These were revealed in Gulu University Annual Report which names some of the functions of the university secretariat thus "providing internal management functions such as staff recruitment, retention, welfare . . . and superintending office requirements such as furniture and space" (Gulu University, 2013; p.4).

The findings of the current study are incongruent with those of most studies. For instance ElHadidi, and Kirby (2016) found a range of distinct forms of support in two Egyptian universities embedded in non disciplinary structures. Bisaso's (2013) study reveals that different forms of distinctive support for the third mission were embedded in specialised non-academic units at Makerere University. Welch and Saltmarsh (2013) found support for community oriented activities such as capacity building, risk management, annual reporting and streamlining community transformation agenda into the university functions situated in designated units within the institutional structure. Cloete, et al. (2011) found that support towards furthering community economic development agenda in the University of Mauritius manifested in a number of ways and was linked to a number of posts and structures. In such cases, support for community transformation were generally robust and more streamlined as opposed to the situation in Gulu University where no designated offices were in place and support was found to be distributed and routine.

The current study supports findings by Purcell (2014) who found leadership for community oriented activities was informal and widely distributed followed by a weak support

for the same. Therefore, it is convincing that support for community oriented activities could be robust enough and distinct only in the presence of well established structures with clear mission for community transformation. Absence of structures designated for community transformation activities and the subsequent distributed and non distinctive support could be attributed to the ivory tower mentality which was re-echoed by participants that, there was no need for specifically designated structures for community transformation affairs, after all it was over-arching and therefore every activity of the university ultimately leads to it. This mentality undermines the current discourse which calls for direct and interventionist role of universities in contributing to the socio-economic viability of their proximate communities. Besides, it starkly contravenes the very essence of community transformation which Gulu University stands for. We note that, under normal circumstances, streamlined conscious and distinctive support for community transformation activities should be the hallmark of a university which declares community oriented stance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

We therefore conclude that, there is weak and co-incidental support for community transformation activities in Gulu University. Although, the findings revealed some sort of support, these support were not active but rather passive. In other words, there were no standing support. Support for community transformation activities by non-disciplinary units is distributed in an unsystemic manner. No one was found squarely taking charge of activities for community transformation activities. Two offices cited by some participants to be responsible for community transformation, were found not to have the mandate in precise terms. Indeed, none of the traditional institutional structures of the university were designated to coordinate, oversee or monitor community related affairs. Without any specifically designed structures such as offices, desks or unit for community transformation affairs in Gulu University, no precise reference or referral could be made to any office in respect to community transformation affairs. It remained all too far-fetched in the thinking of both disciplinary and top management members that community transformation affairs could be managed by a designated office.

We recommend that the university management should institute deliberate support and have institutional structures reconfigured for community transformation activities, or new ones set up. Support for community transformation activities should be defined to include areas

already revealed in the current study, which should be consolidated and others revealed in the literature such as partnership support, funding, quality assurance, legal and operational support among others should be instituted. To ensure that such support for community transformation is robust and active, relevant structures should be put in place to manage community related activities. These could take the form of units, desks, offices and eventually a directorate headed by a Director for Community Transformation affairs to lead the overall community transformation agenda under the supervision of the Vice Chancellor assisted by a Deputy Vice Chancellor for Community Transformation Affairs. Committees for community transformation agenda should be instituted at all levels, namely: council, senate, faculty boards, and departmental boards.

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