



IJRSLCE

International Journal
of Research on
Service-Learning &
Community Engagement

Volume 13 | Issue 1

Building a (Community) Engaged University: Exploring the Determinants, Elements, and Processes in an Indian Context

Wafa Singh

Department of Community Health Studies, Durban University of Technology, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Raisuyah Bhagwan

Department of Community Health Studies, Durban University of Technology, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Manju Singh

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Malaviya National Institute of Technology Jaipur, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Recommended Citation

Singh, W., Bhagwan, R., & Singh, M. (2025). Building a (Community) Engaged University: Exploring the Determinants, Elements, and Processes in an Indian Context. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.154389>

Building a (Community) Engaged University: Exploring the Determinants, Elements, and Processes in an Indian Context

Wafa Singh, Raisuyah Bhagwan, and Manju Singh

Abstract

Of late, many universities across the world are seeking assistance to transform themselves into becoming (community) engaged institutions. This has coincided with increased demands for a deeper theorizing of engaged universities and exploring mechanisms for advancing engagement within the higher education landscape. While the literature documents institutional or programmatic efforts, few studies have focused on adopting a holistic perspective that involves understanding how stakeholders, processes, and their interlinkages contribute toward building engaged universities. This study adopts this multifaceted lens to explore these nuances through an in-depth qualitative study that focused on the insights of 50 academics based at eight Indian universities. The findings revealed three key aspects for realizing the engaged university vision: (a) cultural determinants, (b) structural elements, and (c) functional processes. Drawing on these insights, this article proposes a conceptual framework for guiding the creation of engaged universities, thus offering valuable guidelines for policymakers, university leaders, and academics.

Keywords: *engaged universities, community engagement, engaged scholarship, community partnerships, social responsibility*

Construyendo una universidad comprometida con la comunidad: Explorando los determinantes, elementos y procesos en un contexto indio

Wafa Singh, Raisuyah Bhagwan y Manju Singh

Resumen

En los últimos años, muchas universidades en el mundo han buscado apoyo para transformarse en instituciones comprometidas con la comunidad. Esto ha coincidido con una creciente demanda de una mayor teorización acerca de las universidades comprometidas con la comunidad y la exploración de mecanismos para fortalecer la vinculación con la comunidad dentro del ámbito de la educación superior. Aunque la literatura documenta esfuerzos institucionales o programas específicos, pocos estudios han adoptado una perspectiva holística que permita comprender cómo los grupos de interés, los procesos y sus interrelaciones contribuyen a la construcción de universidades comprometidas con la comunidad. Este estudio adopta este enfoque multifacético para examinar estas dinámicas mediante un estudio cualitativo a profundidad, basado en los aportes de cincuenta académicos pertenecientes a ocho universidades de la India. Los hallazgos identificaron tres aspectos clave para materializar la visión de la universidad comprometida con la comunidad: (a) determinantes culturales, (b) elementos estructurales y (c) procesos funcionales. A partir de estos resultados, el artículo propone un marco conceptual para la creación de universidades comprometidas con la comunidad, ofreciendo lineamientos valiosos para los responsables de crear políticas públicas, líderes universitarios y académicos.

Palabras clave: *Universidades comprometidas con la comunidad, vinculación comunitaria, investigación comprometida con la comunidad, alianzas comunitarias, responsabilidad social*

Introduction

In view of the complex, fast-evolving, grand challenges of the 21st century, there have been increasing calls to develop new models of well-being, which goes beyond the limited notion of economic growth and encompasses aspects of positive community participation, good health and education, community resilience, social capital, sustainable livelihoods, enhanced life quality, and social cohesion, thereby translating into overall human progress and development (Cicognani, 2014; Holland & Malone, 2019; Kohl & Hopkins, 2021; Tandon et al., 2016). A significant component of this transformation needs to be led by universities, considering their role as agents of social change (Appe et al., 2017). In their capacity as knowledge producers and disseminators, universities bear the responsibility to apply this knowledge to explore reality, address social challenges, advance community well-being, and contribute to social development (Farnell, 2020; Kohl & Hopkins, 2021). However, considering the difficulty of the present challenges, universities need to collaborate with other societal sectors through a planned agenda of directing institutional expertise toward enabling constructive interactions with communities/community organizations for producing “new” knowledge aimed at developing effective action-based solutions (Holland & Malone, 2019). This aligns with the need to “reset” knowledge within a public knowledge common, which enables knowledge sharing in intersectional contexts between academic and nonacademic actors (Tandon & Hall, 2021).

This has entailed broader engagement of universities with society for holistic social development through diverse activities such as technology transfer and innovation, continuing education, and community engagement (CE) (Benneworth et al., 2018). CE entails activities and interactions that occur within the process of building partnerships between universities and communities, while offering a transformative space for innovation, knowledge cocreation, and development of active citizenship (McIlrath, 2014). Education emerging from such democratic engagement results in multidimensional learning, enhanced knowledge, improved social awareness, and development of core competencies (Dobson & Kirkpatrick, 2017). This forms the basic premise of (community) engaged universities (referred to as engaged universities, herewith), where CE is positioned as an integral part of university missions and is embedded in its culture, operational value structure, and everyday practice (Furco, 2010; van Schalkwyk & de Lange, 2018). Such universities produce knowledge that benefits the society and educates students for productive roles through expanded collaborations with organizations outside the academy (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). This represents an intentional move to connect academia with society, achieve the goal of producing better professionals, citizens, communities, and create sustainable societies (Gregorutti, 2022).

