

**PART A**

**1**

**EXPLORING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENTS  
IN THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA**

**PROFESSOR SUZY HARRIS (Ph.D, MA)**

**&**

**GIFTY OFORIWAA GYAMERA (PhD)**

**CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN EQUALITIES,  
POLICY AND PEDAGOGY (CEREPP),  
UNIVERSITY OF ROEHAMPTON, LONDON**

**Abstract**

*Alongside the globalization of the economy and the emergence of a global knowledge economy, universities have developed strategies to try and address local community needs. This paper explores university-community engagement in two public universities in Ghana; it is based on a study conducted to explore how public universities in Ghana are working to address both local needs and national and international expectations. The findings indicate that students find these community engagements interesting and worthwhile, and believe that they have a positive impact on them as well as the local communities. Students, however, are confronted with various challenges which this paper argues could limit the desirability of such programmes. In spite of the emphasis on cross learning between the institutions and the communities, the data suggest limited influences of the communities on both the students and the universities. Paulo Freire's work is drawn on to argue that dialogue, mutual respect, trust, and cross learning should be re-emphasised and prioritised. There is also a need for universities to draw attention to the importance of indigenous ways of addressing the needs of the communities. Efforts should also be made to make these community engagements less stressful to students.*

**Key words:** community, dialogue, university engagements, indigenous knowledge systems, Freire

## **Introduction**

Historically, universities have long engaged with their local communities. Recently, however, with the globalization of capital and the emergence of the knowledge economy, in which knowledge is perceived as critical in the socio-economic development of nations **and wellbeing of the people**, there has been much emphasis on university-community engagements (B-HERT, 2006).

This emphasis results from a perception of the importance of knowledge in building economies and enhancing a better life for the individual (Bailey *et. al.*, 2011; OECD, 1999; Singh and Manu, 2007). Thus, higher education should not only perform the traditional role of teaching and research but should be able to enhance development and impact on the lives of individuals and the nation.

*In Ghana various educational policies and reforms have underlined the need for the universities to provide relevant knowledge in the society to enhance its development (Report of Educational Review committee, 2002; White paper, 2007). They are to help address various challenges including poverty alleviation and control of diseases.* The concept of development, however, is not unproblematic, as will be discussed later in the paper.

A major response of the universities to these expectations is to strengthen *their links with their communities, and this has been manifested in various university-community engagements. Even though many of their policies and reforms have emphasised the need to strengthen the link between the universities and industries, there is an emerging interest where students are sent to local communities to engage with the communities; to identify the challenges of the communities and, together with the community members, develop solutions.*

Though this study did not set out to explore these community engagements of the universities, in the course of the research, the relationship between the universities and their local communities emerged as a major theme. There was therefore the need to discuss and explore it further. This paper discusses community engagement in two public universities in Ghana, with particular emphasis on students' experiences, and explores ways these relationships could be more beneficial to students, the universities and the communities. *The paper will be in four sections: the first will discuss the research, the second presents three types of community engagements in the universities, the third provides discussions, while the fourth presents conclusions and recommendations.*

### ***The study***

The study was qualitative and involved case studies of three public universities in Ghana. In each university, three departments were purposely selected and the respondents comprised senior management, Deans, Heads of Departments, Academics and students. While the staff were purposely selected, students were selected using the snowball method. Means of gathering the data were interviews and documentary analyses. Student interviews took the form of group interviews while staff were interviewed individually. In each selected Department, a group of six students maximum was interviewed and this included student leaders. In all 44 students participated in 10 group interviews. The documents utilised included the Mission statements of the Universities and field guides of the community programmes. Content and discourse analyses were the main procedures

adopted for analysing both the interview and documentary data.

Two of the three universities were engaged in community-university relationships with students spending several weeks in their local community. These community engagements differ in nature: in one university, the community engagement is mandated by a national Act requiring the University 'to blend the academic world with that of the community to provide constructive interaction between the two for the total development of the Northern region [of Ghana] in particular and the country as a whole' (PNDC Law 279 section 2). In furtherance to this commission, **the University adopted the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFP), which is discussed in the next section.** In the other university (and in others not included in the research), there are a number of ad hoc policies on community engagement where individual Departments have developed their own particular way of working with local communities. At the time of the fieldwork, the third University involved in the study had no such programme although a respondent did hint that this was an area, which the university was considering its involvement.

