

# A Reflection on how Universities Perform Against Criteria for Authentic Community Engagement

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**Abstract:** Departing from the belief that academic community engagement (ACE) initiatives should result in impactful developmental outcomes that improve the livelihoods of vulnerable populations in society, this paper offers an evaluation of how authentically a sample of universities are meeting criteria depicting such authentic engagement. The specific focus will be on what is publicly available, since university rankings and membership to scientific committees are shared as part of presenting the university's status, the study aims to determine if the engagement aspects are shared publicly as well. The intention of the institutions to publicly reflect their true civic impact in critical developmental areas is important to showcase the importance they attach to addressing societal challenges. The more criteria are addressed, the more likely the engagement activities will contribute to the targeted changes. Results from the evaluation will be shared with recommendations on how all higher education (HE) institutions can strengthen their impact through ACE. This will provide a departure point for measuring the return on investment of activities that at times are viewed as charity instead of the rigorous form of scholarship it has become.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development goal 3, Evaluation of academic engagement, Engaged scholarship

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## 1. Background to the Study

Service-learning (SL) as academic engagement facilitated through community-university partnerships, is arguably the first thrust towards demonstrable real-world impact, at least for South Africa (SA). Its practice as one of the three core aims of HE, or its 'third mission', was embedded through the Council on Higher Education (CHE)'s framework which postulated that community engagement (CE) has the potential to advance social development and transformation agendas (Bender *et al.*, 2006). Criterion 18 of institutional audits conducted by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) involves the provision of evidence that "quality-related arrangements for community engagement are formalised and integrated with those for teaching and learning, where appropriate, and are adequately resourced and monitored" (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 18). At the turn of the century, a rise in publications on SL was evident and the integration of engagement by academics were prioritised in university workloads. Bidandi, Ambe and Mukong (2021) confirm that CE by universities is about social responsibility and that engaged universities are essential for any country's economic and social future. Brackmann (2015 in Mohale, 2021, p. 118) stated that "CE fosters new knowledge circuits by positioning education and research outside the ivory tower, thus, enhancing higher education's civic commitment". Initially CE was not defined by the CHE, allowing institutions to define the concept in ways that were appropriate to their own contexts and missions (Favish and Ngcelwane, 2009). Three aspects of the institutionalisation of CE have been identified as "defining social responsiveness; linking social responsiveness to research and teaching; and supporting and rewarding social responsiveness" (Favish and Ngcelwane, 2009, p. 19). In an intense process of its positioning at one university in SA, a broad definition of social responsiveness was suggested to incorporate activities involving academic staff, partnerships with external constituencies, and the notion of contributing to the public good that is integrated with executive accountability – recognising the major forms of social responsiveness as research orientated at responsiveness; teaching and learning forms of responsiveness; and civic engagement without a link to the formal curriculum (Favish and Ngcelwane, 2009). Through a grant by the Ford Foundation the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) was established in the early 2000s to advance SL to incorporate the objectives of supporting programmes that include CE as part of the core function of HE, which are monitored and evaluated, while also using the outcomes of the activities to influence policy and practice (Council on Higher Education, 2010). The CHESP articulated the *triad* as a three-part triangular partnership model with the partner poles of the academic institution, the service agency, and community leaders (Community Higher Education Service Partnerships, 2008). In a keynote address at a recent CE conference, an 'engagement transformation interface' was introduced as a practical strategy for rethinking the university structure, where forms of epistemic freedom, engagement activities, and institutional cultures, are transformed through a three-tier model that considers the multi-faceted policy restructuring, while also responding to global challenges, but more urgently to mobilise the language of human rights, equality, non-discrimination and cultural tolerance – as part of the university's orientation and character (Nkunzi, 2024).