Despite this conceptualization in the global literature, the lack of a cohesive and sustained strategy toward institutional transformation has constrained universities from becoming truly engaged (Holland & Malone, 2019). Stunted and attenuated efforts have further weakened the contours of engaged universities (Sorgen, 2024). Further, the neoliberal discourse in higher education, which advances a commercialized view of education, has contributed to the isolation of universities and the emergence of a cohort of students disengaged from their social realities (Baas & Thomas, 2023; Hutson et al., 2019). However, this coexists with a discernible change that is underway, marked by an increased interest among universities to enhance their public relevance, maximize their regional/social contributions, and improve their public relations (Sánchez-Barriluengo & Benneworth, 2019; Sorgen, 2024). To seize this momentum, there is an urgent need for further theorizing in the field of engagement and clarifying “what it means to be an engaged university” (Cherrington et al., 2019). However, it is observed that most literature in this domain remains disproportionately focused on the Global North and includes only occasional representation from the Global South (Appe et al., 2017), with the Indian context being barely represented.

To address these gaps in literature, the authors designed a qualitative inquiry and approached it from an exploratory lens to answer the research question: What makes a university, an engaged university? Here, a review of the literature on the concept and characteristics of engaged universities is first provided. This is followed by a summary of the methods and study findings, based on interviews with 50 academics (including university leaders and faculty members), that was conducted at eight Indian universities (best

known for their engagement practices). The findings revealed three distinctive themes, depicting what engaged universities stand for, which are unpacked from a cultural, structural, and functional perspective. Further, the discussion section presents a conceptual framework aimed at guiding universities into becoming engaged. Finally, the conclusion outlines the key emergent lessons, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

While the term “engaged university” was coined by Russel Edgerton (former president, American Association of Higher Education) in 1994 (Hartley et al., 2006), the movement toward universities becoming more engaged with their local communities started gaining momentum since the 1980s (Martin & Pyles, 2013). This movement symbolized a new paradigm, wherein academics (university faculty, staff members, and students) partner with community organizations and other external stakeholders to create learning and research agendas, while leveraging the knowledge and needs of the community and the expertise and resources of the university (Bhagwan, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Furco, 2010). Popularized by Dr Ernest Boyer’s conceptualization of “scholarship of engagement,” where he called upon universities to pursue a broader public purpose (Boyer, 1996), this concept was further theorized by Watson (2011). He viewed engaged universities as replacing ivory tower universities and focusing on Mode 3 knowledge production by mobilizing their human and intellectual resources for tackling community problems in areas such as public health, environmental management, and poverty alleviation (Watson, 2011).

This builds on the premise of CE in higher education, which is defined as the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources, in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6). An engaged university embodies the spirit of CE and embeds it into its teaching, research, and service functions (Hart et al., 2023; van Schalkwyk & de Lange, 2018; Welch, 2016). This involves academics working closely with public and community partners (within the framework of academic functions) for solving social challenges, while students engage in such projects to be able to connect the abstractness of theory with real-world applications (Sorgen, 2024). This translates into engaged teaching/research/service functions that not only address community-identified needs but also deepen students’ civic and academic learning (Benneworth et al., 2018).

This engaged scholarship perspective brings down the barriers between theory and practice and advances curricular revision that connects the classroom and course material with the immediate communities and their context, thus resulting in transformational learning outcomes (Baas & Thomas, 2023; Furco, 2010). Further, in catering to the experiential learning needs of students and scholars through CE, and applying its knowledge, skills, and resources to address pressing community issues, an engaged university links academic objectives with social development outcomes (Hamner et al., 2002; Meerman & Davey, 2025). Therefore, Sorgen (2024) viewed engaged universities as encouraging scholarship, which includes collaborative projects/interventions, built on dialogues and mutually beneficial, respectful collaboration with civic partners, and reflects social problems. These ideas of enhancing the social relevance of core academic functions were the initial steps toward the development of the engaged university movement (Gregorutti, 2022).

This was earlier articulated by Furco (2010, p. 388) who posited that “a university becomes engaged when, through the establishment of genuine community partnerships, its intellectual and discipline-based resources are harnessed, organized and used to address community concerns.” Such partnerships form the cornerstone of engaged universities and are characterized by “problems defined together, goals and agendas that are shared in common, definitions of success that are meaningful to both university and community and developed together, and pooling or leveraging of university, public and private funds” (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 27). Such authentic community–university partnerships (a) facilitate a wide range of reciprocal university–community interactions for addressing social issues such as health disparities, housing needs, and climate change that impact the overall well-being and progress of communities; (b) are

essential for sustaining an engaged approach; and (c) embody the essence of what an engaged university stands for (Baas & Thomas, 2023; Bridger & Alter, 2006; Leal Filho et al., 2023; van Schalkwyk & de Lange, 2018).

Therefore, a holistic view of an engaged university symbolizes a synergistic alliance between the university's knowledge and resources with the public, service, and private sectors "to enrich scholarship, research and innovation; enhance curriculum, learning and teaching; prepare educated, engaged citizens; address critical societal issues; and strengthen democratic values and social responsibility" (Bender, 2008, p. 91). This evidences that in being concerned about pressing societal challenges, engaged universities redesign their academic functions to become "more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however communities may be defined" (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 9). This framework positions universities as a public good, delivering community-engaged education, fostering increased civic engagement among students, and contributing toward community capacity building (Bridger & Alter, 2006; Meerman & Davey, 2025; Sugawara et al., 2023).