*In the next session, three types of community engagements that were pursued in the two universities are considered. These are, the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP), the Supervised Enterprise Projects (SEPs), and the Social Laboratories (SL).*

#### ***The Third Trimester Field Programme***

This programme, pursued in the first university, was initiated in 1993. It requires all students, irrespective of their degree course, to live and work each year for eight weeks in selected rural communities. This requirement has meant adding a third semester to the normal Ghanaian two semester university calendar. It is in this third semester that students live in the communities. The main objectives, as indicated in the programme field guide, are:

To help students develop favourable attitudes towards working in rural communities... expose students, practically, to the nature and dimensions of development problems plaguing rural communities... provide useful services to Ghanaian communities through the exchange of knowledge and its application to address the felt needs and aspiration of these communities... [and] generate data for further research into problem solving development issues, and other purposes.

A major aspect of the programme is to ensure **the integration of Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) with scientific knowledge to address problems and challenges identified in the communities (Kabruise, 2003).** In a speech by the Vice Chancellor in 2011, he described the programme's aim is to ensure that **both students and staff work closely with the disadvantaged, marginalised and hard-to-reach people in the communities with a focus on poverty reduction.**

Students identify the needs of the communities, write proposals and submit them to appropriate bodies including the district assemblies and the university for these needs to be addressed.

#### **The Supervised Enterprise Projects (SEPs)**

In the second university, there is what is called the Supervised Enterprise Project and is organised within the Department of Agricultural Extension Services in the School of Agriculture. It is a two-year programme which, according to its website, gives students the opportunity to actually experience the realities of farming systems and agribusiness through planning, management and evaluation of their action-oriented and client focused off-campus community projects. Unlike the Field Programme, it is not the result of a national Act but rather was developed through collaboration of the Department of Agricultural Extension Services and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) and the Sasakawa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE).

In the first year, students are exposed to various theories and new technologies. They then go to the communities to do action research, and this involves identifying problems in the communities and together with community members propose solutions. They also learn from the farmers and the communities' indigenous technologies (Annor-Frimpong, n.d.).

The School of Agriculture in the same institution has a different community outreach programme, which allows students from other departments including the Animal and Crop sciences departments to go out for six weeks to visit local communities. They visit community members in their farms to study the local farming practices and technology how things are done locally. According to respondents, visiting the communities helps students to engage with others rather than just theorizing within the confines of the university with little obvious connection or application to what is happening in actual communities. The School also organises field trips to various places to give students hands on experience.

#### **The Social Laboratories**

The Social Laboratory programme is another distinctive approach to community engagement and is organised by the Department of African Studies at the same University. It is part of its vision of reaching out to communities within its catchment area. In this programme, third year students in the department go to communities adopted by the university to stay with local families for about three weeks. These communities are known as 'social laboratories' and in the words of the Head of Department, the programme is to help acquire 'home grown...skills that will be able to solve problems in the society'. It is intended to help students identify real needs in the community with the aim of addressing them. In addition, it is to help students to understand and recognise their responsibility to the local communities rather than become alienated from the reality of those living there so that students know, understand and are able to tolerate different groups and ways of living. The programme focuses on all facets of community life, including for example, gender roles of males and females in the family; sources, level and expenditure of income; history of childbirth; and female education. The Department has also adopted some schools in these communities where university students talk to the local students about educational possibilities including university admission requirements. Students from these adopted schools are given preference should they apply for admission to the university.

#### **Discussions**

Many writers have emphasised the importance of community-university engagements (for example, Astin and Astin 2000; Annor-Frimpong, n.d. Bonsal, *et. al.* 2003; Cress, *et. al.* 2010; Denton and Brown, 2010). According to Astin and Astin (2000) community engagement is important in building leadership skills and civic responsibility in students.

Many of the student respondents narrated how they were able to plan and embark on activities to address some of the challenges they were confronted with in the communities. One student expressed emphatically the following:

After the community programme, there is no community, no society, you can't fix. There you meet a whole lot of people, drink, communicate with a whole lot of people (Student of Agriculture)

The experiences of students also confirm what Astin and Astin (2000) explain when they state that community engagement enables students to become critical thinkers and to be able to identify societal problems. According to respondents, it also enhanced their ability and confidence to work in teams and interact with the public.

With the TTFP, about eighty percent of respondents indicated it helped them develop empathy and a willingness to serve the poor and the marginalised. As students shared their experiences of the programme many emphasised how they would never forget the suffering of many of the people in the communities and that they were sure that their experiences would impact on their sense of public duty to the nation long after they completed their university studies. One student told me:

We stay with them for almost two months. There, you are part of them. When you go and you see the food they eat, the water they drink, and all that, you will be shocked...When we get to the top definitely we will remember (student of Agriculture).