In more recent years, CE has been “connected to activities that focus on social justice and promoting sustainability” (Neary and Osborne, 2018, p. 336). The World Commission on Environment and Development report on ‘Our Common Future’ defined sustainable development (SD) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Neary and Osborne, 2018, p. 338). In September 2000, the United Nations adopted the eight Millennium Developmental Goals, updated to the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (Millennium Development Goals, no date) as an impetus to global mobilisation to achieve universal and interconnected priorities (Neary and Osborne, 2018). The goals follow a *triple bottom line* approach to well-being, focusing on economic development, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion (Neary and Osborne, 2018). While there is a risk that sustainability is merely seen as ‘green’ or eco-centric practice, Gordon and Dixon (2021) highlight that the topic includes legal, social and ethical concerns, and that beyond environmental sustainability, social sustainability can be broken down into financial and professional sustainability. Two decades after the first formalisation of impact demonstrated through development goal indicators, and considering the poor performance against the 2030 Agenda, the ‘Decade of Action’ has been announced (Ghorbani, 2020). The push for this decade of action involves the call to ‘mobilize everyone, everywhere; demand urgency and ambition; and supercharge ideas to solutions’ (United Nations, 2020). Apart from ensuring equal access to HE as an aim in itself (SDG 4.3), HE is also seen to play a prominent role in achieving the other goals in the 2030 Agenda (Yemini, 2021). Against this background an evaluation was done on how some South African universities are performing against criteria for SL that incorporates elements of authentic CE and impact on SDGs.

## 2. Methodology

The research question is to determine how many critical SL protocol criteria are publicly evident for universities in SA. The aim of the study is to establish the level of HE CE/SL engagement addressing societal needs, especially within health and welfare courses which should be contributing to the targets and indicators of SDG3. Seeing that it is not possible to reflect on all the SDGs, the general one of ‘Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’ should target concerns for a variety of vulnerable populations and should therefore link to SL projects aiming to meet the needs of communities. The specific focus will be on what is publicly available, since university rankings and membership to scientific committees are shared as part of presenting the university’s status, the study aims to determine if the engagement aspects are shared equally. University members will therefore not be interviewed on information that may only be available internally and influenced through individual perceptions. Keywords obtained from a scoping review conducted by the researcher in an earlier study were used to inform the search for activities seen as authentic critical SL. The universities were selected based on *Wiki South Africa’s* list of top 10 universities in 2023, according to a combined consideration of ranking bodies like QS BRICS University Rankings, QS World University ranking, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Wiki South Africa, 2023). This served as a convenient form of sampling that represents universities of different sizes and situated in, or serving, 7 of the 9 provinces and of different sizes. Apart from two universities in this top 10, they were also in the top 8 of the 2023 Shanghai university ratings (ARWU, 2023). Of interest is that one province excluded through the sampling only had a central public university for that province opened in 2014, while the other province not represented, had their public university established in 2005. Using public universities with a much longer history, some established in the 1800s, in a study aiming to evaluate performance related to impact, would then make sense for this paper. The order of the universities reported on in this paper is different to the order provided in the top 10 list, to provide some anonymity to the discussion of the findings. While the universities were deidentified during the analysis, there may be a possibility to indirectly identify them with some effort, through description of the type of activities or rankings, even with an intention to minimise the detailed shared. Since the unit of analysis is publicly shared content, this is not considered to be a breach of the conditions for the institutional ethics clearance obtained (R.000191), as the results merely form a synthesis of what is already available for public viewing. The focus is not on the university per se, but the reflected ACE activities.

The sources used for the review of the ten universities’ evidence of engagement involved university webpages; Google search of university events / engagement in the news; case studies from sources obtained from the database search; and open communication on engaged curriculum design, delivery processes and initiatives. The intention of the institutions to publicly reflect their true civic impact in the identified service delivery areas is important to showcase the importance they attach to addressing societal challenges. The importance of showcasing impact publicly is confirmed by the methodology used by Times Higher Education (THE) to score evidence for the impact rankings. A point is allocated if evidence is provided of activities, and another if this evidence is available publicly (THE reporters, 2024). In a presentation by the Executive Director of the Research

Chairs and Centres of Excellence directorate at the National Research Foundation, he stated that: “A strong culture of research excellence and innovation for epistemological (knowledge advancement) and societal impact (social, economic and environmental) are key to producing high-impact, discoverable and highly visible scholarly content” (Khati, 2024). The scoping review focused on what is accessible online from the last ten years (from 2014) and only those projects linked to the thirteen targets and twenty-eight indicators of SDG 3. The keyword search was done in three parts, an initial search of ‘engagement’ and ‘sustainability’ linked to each university’s name to allow for the inclusion of a wide spectrum of webpages linked to the topic. Secondly the researcher followed the lead of what was provided online by the university, which mostly incorporated menu options or sub-headings on their webpages, being redirected to other pages with more specific information. What was found was then evaluated against the key word criteria for critical SL criteria (protocol). The findings were summarised, and a third part of the search were done to also look for missing criteria. Institutions’ information was deidentified during the analysis process through the allocation of a number to the institution in place of their name. Since the evaluation of the universities against the designed protocol criteria focus on content available online, the limitation to the findings discussed in the result section, would imply that relevant content that may only be available internally to the institution or published on through subscription-based sources or networks requiring member login, were not incorporated in this study.