However, becoming an engaged university requires universities to rethink and reconfigure their operational strategies and strive for holistic institutional transformation that allows CE to thrive; values community involvement in teaching, research, and service; and incorporates structural reforms that anchor the way of being in and with communities (Baas & Thomas, 2023; Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022; van Schalkwyk & de Lange, 2018). Additional features of an engaged university include cultivating respect, trust among partners, demonstrating responsiveness to community needs, and increasing community accessibility on campus (Kellogg Commission, 1999). Examples of institutional models built on similar ideas include the "civic university" (Goddard, 2018), "socially engaged university" (Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022), and "regionally engaged university" (Sánchez-Barrioluengo & Benneworth, 2019).

Methodology

Study Context

Considering that the vast Indian higher education sector comprises 1168 universities, 45,473 colleges, and 12,002 stand-alone institutions (Ministry of Education, 2023), the scope of this study was limited to universities. The Indian University Grants Commission (UGC) categorizes universities as (a) *public* (central and state universities, run and financed by the central and state governments, respectively), (b) *private* (funded by private bodies), and (c) *deemed-to-be* (accorded the status of universities by the UGC, in recognition of their long-standing academic tradition) (UGC, 2024).

Universities were selected based on these criteria: (a) *Experience*: Given the qualitative nature of the study, only universities known for their best practices in engagement were considered for selection; (b) *Category*: At least one university was selected from each of the three university categories; and (c) *Zone*: At least one university was selected from each of the five zones (north, south, east, west, and center). Finally, eight universities (two public, three private, three deemed-to-be) representing eight different Indian states across five zones were selected.

Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

The study adopted a nonprobability sampling design and used a purposive sampling technique to select two samples of participants who could provide rich, quality perspectives on the study topic (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011): university leadership (sample 1) and faculty members from different departments/schools (sample 2). Emphasizing sample composition (which prioritizes information richness to representative opinions), the following sample sizes were selected (Table 1):

Table 1.*Samples and Sample Sizes*

Sample number	Participants	Number of universities	Minimum number of participants recruited per university	Initially planned recruitments	Final recruitments
1	University leadership	8	$n = 2$	$n = 16$	$n = 21$
2	Faculty members	8	$n = 3$	$n = 24$	$n = 29$
Total			$n = 5$	$n = 40$	$n = 50$

While the initial planned number of participant recruitments for samples 1 and 2 was 16 and 24, respectively, the principle of data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) was applied to determine the final sample size. Consequently, recruitments continued until no new or additional issues/insights were identified, and the repetition of data was observed. The final sample sizes were 21 for sample 1 and 29 for sample 2, across all eight universities.

Data Collection

The data were collected through semistructured, in-depth interviews, which allowed rich, descriptive information, and learning or understanding to emerge from the participant's experiences on the research topic (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide, which included questions such as (a) What aspects of your institution make it an engaged university? (b) What are the essential criteria for building an engaged university? (c) What are the internal and external factors that influence the process of a university becoming engaged?

Data Analysis

This comprised an inductive, iterative, systematic process, which began by transcribing the interviews verbatim and converting the data into detailed transcripts (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Further, Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was used for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the data for emergent patterns. This included (a) immersive reading of the transcripts for familiarization with the data, the emergent ideas and their tone; (b) generating initial data codes, drawing on the data impressions, rearranging it into categories and labeling them as "codes"; (c) sorting the narrow codes into broader "themes," representing a patterned meaning within the data set; (d) reviewing themes by revisiting the extracted codes to ensure coherence and consistency; (e) defining and naming themes by summarizing the scope and content within each theme and making credible analytical conclusions on the final data representation; and (f) weaving the narrative into an objective discussion.

Trustworthiness of Findings

Being a qualitative study, its rigor or trustworthiness was established through designing and conducting the study, along with the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the credibility of results was ensured through sustained and quality engagement with the participants, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling, transferability of the data was ascertained through a detailed narration of the research study and its design. Maintenance of a dedicated audit trail, including a detailed description of the research methodology, ensured the dependability of the study. To ensure the confirmability of the study and reduce researcher bias, all the information/data obtained from the participants were corroborated with them. Further, the selection of two data samples and multiple data

sources (audio tapes, transcripts, field notes, and reflective journals) ensured that the findings were triangulated and mutually supported, thus aiding its confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained through the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC number 202/21). Gatekeeper letters were sought from appropriate leadership authority, requesting permission for conducting the study at their respective institutions. All selected participants were briefed on the study through detailed letters of information. Interviews were conducted only after duly completed consent forms were received, and any questions/clarifications regarding the processing of information and use of data were suitably addressed.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the findings produced three themes, emerging from interviews across sample 1 (university leaders (UL), numbered between 1 and 21) and sample 2 (faculty members (FM), numbered between 1 and 29), and across all eight universities (U), numbered between 1 and 8.

Theme 1: Cultural Determinants (Guiding Philosophies and Policy Mandates)

Many interviewees believed that the making of an engaged university depends on what drives its beliefs, values, and practices, and unpacked it into an internal and external determinant, which impacts this transformation.