In many cases students did not have to wait till they get to the 'top' to help the community. Some students helped build structures to serve as school buildings for the communities. They also helped in teaching the children and organising communal labour in the communities. In some cases students have adopted children from the communities so that they could provide them with educational support.

The students spoke of how they loved the community members in spite of the hardships which they had experienced. One student said, 'The first time you go you will cry but after some time you will find it difficult to leave'.

According to respondents, the communities have benefitted greatly from the programmes through, for example, infrastructure and facilities such as health centers, water, and schools. Communities have also adopted 'best practices' in agricultural processes. Respondents indicated they have also impacted on the social-cultural conditions of the communities.

In spite of these stated benefits, students are confronted with many challenges which, as they indicated, limit the desirability of the community engagement programme. In many cases, especially with the Field Programme, students work under what could be perceived as 'difficult' conditions including working in communities with limited or no basic amenities and infrastructure including electricity, accessible roads and means of communication. They are also challenged with accommodation problems. A director of one of these engagements indicated that the universities are not just subjecting its students to the hardships of the communities for no good reason. They are expecting that by so doing, the

students, through innovation, will over time find solutions to local problems.

Another challenge the students are confronted with is the attitude of some community members who see students as a source of financial gain. In this case, they refuse to cooperate with students when they are unable to derive such benefits. Kaburise (2003) has drawn attention to this condition when he indicated that there is inadequate orientation of community members. With the limited orientation, some communities could expect more than students could give.

Again, as indicated by the various respondents, a major tenet of this university-community engagement is cross-learning between students and the community members (Kaburise, 2003). However, as aspects of the data suggested, there are tendencies for the universities and students to impose their ideas of what is right or wrong on the community members. For example, one student narrated an incidence where he decided to report to the police a traditional practice (tribal facial and bodily marking) that he did not agree with. Apparently, the traditional ruler had told the student that they would do anything the students ask them to do but not discard this traditional practice. Again, when some student respondents explained how they were able to influence the community members in many ways including their dressing, I asked to what extent the community has equally influenced them. One respondent said: 'The fact is that we have a feeling that we know more than them so it is very difficult to be influenced by someone you think you know better than'. In many ways students go to the communities with the idea of changing the community.

The data also suggested little is done to incorporate the indigenous practices of community members in the curriculum of the institutions. This was especially with the Departments of Agriculture where students encounter many indigenous farming practices. Though it is emphasised (for example, Kaburise, 2003) that the Universities integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with scientific knowledge in addressing problems in the communities, the IKS aspect is not much or hardly used. Crossman (2004) has confirmed that many of the African development oriented universities address problems using scientific knowledge systems which does not enhance the development of the IKS. Further enquiry indicated IKS are not used because they do not have a 'scientific basis' and they need further tests and research to ascertain their benefits, which the institutions either lack the commitment or resources to do.

Some respondents also indicated that IKS is not emphasised because there is 'no market for it'. Another respondent indicated, '...the point is people are looking for daily bread, what will give them the daily bread is what they are going to follow'.

These statements suggest how indigenous knowledge systems are downplayed in the present discourse of employment and instrumentalized view of knowledge. Such downplay of indigenous knowledge systems comes from the present traditional/modern dichotomy. In many cases indigenous practices are perceived as primitive. Dei has indicated that the 'traditional/modern' split is an attractive allegory and is offered up as 'ridiculous imagery' to silence any emphasis on African knowledge systems and values (2011, p. 5). Such images also reinforce the 'over-simplification of African culture' (Ibid). With all these challenges, it is important that strategies are developed to make these university-community relationships more beneficial. The next section draws on the thinking of Paulo Freire to offer some conclusions and recommendations.

### Conclusions and recommendations

As indicated above, the target population of the university-community outreach programmes is mostly the poor and the marginalised. Freire (2005) has emphasised the importance of dialogue in dealing with the marginalised and the poor, whom he refers to as the 'oppressed' in his 'Pedagogies of the Oppressed'. Though his 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' is rooted in his experiences of the masses in Latin America some decades ago, many writers including Macedo, (2000) and Shaull, (2006) consider the concept as having a contemporary cross national applicability. Freire argues that, 'The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into *communion* with the people, whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived'. (2005, pp. 61) He goes on, 'The convert who approaches the people but feels alarm at each step they take, each doubt they express, and each suggestion they offer, and attempts to impose his 'status', remains nostalgic towards his origins (Ibid)'.