### 3. Discussion of Results

From a protocol designed to capture the elements of authentic critical SL or civic engagement in HE, the main aspects were identified as: (a) designing curriculum for civic engagement; (b) building authentic partnerships; (c) infusing cultural sensitivity; (d) a focus on developmental impact (sustainability); (e) institutionalisation of critical service-learning; and (f) mitigating barriers to critical service-learning or civic engagement (Swanzen, 2025). These overall six categories had various sub-categories with more specific descriptors representing each (see Swanzen, 2025). This protocol type synthesis of elements was used to screen the publicly shared engagement endeavours of the universities. Table 1 summarises the results in terms of the number of websites and documents found and consulted and lists the Impact ranking by THE, where applicable. It then captures the types of ACE activities found and indicates which elements of ACE were met through these activities. The latter column will reflect the sub-categories as listed above, and thereby will provide more descriptive terms for the purpose of this paper. It can be expected that not all descriptors would be found with each university, since a large number of 160 descriptors were represented, and the detailed descriptors can only be confirmed if module content would be available online. Since content of university modules will not be available online, it can be expected that a lesser number of the aspects in (a) were found to reflect on in the findings. With different terminology still being used by different institutions, reference to ACE as a general overarching term is used in discussion, with highlights to related conceptualisations per institution where relevant. Interestingly concepts like Quintuple helix and GAP framework were not discovered in the findings. The exercise of applying the protocol also provided the author with insights on its applicability to the universities’ ways of describing ACE, which informs her further refinement of the tool. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the number of websites and documents found for each university, and the ACE elements that were the most and the least evident from the findings. The impact rankings, indicated as the SDG rank in Table 1, are only provided for interest to show a focus on development that is reported on by some of the universities, but it will not be discussed in detail, after which expanded findings from each of the universities are discussed.

University 1 was successful in building a history of reporting that is integrated into their institutional planning. This university made a definitive separation between the terms social responsiveness (SR); civic engagement; and engaged scholarship (ES). The biggest difference was where the academic’s activities were initiated or informed by their scholarly expertise, which incorporates SR and ES (with the latter seen as a form of SR), while civic engagement is recognised as the engagement with external, non-academic constituencies, but which could not be linked to the professional and disciplinary expertise of the academic.

University 2 has a CE directorate that incorporates SL as a focus area. While the initiatives of the different academic departments are considered, the reporting of these on the webpages are not as integrated, noting different topical pages with little info. A strength is the good integration with other initiatives, such as linking the research association of the institution to the page speaking to engaged research. One of the programmes also aim to inform communities of the benefits the institution can provide from their academic endeavours to address their societal challenges. Where university 1 excluded consultancy work under their concept of ACE, university 2 sees this as one of the ways academics share their expertise with the community, but for the influencing of policy only. The latter also includes external training, presenting public lectures and serving on

panels as experts as examples of engaged activities. The university has one space where all news coverages were archived from 2003, ensuring that the impact of the university is shared in a cohesive manner.

With university 3 engagement projects were shared with a focus on the projects, and not reported in an overarching manner to showcase where individual projects fitted in. While this gave exposure to the impact of individual projects it does lack the integrative essence and reporting years were inconsistent – thereby not giving a sense of what engagement is occurring in a certain period. What was evident is how each faculty gets the responsibility of showcasing their own engagement, an aspect lacking in the more overarching reporting of university 1. There is a stronger emphasis on outreach and philanthropy than SL integrated into the curriculum.