The internal determinant emerged as the commitment of universities toward the overarching public purpose of higher education. Interviewees shared that the philosophy of an engaged university is rooted in the belief that higher education is entrusted with the responsibility of societal development. This drives the university to actively engage with the community they are embedded in, for fostering social, economic, and environmental well-being and encompassing aspects of good health and education, equality, livelihood security, and so on. Reiterating this, an interviewee elucidated:

A university has a social, moral and ethical responsibility towards society. We are not looking only at degrees, because what is its value if it doesn't serve the community. The institution has to adopt an inclusive and engaged outlook and work for communities which are out of circle, out of square. [UL1, U1]

Adding a cultural undertone to similar ideas, another interviewee noted,

What is the purpose of education? It is getting education and giving it back to the society. We must engage with and serve the society. This consciousness needs to be developed, and this is not taught in any curriculum. It is cultivated through practice and what we do on a daily basis. [UL17, U7]

These insights underscore the university leaders' belief that developing socially responsible consciousness is a part of daily practice and ethos of a university. Here, engagement emerged as an institutional value, which guides its practices and is embedded into the institutional fabric, thus characterizing engaged universities. Further, interviewees believed that the integration of CE into the teaching-learning processes makes educational practices socially relevant and responsible by connecting classroom learning to real-time issues. In doing so, the knowledge production function of a university is leveraged for serving societal needs/aspirations. This constitutes the essence of engaged universities, which not only contributes to well-being and social development by mobilizing the knowledge produced for public good but also molds students into becoming responsible citizens who can anchor the process of social change. Reiterating these ideas, an interviewee shared,

Being engaged means linking education and society, classroom learning and issues faced by communities in real time. This is the starting point: to create a link to go to the community, which

then becomes a part of educative practices in the classroom and beyond. Slowly, the student learns to relate things to his/her subject, and can use this knowledge for social good. [UL9, U3]

Elaborating on this, an interviewee added, “Being truly engaged means that CE is anchored and embedded into university’s activities and functions in a way that you don’t see any differentiating markers” [UL5, U2]. Sharing similar sentiments, another interviewee commented,

For us, being engaged or practicing CE is not something we do as extra. It is from where we begin, right from establishing campuses in rural hinterlands, to making it a part of academic delivery mechanism, to setting up social enterprises within the university. So basically, it is our day to day living. [UL1, U1]

Further, the interviewees also described an external determinant that plays an important role in the emergence and sustenance of engaged universities: national higher education policies and schemes. Mixed responses were received in this regard. Some interviewees expressed concern regarding a restrictive policy scenario with respect to engagement, as one of them shared,

Creation of engaged universities needs policy backing and support, with respect to funding, accreditation, and specialized grants, which at the moment favours big institutions focused on publication-based research. This puts CE centric universities focusing on action-based research in a disadvantageous position. [UL2, U1]

Reflecting on how such policies impacts higher education operations, another interviewee added, “Thanks to ranking and accreditation criteria’s, research publications have become the end product, rather than being a by-product of the larger social welfare goals, that research tends to achieve. Unless this changes, little can be done” [UL8, U3]. To offset the rigidity of regulatory frameworks, an interviewee suggested that “Creation of more community-centric and engaged universities will be possible only when more choice and flexibility is offered in evaluation, assessment and ranking” [UL2, U1].

Here, two recent policy directives offer hope: (a) National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) and (b) UGC guidelines on fostering social responsibility and CE in Indian universities, 2022 (UGC, 2022). These directives emphasize the ethos of social engagement in higher education, promote engaged academic practices, and acknowledge the role of universities in creating a sustainable, equitable, and vibrant knowledge society, while contributing to community well-being and holistic societal development. In this light, a few other interviewees expressed belief/hope in the potential impact of these policies and viewed it as critical for incentivizing and reinforcing the efforts a university takes toward engagement. Accordingly, an interviewee commented,

With the coming in of NEP, there is a gradual shift happening with respect to the integration of CE within teaching-learning processes. While we are only at the beginning phase, we have started to make CE an integral part of academic curriculum. [UL15, U6]

Citing the example of policy-based support toward the development of an exclusive CE course, an interviewee shared:

Under the UGC scheme, we have developed a two-credit course on CE, one credit is for theory and one for field work. The course spans 10 weeks, with one module per week, and focuses on various dimensions of CE, specially rural CE. It includes modules on CE concepts, practices, principles, rural institutions and an introduction to community engaged research. [UL21, U8]

The explicit focus on rural CE is poised to have crucial implications on achieving well-being and development in an Indian context, considering that a fair proportion of its population lives in rural areas and suffers deprivations in health, education, and living standards. Essentially, the excerpts reveal the impact of policy support in pushing the engagement agenda at universities. While the integration of CE into broader regulatory frameworks of ranking and assessment is still desirable, these new developments emerge

as a positive step forward toward creating engaged universities, encompassing teaching–learning processes aligned to the social contexts and embedded in its communities.

Theme 2: Structural Elements (Requisites for Institutionalizing CE)

In order to concretize the CE vision, the interviewees called for the creation of policies and strategies for engagement and for embedding engagement practices at universities. Here, an interviewee explained, “A CE policy ensures the integration of systematized CE activities at an institutional level, and that concrete things are done under its umbrella, rather than superficial activities like cleaning of streets” [UL19, U7]. Another interviewee viewed this systematization and clarity as encouraging for the FM to engage in in-depth CE interventions:

An institutional CE policy can detail as to what is to be done and at what level. Is it at an extension level or service level or an engagement level and by whom. With this kind of clarity and support from the policy, the staff is encouraged to get involved in CE. Else, it gets scattered, which demotivates them. [FM19, U6]

However, most interviewees admitted the absence of a distinctive CE policy, with the engagement values being immersed in the broader vision/mission of the university. This was flagged as negatively impacting the sustainability of CE efforts, as pointed out by an interviewee: “Although CE values and principles are integrated in the university motto and objectives; at some point of time, without a backend policy integration, we will not be able to drive it. It has to be perpetual” [FM1, U1].