The universities and students should avoid what Goulet, in his introduction to Freire's 'Critical Education', and in describing relationships between experts and the masses, describes as, 'ideology of paternalism, social control, and non-reciprocity between experts and "helpees" (2005, p. x). He goes on to argue that people who work with the marginalised should avoid the 'role of a charismatic guru dispensing wisdom to willing disciples (Ibid, p. xii). To enhance proper dialogue individuals who seek to liberate the poor must abolish any sense of superiority related to their intellect, wealth or position in society (Ibid).

As students are trained to develop interest in working in rural areas, as they are trained to acquire leadership qualities, the need to be guided by the concept of equality. The institutions could encourage this by developing practical interest in the practices and ideologies of the community members. Moreover, there is a need for institutional policies to emphasise IKS as integral parts in the community engagement in all the universities. As attested to by Kaburise (2003) emphasising IKS would develop students' interest, in indigenous approach to development. It would also help to portray the extent to which IKS could be scientific.

Limited funding is a further problem and the institutions and departments need to develop attractive funding proposals that appeal to both external and internal donors. Funds accrued from the sources, should be reserved for the development of IKS to enhance research and publication of studies on these knowledge systems. There is also the need to create industry/public awareness of research findings, courses and extension services.

A means to boost a sense of equality in the relationship of the universities and the communities, also enhance the integration of IKS, the importance of the concept of development not to be perceived in the western neoliberal way. As indicated above, the main aim of the programme is to ensure development of the communities. However, as Nielsen (2011) has indicated, development as a concept is difficult to define. In terms of time and place, and among organisations, development has been defined differently. During the period after the Second World War, economic development was perceived 'as a process where latecomers catch up with pioneers' (Nielsen, 2011: 5). Later, Sen (1999) in his book 'Development as Freedom', perceived development as freedom from everything that makes a person feel uncomfortable.

In Ghana, most often, development is perceived in terms of adequate and sustained

increase in infrastructure, schools, health facilities and employment. It also includes people having adequate food and shelter. Though these lists in themselves do not appear to be problematic, there is the need for the universities through the students to identify what local communities want and not to impose their idea of what is right for them or what kind of development is best. One respondent who is a senior administrator for instance explained to me, as a researcher, the life style of the people of his traditional community. He indicated that their lifestyle including their way of eating, and dressing could be perceived negatively but according to him his people feel happy and satisfied. It is essential that the living conditions and practices of the people in the communities are not viewed simplistically. The paper agrees with Freire (2005) that in our efforts to help the marginalised, our idea of development should not be imposed on others.

Again, Freire has indicated that self-depreciation is a characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from how they are aware they are perceived. He explains concerning the oppressed people in his community that 'So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything- that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive-that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness' (2005: 63). Mostly, they never realize that they, too, "know things" they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men... They are disheartened, fearful and beaten' (Ibid, p. 64) There is the need for university and students to emphasise self-confidence, self-assertiveness and self-sufficiency in the people. They should be assertive of what they think give them both extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction and happiness, provided it does not contravene the laws of the country. This emphasis could be part of their orientation as partners of the community-university engagement.

The paper argues that efforts should be made to make this community-university engagement, as far as possible, more enjoyable and less stressful for students. Though students are not supposed to lead a life significantly different from the communities they visit, certain things could make their living there less strenuous and risky. For instance, the universities could take care of their transportation for the various times they are supposed to go to the communities. Safety measures including provision of wellington boots, first aid boxes and other amenities could also be provided. If it is possible, students should not be made to pay for these programmes. In some of the community-engagements, students are required to pay for their participation.

It is also important that the universities undertake programmes and invite community members to participate in activities in the universities. Research conducted by Bruning, *et. al.* (2006) indicates that community members who have attended an event in the universities had a more positive impression compared to those who have not attended any event. Though this study was conducted in the United Kingdom, the findings could be applicable to the Ghanaian context.

***In the universities where the community-engagement is not mandated by a national Act,*** issues regarding such relationships should not be left to university departments. ***This paper suggests for a coherent policy to regulate such relationships institutionally.*** As in the case of the first university, the departments could work together with other departments so students' engagement with the communities would be more comprehensive and elaborative.