**Table 1: Results from the ACE university evaluation**

| University info |          | Available online CE sources |                     | Most evident Academic Community Engagement (ACE) elements                                                                                                                                  | ACE elements not evident                                                           |
|-----------------|----------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Number          | SDG rank | Number of websites          | Number of documents |                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                    |
| 1               | 77       | 16                          | 11                  | multi-disciplinarity; stakeholder relationship; participation/ citizen science; social responsiveness; sustainability drive; institutionalized SL; social justice orientation              | tracking; civic engaged & global citizen curricula; asset mapping of community     |
| 2               | -        | 24                          | 21                  | tracking; sustainability drive; recognize traditional leadership; participation/citizen science; stakeholder relationship; social responsiveness; advocacy course; institutionalized SL    | participation planning; asset mapping of community;                                |
| 3               | 36       | 14                          | 15                  | critical SL curriculum design; participation/citizen science; global citizenship; institutionalized CE; indigenous knowledge hub; social justice orientation; celebrate                    | conviviality principles; asset mapping of community;                               |
| 4               | 1001+    | 6                           | 10                  | sustainability drive; knowledge creation for community gain; social justice orientation; celebrate                                                                                         | tracking; advocacy courses; institutionalized SL                                   |
| 5               | -        | 16                          | 18                  | knowledge creation for community gain; interculturalism; tracking; celebration; stakeholder relationship; sustainability drive; social justice orientation; tracking; multi-disciplinarity | global citizenship; institutionalized SL                                           |
| 6               | 42       | 18                          | 7                   | institutionalized SL; global citizenship; social responsiveness; participation/ citizen science; celebrate; asset mapping of community                                                     | tracking; global citizenship; knowledge creation for community gain                |
| 7               | -        | 18                          | 16                  | social responsiveness; celebration; knowledge creation for community gain; designing curriculum for civic engagement; celebration; institutionalized SL                                    | global citizenship; asset mapping of community;                                    |
| 8               | -        | 16                          | 10                  | global citizenship; social responsiveness; participation/citizen science; social justice orientation; designing curriculum for civic engagement; tracking; stakeholder relationship        | asset mapping of community; institutionalized SL                                   |
| 9               | 401+     | 14                          | 5                   | celebration; sustainability drive; social justice orientation; institutionalized SL; knowledge creation for community gain                                                                 | participation planning; conviviality principles                                    |
| 10              | 201+     | 5                           | 3                   | conviviality principles; sustainability drive; advocacy courses; address inequality contexts                                                                                               | institutionalized SL; asset mapping of community; tracking; stakeholder engagement |

University 4 is successful in having all their CE related activities grouped on one page, categorised by year – even though this is only done from 2018 onwards, but then CE reports are provided from 2014 to 2017. Another CE website exists for news articles linked to projects. This institution has a longstanding foundation that drives philanthropic activities and reports on the impact of donations. This reporting is done in the form of magazine articles and was up to volume 15 until only one annual report is shown for 2022. The most visible explanation of this university's approach is a focus on projects, by staff and students, designed to impart knowledge and skill development for meaningful change and to create lasting impact. The diversity of the various projects shared, is however remarkable, and shows vibrant participation by students.

For university 5 a clear focus on impact and reciprocity was evident in the description of and reporting on their ACE activities, as well as differentiation with or clarification of related concepts such as social justice, sustainability and volunteerism. A practice that shows potential for institutional integration is the use of an open access online repository for all material created by members of this university. Data from the repository is then also used for the statistics drawn for the reporting on their impact. This very likely created a culture where a central space for reporting is recognised, even though the 2023 report on CE indicated remaining challenges with terminology and uptake in capturing. This university also provided guidelines for the engaging of partners or stakeholders.

In one of the volumes of a CE newsletter for university 6, a project by one of the academic schools listed the learning outcomes of an activity, thereby displaying the SL balance considered. Most of the articles in the newsletters, depicting the ACE activities, have an educational value with some literature sources referenced as well. The members of the CE committee are listed in each volume, and these include those representing sectors from the community. While categories for CE are defined by this institution, the webpages are sparse with content. A geographical map is provided to show where the activities are focused, and a database of partners are linked to one of the sites, but it is not clearly stated whether permissions were obtained for the sharing of contact information.

A first volume of an open access HE CE publication was initiated by university 7 in 2023. The institution's CE policy provides definitions of the related terms as well as a clear indication of the roles for each stakeholder. There is separation made with engaged citizenship as a model that goes beyond traditional volunteerism to cultivate a more impactful form of community involvement. Projects are listed together, under various categories, that highlights their impact more clearly. What is not clear is whether all projects are captured and the length or year of the projects. Engaged research community of practice roundtables are held with lessons learned for the global South. A knowledge wheel depicting the three themes of well-being, sustainability and collaboration, provides strong direction to the institution and considers the SDGs, the African Agenda 2063 and the National Development Plan.

University 8 demonstrates the importance given to ACE through their requirement to have all community interaction projects by faculties and student structures registered on the conditional acceptance of a code of ethical conduct when there is engagement with the community. Apart from a social impact knowledge platform where staff and student activities are registered, the institution also have 7 impact themes that are broadly linked to the SDGs. This tracking allows them to report on their initiatives not only by faculty, but also partner category, target group and themes, for both staff and student activities.