The interviews also revealed the importance of crafting detailed strategic plans, entailing comprehensive instructional guidelines to support the CE policies. This includes providing definitional clarity, addressing challenges (related to funding, curricular integration, and collaborative partnerships), and providing flexibility for decentralized implementation of CE (at the department level). Attributing these as having important implications on the engagement process and outcomes, an interviewee remarked,

CE strategy comes down to having clear intentions and purpose of what it is that you are doing, how you are doing it, the resources that need to be mobilized, and outlining the learning outcomes, having both curricular and social connotation. [UL13, U5]

Further, the importance of aligning such plans with the institutional mission and vision was emphasized. This was believed to play a central role in positioning CE as a strategic/functional priority, foundational for the emergence of engaged universities. Accordingly, an interviewee explained,

You need a plan and its alignment with the vision and mission is important. This alignment should be in the context of the core value framework. As our university believes in the spirit of universal human values and social welfare, it imbibes those values into its academic interventions. This has helped us institutionalize CE as an academic priority. [FM10, U3]

In addition, interviewees’ idea of engaged universities also included aspects of CE governance such as (a) establishing centralized, institutionally recognized CE structures (center/office), (b) recruiting staff under these structures, and (c) providing requisite support for CE implementation. Emphasizing the importance of CE structures, an interviewee posited, “Universities need to establish a central hub for coordinating institution-wide CE activities, establishing community partnerships, developing CE-aligned curriculum, and supporting CE programs” [FM11, U4]. Interviewees also viewed such structures as playing an important role in popularizing the practices of CE, exploring and advertising potential engagement opportunities, creating knowledge-sharing platforms, and ensuring easy access and mobilization of funds/resources needed for CE activities.

Another popular sentiment among interviewees’ vision of engaged universities included provisioning specialist training/capacity building opportunities for faculty members (led by CE structures) for developing competencies in engagement. This was highlighted on two accords: (a) lack of orientation on

CE due to traditional academic background; and (b) ambiguities in understanding the values, principles, and practices of CE. This was elaborated by an interviewee, who stated,

We have academics from different backgrounds, who may not have an orientation to CE or may have different approach or understanding. So, there is a need to first bind the unequal energies of people from different areas. For this, proper training is needed, to synergize CE efforts. [UL3, U1]

Linking this aspect to institutionalizing CE and building a collective vision of engaged universities, another interviewee elucidated,

Institutionalization comes with one understanding. So, faculties need to be inducted to this concept. So, an induction training is required to gain clarity of purpose on the common goals, develop a common understanding of the concept, and its linkage with the broader engaged vision. [FM8, U3]

Herein, proper training and orientation not only develops the core understanding of CE concepts but also clarifies its interlinkages with the institutional vision and priorities. This was considered essential to build universities aligned with the engagement agenda.

The next step included the recruitment of trained and experienced staff as part of the CE structures for steering CE efforts across the university and ones who are adequately supported, incentivized, and compensated for their services (in terms of rewards, recognition, promotion, and pay). Here, an interviewee noted, “A hardworking and passionate team is needed to lead CE efforts, who are trained, well-supported, and ready to take on responsibilities with the right motive” [FM23, U7]. Narrating the challenges where such staff recruitments were missing, an interviewee mentioned, “We don’t have any permanent staff as part of our CE centre. They are faculty members who are recruited on an ad-hoc basis, based on their knowledge and experience. This is not sustainable” [FM18, U6]. Another interviewee added, “We also need to build on the manpower. At present, we are only four faculty members who are driving it, and who are already burdened. What can be expected from such less and overworked people” [FM12, U4]. This highlighted the need to address issues related to staff’s workload imbalance, in addition to their proportionate recruitment, for optimal outcomes.

Outlining the advantages of having a functional CE center and staff, an interviewee recounted, “We have dedicated staff (faculty members) at the Centre for Service Learning, from different campuses and departments. So, it is easy to monitor and guide the activities in all campuses. The work is also easier and coordinated” [FM5, U2]. This excerpt underscores that adequate and diverse representation among CE staff in terms of disciplines and campuses (in the case of multicampus universities) aids the institutionalization and implementation of CE, aspects which are symbolic of engaged universities.

Theme 3: Functional Processes (Adopting a Dynamic Approach Toward Effecting Engaged Scholarship)

In envisioning engaged universities, many interviewees outlined the need to imbibe dynamism in the way academic scholarship was viewed, approached, and conducted, for making them contextually engaged. Two aspects were highlighted in particular: (a) devising a socially relevant curriculum and (b) incorporating innovative strategies toward effecting teaching, learning, and research processes. Sharing a holistic perspective on this, an interviewee explained,

It is necessary for a university to be dynamic, and not fall into the stereotype way of looking at things. Like the way we diligently implement our transformative education model in teaching, learning and research, giving equal emphasis to cognition, action and affection. We are clear that we want this only. If something does not work, then we are ready to change or iterate. That openness should be there. [UL9, U3]

Speaking on curricular transformation, an interviewee remarked,

An engaged curriculum responds to the local context. Students from rural areas find more relevance if the curriculum is connected to their immediate social realities, issues, because unless their education is connected to their roots, a gap remains, which causes dis-engagement. [FM25, U7]

The idea here was to link the curriculum with local realities/context to ensure its social relevance. The interviewees maintained that an important part of this linkage involved adopting innovative strategies toward teaching, learning, and research that can ensure curricular rigor and enable engaged and real-time learning in students so that they are adequately capacitated for ensuring well-being and development of communities. Sharing about one such “Labs-on-Land” teaching methodology, an interviewee commented,

We don’t have simulated environments. We work on the concept of labs on land, where the mind opens up to new ideas, because you ought to relate to the world outside to understand relevance. This will not come by sitting in artificial environments, but engaging with people and social issues in real-time. [FM28, U8]