In conclusion, the paper argues for this type of community-service to be embraced

by all the universities and to be emphasised in the university curriculum. Barnett and Coate (2005) have indicated that despite all the growth and expansion of higher education and the money being spent on higher education what students should be experiencing is barely a topic for debate. Though this argument was made in the context of the United Kingdom, it has a cross-national applicability, and it could be applicable to the Ghanaian context. Barnett and Coate (2005) argue for three dimensions to help in the curriculum: knowing, acting and being. Curriculum should not be perceived as 'tasks of filling of various kinds' including 'filling spaces, time and modules, not to mention minds (p. 3). Curriculum design should be understood as the imaginative ' design of spaces' that are likely to generate new energies among students and inspire them, and so prompt their triple-engagement-in knowing, acting and being (Ibid p. 3).

Nkrumah (2012) expressed similar sentiments when he asked, with the establishment of the Institute of African Studies, for what kind of services the Institute and the University are preparing students. These questions are still relevant for universities in Ghana. The paper reiterates Nkrumah's view (2012) that education should imbue students with the ability to understand and appreciate the needs of other people, and to be of service to them, and to seek the welfare of people. These attributes, the university-community engagements seek to do.

## REFERENCES

- Annor-Frimpong (n.d.). Supervised project a community development tool. Modernising extension and advisory services (MEAS). Retrieved from: <http://www.meas-extension.org/meas-offers/case-studies/supervised-enterprise-projects>
- Astin, A. W., & Astin, H. S. (2000). *Leadership reconsidered: Engaging higher education in social change*. Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Bailey, T., Cloete, N. & Pillay, P. (2011). *Universities and Economic Development in Africa, Case study: Ghana and university of Ghana*. HERANA, CHET. <http://chet.org.za/files/uploads/reports/Case Study-Ghana and University of%20Ghana.pdf>
- Barnette, R. & Coate, K. (2005). *Engaging the curriculum in Higher Education*. Open University Press.
- B-HERT (2006). Universities' third mission: Communities engagement. *B-HERT POSITION PAPER(11)*. <http://www.bhert.com/publications/position-papers/B-HERTPositionPaper11.pdf>
- Bonsall, D. L., Harris, R. A. & Marczak, J. N. (2003). The Community As a Classroom: New direction for student services. *WILEY PERIODICALS*, (100) Retrieved from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ss.72/pdf>
- Bruning, S. D., McGrew, S. & Cooper, M. (2006). Town-gown relationships: Exploring university-community engagement from the perspective of community members. *PUBLIC RELATIONS REVIEW*, 32 (2), pp 125-130.
- Cress, C., M., Burack, C., Giles, E. D., Elkins, J., & Stevens, M. C. (2010). *A Promising Connection: Increasing college access and success through civic engagement*, Boston: Campus Compact.
- Crossman, P., (2004). Perceptions of Africanisation and endogenization of African universities: Issues and recommendations. In Zeleza P. T., and A. Olukoshi, (eds.), *African Universities in the twentieth century*, 2 (pp. 24-42) Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Dei, G. J. S. (2011). *Reframing Africa's Development: Situating Indigeneity and Indigenous Knowledges*. Paper presented at the 2nd African Regional Conference on Endogenous Development, University of Development Studies,

- Denton, S. & Brown, S. (ed.). (2010) *A practical Guide to university and college management: beyond democracy*. UK: Routledge
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Bergman, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (first published 1970)
- Freire, P. (2005). *Education for critical consciousness*. London: Continuum. (first published: 1974)
- Government of Ghana (GOG) (2007) ***White Paper on the Report of the Education Reform Review Committee, Accra.***
- Kaburise, J. B. K., (2003). *New Variations on the African Development University: The UDS experience with developing an alternative approach to tertiary education*. Paper presented at Regional Training conference on *improving tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Things that work, Accra, Ghana.*
- Nielsen, L., (2011). Classifications of Countries Based on Their Level of Development: How it is Done and How it Could be Done, IMF Working Paper. *INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND (IMF)*. WP 11(31) Retrieved from: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2011/wp1131.pdf>
- Nkrumah, K. (2012). The African genius. In L.Helen & K. Anyidaho (eds.) *Reclaiming the human sciences and humanities through African perspectives*, 2(pp. 909-017). Accra, Ghana: Sub-Saharan publishers.
- OECD, (1999). *The knowledge-Based Economy: A set of facts and figures*, OECD.
- Report of the President's committee on review of Education, (2002), Accra.
- Sen, A., (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York.
- Singh, M. & Manuh, T. (2007). *Contribution of higher education to national educational systems: Current challenges, overview*. Paper presented at the