University 9 identified nine contact points a community could have with the university as teaching and learning, research, CE, SL, work-integrated learning, community service, field education, internship; and volunteerism. ACE is structured around the notion of knowledge creation driven by a CE unit that lies within the office of the deputy vice-chancellor. Engagement and responsiveness are embedded in their values statement and institutional operating plan. While the institution has an online CE portal linking to each faculty, those redirected pages are the general faculty pages and does not highlight the specific CE activities. The CE training opportunities provide overviews of programmes, workshops and courses, including a course on preparing applications for the CE awards and promotion. Community liaison is indicated with civil society, the student and scholarly community, while CE partnerships are sparsely described in terms of its purpose, types and special projects, although finding a concise list of ACE activities and their impact is challenging.

With university 10 there were surprisingly little website hits with the keyword search. One of the faculty disciplines linked to community work was the first find and the page referred to active citizenship being integral to the institution's strategic framework. It also mentioned a new 'for good' focus, but no detail could be found on this. Under a more general CE page, five philanthropic projects are listed with a request for donations. While a knowledge hub entity links SL programmes with communities and service providers, it is not clear in what context the entity functions. Like university 8, this institution also focused their ACE under social impact, but for the latter a focus on democracy and governance was also highlighted, not only the concept of social justice.

#### **4. Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

Centres, directorates, CE specialists, donor relations managers, prospect researchers, or site facilitators for communities, employed by the university, who focused on aspects of transformation, inclusivity and change, were evident in universities with strong evidence of various CE activities. Institutional policies of these institutions would also specifically stipulate mandatory inclusion of SL projects within disciplines. One university

without an impact ranking, but who successfully demonstrated their vast reach through various projects, also provided asset-based-community-development training adapted to their various institutional stakeholders. Initiatives like these could very well be the key to success in the institutionalising of ACE. To drive projects towards sustainability and development, institutes, foundations, divisions, units or consortiums with targeted strategies were in place. Those with the strongest evidence of their ACE had platforms where the activities were registered and tracked. Key to the mobilising to fast-track action, include targeted resourcing of the mission within the institution. For a strong sustainability drive it seemed conducive if the university joined initiatives like becoming signatories to 'green' campus strategies.

Some projects that would seem to be key innovative solutions for communities were evident, but it was difficult to determine how well known or how widely shared these were. Without sufficient exposure, brilliant ideas and many manhours will not be effectively used by the community to meet their needs. While a university linked action research to the CE pages of the institution, nothing has been posted on there about such projects in the past 12 years. From the last Global Sustainable Development Congress, integration through partnerships were highlighted as a critical requirement towards the 2030 Agenda (Times Higher Education, 2024). It raises the question whether the different universities have sufficient cross-campus and inter-institutional agreements in place to fast-track the utilisation within communities to meet their needs. The only partnerships driving the ACE agenda between universities evident, were university 4 that established a partnership between their CE departments, with a university that is not part of the 10 selected for this study; a community-based research partnership between universities 3 and 5; and a visit by a university of technology to glean best practices from university 7. The length of these and details about the partnerships were not clear. Universities 3 and 7 have their own internal centres for social development with which CE work is linked in some way. It is possible that more partnerships may exist on faculty and discipline-level, but these may not meet the criteria for an institutional level integration of authentic ACE principles.

Many diverting sections emerged with a study like this that is focusing on such a broad theme. Recognition is given to reactive outcomes to redress through, for instance, student protests to have honoured colonial figures removed from the grounds of certain universities. An observation made without the researcher having clarity around the reason, is that university 1 and 2 had their engagement linked to the corporate section of their institution. While an assumption cannot be made as to the reason, a potential concern can be that CE is too intrinsically linked to social corporate responsibility and that the link with academics needing to provide the required expertise and contextualising, may not sufficiently be involved in, or consulted on the projects, or at least the manner of reporting on these. Not all institutions' websites had equal quality and functionality with their websites, pointing to the importance of internal networking with the marketing departments to sufficiently display the impact of the university. Most universities did split CE and SD activities, with roughly similar definitions of engagement, SL and sustainability. Of concern is the remaining lack of one comprehensive conceptualisation of ACE. While some universities link to civic engagement and SL, others link the activities to philanthropy and social corporate responsibility. Social responsiveness could be implied if the outputs were considered, but details were not sufficient to determine if all levels of responsiveness were getting attention.