Explaining how a similar approach is adopted in research processes, another interviewee shared her understanding of community-based participatory research: “Research is relevant when the demand comes from the community side. They share their problems with academics, discuss the nuances, co-design the research, and co-create the solutions. This also enables multidisciplinary approach to research and meaningful CE” [UL19, U7]. However, the interviewees also cautioned that while effecting engaged scholarship constitutes the essence of an engaged university, it is rarely an easy exercise. It is often riddled with challenges, specially amid the dominant educational paradigms that prioritize conventional approaches to educative practices. An interviewee shared his experiences in this context:

We are striving towards a model where a significant part of student learning is linked to their engagement activities. It may be through direct interventions like special project-based programs or focused courses on CE, while an indirect approach may be through course assignments, in which students go outside, interact with the community and bring the experiences back to the classroom, which enables peer and cross-disciplinary learning. We want this co-creation aspect to be a part of the curricular structure. But it is challenging, as it is not recognized in regulatory frameworks, but we are continuously working towards it. [UL7, U3]

In this light, commitment to engaged ideologies/practices becomes increasingly important for implementing transformational ideas that are pivotal for building engaged universities. Further, two aspects shared by interviewees as foundational for effecting engaged scholarship activities (considered as the cornerstone of educative exercises at engaged universities) were (a) establishing community partnerships and (b) fostering multidisciplinary learning.

Formalization of collaborative community/external partnerships was seen as critical for not only implementing CE but also providing it with institutional credibility and validation, which constitutes a defining characteristic of engaged universities. Reflecting on this, an interviewee elucidated, “As the term itself indicates, community-engaged universities foster diverse partnerships with communities, local governmental/non-governmental organizations, to create a platform where there are increased interactions between the students and such agencies, for exploration of social problems and their solutions” [UL7, U3]. Such partnerships focus on leveraging the strengths of each partner with regard to how they can contribute to the CE process. This paves the way for working “with” communities/community partners to co-construct “new” knowledge, to achieve the shared goals of well-being and development. However, some interviewees advised that for such partnerships to be impactful and sustainable, it needs to be based on principles and mutual agreements with respect to the CE objectives and outcomes.

Further, such partnerships demand and aid multidisciplinary learning, as shared by an interviewee:

At engaged universities, schools need to work together in coordination and alignment. As CE is interdisciplinary and requires a team effort involving multi-stakeholder engagement, you need all

kinds of expertise, skills and resources. This has been our experience of working with the communities. [UL19, U7].

Elaborating on this further, another interviewee elucidated,

In our In Live-in-Labs program, students work in multi-disciplinary groups because problems in community settings are interconnected and complex. Say, you find unemployment as a problem, but then water scarcity comes out as the main problem. Since there is no water, communities are not able to irrigate their crops and their crop yield decreases. This impacts agricultural operations and in turn, their livelihood is impacted. So, it starts with water, which connects to agriculture and then livelihoods. So, no single discipline alone can solve it. You need to be able to think creatively and work in an inter-disciplinary manner. [FM14, U5]

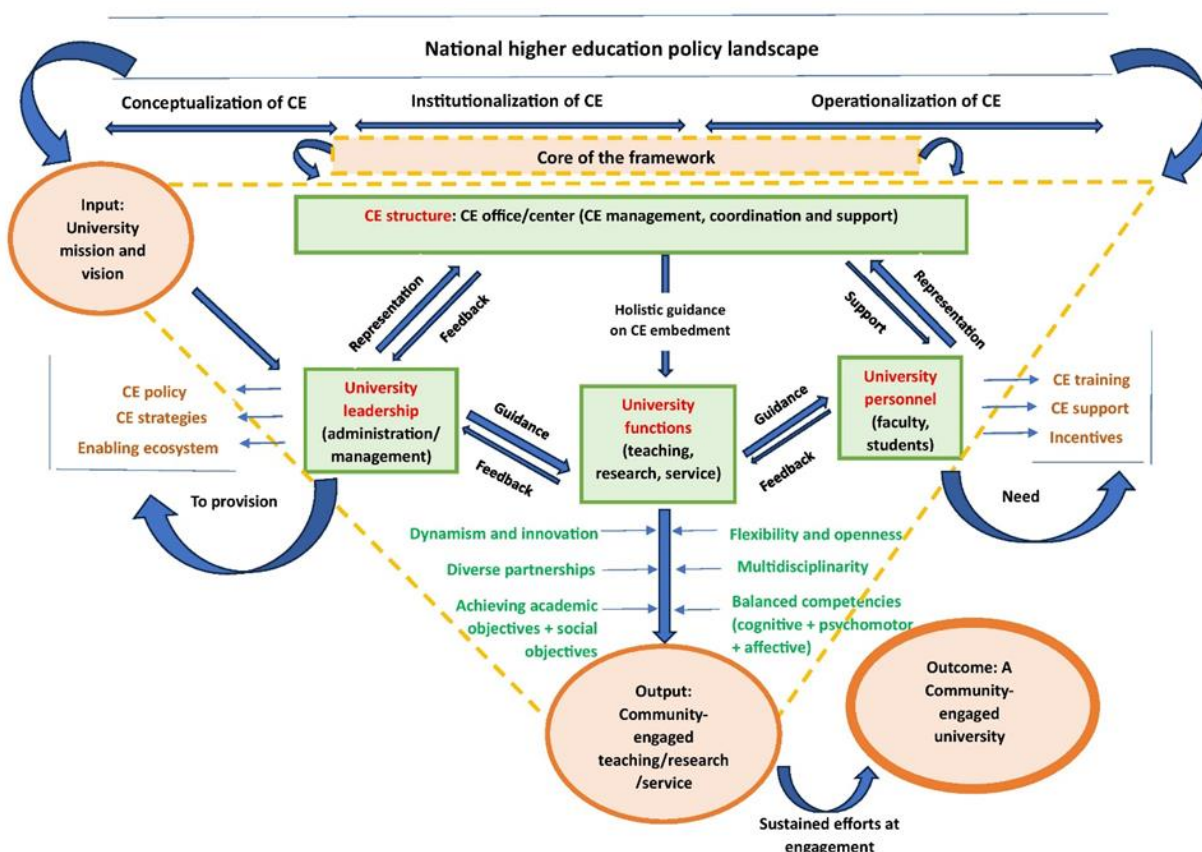
Such an inter/multidisciplinary cooperation facilitates CE, approaches community well-being and development in a holistic manner, and represents unified institutional efforts toward engagement, signaling the presence of engaged universities.

Discussion

The findings from this study answer the research question by highlighting the combination of three distinctive aspects of what makes a university an engaged university. This includes (a) *cultural determinants*, encompassing university philosophies and policies, which ascertain the degree to and manner in which universities become engaged (Watson, 2011); (b) *structural elements*, covering the nuances of institutionalization of CE, as a fundamental step forward in building engaged universities (Welch, 2016); and (c) *functional processes*, outlining the criticality of adopting a dynamic approach toward effecting engaged scholarship to complete the loop representing engaged universities (Hart et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the existing literature that emphasizes the significance of the embeddedness of CE for building engaged universities (Farnell, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Furco, 2010). This embeddedness is a combined product of coherent policy frameworks, positively aligned institutional leadership, organizational strategies, institutional architecture, community partnerships, community-engaged scholarship, and transdisciplinary research, all of which play a fundamental role in transforming universities toward becoming engaged (Bhagwan, 2020; van Schalkwyk & de Lange, 2018).

Similarly, Çınar (2022) attributed the transformation to engaged universities as involving an institutional change process at the macro level (national and regional expectations), meso level (supportive institutional logics, and organizational structure), and micro level (cross-disciplinary adoption of CE as a distinct academic practice). Further, Morawska-Jancelewicz (2022, p. 2257) enlisted five levels for the construction of a socially engaged university: university strategy, university structure, organizational culture, instruments and programs related directly to its core missions, and cooperation with the socioeconomic environment for knowledge co-creation with societal stakeholders. Therefore, an engaged university aligns the academic leaders, faculty members, course/curriculum designers, students, and community members for delivering socially responsible and contextually relevant community-based education (Hamner et al., 2002; Lake et al., 2022).

Leveraging these insights and the lessons emerging from the data, the authors propose a conceptual framework (Figure 1) for not only building an engaged university but also guiding the transformation of existing ones toward becoming engaged. Representing an interlinked schematic of processes and activities (explained in detail subsequently), the framework provides a coherent understanding of engaged universities, focusing on the *conceptualization of CE* (strongly rooted in policy and embedded, prioritized in institutional strategies), *its institutionalization* (supported by an enabling institutional infrastructure, mechanisms), and *its operationalization* (through curricular reforms for effecting engaged scholarship that results in translational and transversal learning outcomes for all stakeholders). Doing so, the framework succinctly encapsulates novel ideas from a holistic “systems” perspective, in viewing the schematic as an interconnected and interactive “systemic whole,” rather than as a summation of parts, an aspect that truly characterizes engaged universities.

Figure 1.*Conceptual Framework*

The framework comprises three components: (a) national higher education policy landscape (shaping university practices); (b) core of the framework (encompassing university dynamics); and (c) outcome, in the form of an engaged university (emerging from the architecture).

(1) National Higher Education Policy Landscape

This is pivotal for guiding the higher education sector in any country and the practices/processes at its universities. This framework too is guided by this mandate, which shapes university operations.

(2) Core of the Framework

An engaged university calls for synergized efforts along multiple tangents, drawing on a spirited to-and-fro process of active guidance and feedback. This involves a dynamic interplay between the following university elements.

2.1. Input: University Mission and Vision

Considering that a university derives its collective ideology from its mission and vision, this framework proposes that the latter be aligned with the CE value framework, which then functions as an input to the subsequent processes.

2.2. Building Blocks: University Sub-Elements

This comprises (a) leadership; (b) CE structure (center/office); (c) personnel (faculty members, researchers, and students); and (d) teaching, research, and service functions. These blocks interact as follows:

- Guided by the mission and vision, the university leadership steers the process of infusion of CE into institutional processes/functions. This includes framing CE policies and strategic plans and creating an engagement-enabling ecosystem, thereby aiding the *conceptualization* of CE.
- To effectuate the above, there needs to be a synergy at various levels of the institution and in between different stakeholders. Hence, it is imperative to establish a CE structure for coordinating and managing the engagement agenda. It can also help revise CE strategies and policies through active feedback to the leadership and provide requisite guidance and implementation support for CE. These constitute the critical aspects of *institutionalization* of CE.
- University personnel as essential “agents” of CE need support for advancing the institutional CE vision laid down by the leadership. Here, CE structures can lead efforts by organizing trainings for building understanding and competencies in CE, ensuring programmatic support for CE interventions, and incentivizing CE efforts, thus aiding the *institutionalization* process.
- The loop of guidance and feedback between the leadership, CE structure, and personnel shapes the design and delivery of teaching/research/service functions. While the leadership can guide the functions toward becoming engaged, either directly or through the CE structure, feedback from the personnel can be provided to the CE structure for better CE support, which can then provide similar reflective insights to the leadership. This feedback can also have implications on the design of teaching/research/service functions, which can be looped in by the leadership to further iterate CE plans and strategies for improved outcomes. These aspects also provide scaffolding support for institutionalizing CE at the university.