Fifteen public universities were not selected for this study, also limiting the findings from universities with less resources for driving CE. Potentially there can be a comparative aspect if the study is extended to these universities, based on characteristic differences. Some of the universities not selected are universities of technology for instance. A similar study-focus over a longer-term can offer a deeper evaluation of the true state of authentic civic engagement and this paper does not claim to fully represent all current projects and planned endeavours in this space. While the findings did show that some universities linked their ACE to internationalisation through international student placements, this element did not form part of the study and was not reported on or explored further. The majority of universities in this study did link sustainability to the ACE drive, but not in equitable measures. To fast-track the SD agenda, tools exist such as the framework for sustainable universities (UN Environmental Programme, 2021).

While impactful work by private HE institutions is being done within ACE, the magnitude of the projects facilitated by public universities are likely not yet matched. An analysis of private HE institutions were not the focus of the study, but the results provide insights into requirements for a socially responsive institution. In the supplementary guideline document for audits of private HE institutions, the mature audit level outcome, beyond the requirement for a coherent quality management system to be in place to ensure student success, requires: "instituting good teaching and learning practices, supporting ground-breaking research, including local research, as well as managing impactful, integrated and ethical community engagement, good governance and sustainability" (Council on Higher Education, 2021, p. 11). Even though funded projects like CHESP focused

exclusively on public universities to expand the integration of ACE, the opportunity for equal university status provided through the Amended Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa, 2016) place the private HE institutions on a pathway that requires a stronger adoption of the 3<sup>rd</sup> mission into their academic structures. Considering the challenges of the population served in SA, balanced with the market ideology of globalisation, Preece (2017, p. 15) encourages the exploring of opportunities for how HEIs can position themselves as “porous, rather than ivory towers for community engagement”. At a panel discussion on the Carnegie classification of CE in the SA context, the chairperson of SAHECEF, Prof. Lortan, highlighted that “CE is an unfunded mandate for universities, and the implications of this for sustained CE initiatives and the proposed CE framework. ‘If the participation becomes contingent upon funding, the benefits may deepen the divide between the CE-haves and CE-have nots’” (Rhodes, no date). While this inevitably create a barrier to ACE, the findings show that some universities use the third-stream income from short courses and continuing professional development courses, to fund ACE activities. Various local and international networks for CE exists, and these should be optimised for relevant impact.

Four common themes for the shaping of social entrepreneurship that differentiates it from corporate enterprise, are the: emphasising of social goals as opposed to economic goals; the social activist role of the yp; elements of innovation; and the using of economic profit, not as a means in itself, but for the solving of social problems (Moore et al., 2011). Initiatives that involve students to address development challenges need to be included in the strategy of the institution. Not all universities in the study highlighted where student voices on CE were included. Although it was more useful to see the vast number of ACE activities provided, than not, a missing feature was that of seeing a concise summary of the combined impact of all the endeavours, and how these are meeting the ACE aims of the institution. Considering that the celebration of ACE is seen as part of the process of institutionalising impact, it will contribute substantially to its cause, if HE institutions concentrate their efforts on coordinating, resourcing, monitoring (tracking) and sharing of this third mission. The majority of universities included in this study showed a firm understanding of the need to include ACE in their institution and publicly defined their positions in terms of the related concepts of SL and ES. While the synthesised protocol of authentic ACE elements is newly developed, it represented literature on the diverse concepts that should have been incorporated into the third mission by now. The need for community partnerships in ACE seems well incorporated, but practical guidelines on how to manage such partners are not equally represented, and not showing for instance if legal requirements, such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) guidelines are followed. An interesting phenomenon observed was that universities will have CE in provinces outside of those they serve, and in provinces where there is another strong university presence. It is not clear whether there is concern about this, as it seems to be accepted based on the networks individual academics establish.

Although many ACE concepts are addressed in the work of the selected universities, it can be concluded that overall, the activities described did not consider all of the extensive aspects involved in authentic ACE, or was not publicly available. Starting with an agreed set of elements as a benchmark for ACE is a good place of commencing to standardise the scholarship of engagement in HE institutions, while incorporating SDGs. This requirement is enhanced with the President of SA assenting the Climate Change Act on 23 July 2024 (South African Government, 2024). Aligning where policies may be contradictory, HE institutions will inevitably need to revisit and demonstrate the effectiveness of their policies. Those who already linked their ACE with sustainability aims, are likely to be well positioned to do this.

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