This reflects the dynamic and reflexive interplay between university values, structures, stakeholders, and functions, essential for ensuring that CE vision is brought to fruition.

2.3. Output: Community-Engaged Teaching, Research, and Service

The aforementioned processes guide the university functions toward embedding CE into the curricular ambit. In addition, the framework identifies five elements essential for successfully completing the transition toward engaged, responsive, relevant, and transformative scholarship, thus symbolizing the *operationalization* of CE:

- (i) Dynamism and Innovation:** Teaching, research, and service functions need to be designed in a way that enables contextually relevant learning, collaborative problem-solving, and critical reflection.
 - (ii) Flexibility and Openness:** It is important to provide flexibility in designing courses, research projects, and service activities that can effectively integrate curricular content (theory) and real-time social issues (application).
 - (iii) Multidisciplinarity:** Engaged academic practices ought to bring together different disciplines to produce meaningful outcomes.
 - (iv) Diverse Partnerships:** Partnerships with external (nonacademic) agencies and practitioners can diversify CE opportunities and aid curriculum development and implementation of curricular CE programs.
 - (v) Achievement of Academic Objectives and Social Development Outcomes and Development of Balanced Competencies in Students:** Concerted efforts should be aimed at nurturing knowledgeable, competent students who can use their cognitive, action-based, and affective skills to ensure community well-being and serve the common good.
- (3) Outcome: A Community-Engaged University**
- The framework proposes that if the aforementioned strategies are implemented with sincerity, are grounded in CE values, and sustained over a period of time, it can lead to the emergence of best practice universities that are truly engaged in *action* and *spirit*. While *action* represents collective institutional efforts toward becoming engaged, it needs to be backed by strong commitment to the values of engagement and social responsibility for ensuring overall well-being and holistic societal development that reflects the *spirit* of engagement.

Conclusion

In examining the rationale, drivers, elements, processes, and activities involved in the creation of engaged universities, this study contributes toward theorizing such institutions by proposing a conceptual framework for universities interested in joining the engaged university movement. In showcasing the interplay between the policy framework, institutional administrative apparatus, infrastructure, faculty members and students, and academic functions and activities, this study proposes valuable implications for several stakeholders. While policymakers can appreciate how CE-aligned policies/schemes help CE at universities to thrive, university leadership can understand the mechanisms for embedding CE within the university culture and structure. Further, faculty members can utilize lessons on how academic functions can be transformed into becoming contextually engaged and socially relevant. Adopting such an approach can aid in envisioning engaged universities, which entails an implicit commitment to (a) reciprocal university–community partnerships that can aid and enrich scholarship, and (b) social responsibility and sustainable well-being of communities (Baas & Thomas, 2023; Furco, 2010; Goddard, 2018; Kohl & Hopkins, 2021).

Towering examples of engaged universities in the Global North include (a) *Simon Fraser University* (Canada), whose strategic vision calls on the institution “to be the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research and far-reaching CE” (Petter, 2017, p. 433); (b) *Oregon State University* (USA), which has adopted a comprehensive framework for public engagement, built on the constructs of community partnerships, community-engaged pedagogy, collaborative/participatory knowledge sharing, and publication of diverse knowledge/practice-based products (Oregon State University, 2025); and (c) *University of Twente* (The Netherlands), whose new strategy—Shaping 2030—prioritizes “community” over campus, while connecting with people and their needs (O’Brien et al., 2022).

Prominent engaged universities in the Global South include (a) *Mpambo Multiversity* (Uganda), built on the idea of coexistence of multiplicity of knowledges, in particular community knowledge, and strives to empower community scholars by spearheading innovations for achieving societal well-being and development (Tandon, 2008) and (b) *UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya* (Indonesia), which emphasizes CE both as its strength and distinctive feature, aided by the institutionalization of community partnerships and community-engaged education and duly supported by its institutional mission and national higher education policies (Naily et al., 2023). However, since “engagement” is an emerging trend in Indian higher education, universities in India still have a fair distance to cover in their journey toward becoming engaged. This also limited the scope of this study to only eight universities.

Nonetheless, with universities’ rising inclination toward the engagement agenda, incentivized by a favorable policy environment, the authors encourage future researchers to expand the scope of their exploration to include more universities and capture their approach and strategies toward becoming engaged. They may also undertake regional, comparative studies to explore the role of context in shaping the engaged orientation of universities and how it differs regionally/contextually. Finally, as stakeholder perspectives are salient for a deeper understanding of a process, future research may also incorporate opinions of policymakers, students, and community partners in accounting for their role in the engaged university movement and the value that accrues out of it.

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About the Authors

Wafa Singh is a researcher associated with the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and holds a doctoral degree in community engagement in higher education from the same institution. wafasingh86@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1606-3730>

Raisuyah Bhagwan is a full professor in the Department of Community Health Studies at the Durban University of Technology and is also a National Research Foundation, C2-rated researcher. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1584-9432>.

Manju Singh is a full professor in economics at the Malaviya National Institute of Technology Jaipur, with three and a half decades of teaching and research career in renowned institutions. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3840-7661>.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wafa Singh: wafasingh86@gmail.com.