Reimagining Community Engagement for Social Justice: Aligning Policy, Pedagogy and Stakeholder Expectations

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Abstract: Community engagement (CE) is globally recognised as a pillar of scholarship through which higher education institutions (HEIs) advance social justice. Yet the available literature offers comparatively limited data on whether key stakeholders - academics, students, policymakers, and employers - who shape the behaviours, practices, and curricula of HEIs share this expectation. This article examines how four key stakeholder groups conceptualise the purpose of CE, drawing on a convergent mixed-methods study conducted at a South African private HEI. The study triangulated four complementary data sources, including a documentary analysis of national higher education policy; an institutional academic staff survey (n = 97); institutional student surveys conducted between 2021 and 2025, including a 2021 survey of more than 4,000 incoming first-year students; and employer survey data on the drivers of graduate employability. Interpreted through Nancy Fraser's multidimensional theory of social justice, the findings reveal fragmentation of purpose rather than opposition to CE. The research highlights the following: national policy frames CE as a social justice imperative; academics endorse it as pedagogy, but face constraints related to enabling conditions; students affirm its value while deferring participation during their transition into university; and employers prize the competencies CE develops without recognising CE itself. In response, the article proposes an original Policy–Pedagogy–Partnership (P^3) Alignment Framework and advances a broader conceptual argument that demonstrates CE as the mechanism through which three major agendas in contemporary higher education - social justice (Fraser), graduate employability (graduate capital), and responsible leadership for social justice and democratic citizenship - can be integrated rather than traded off against one another. The framework aligns institutional policy, developmentally sequenced curriculum design, and reciprocal stakeholder partnerships, offering higher education institutions a practical model for embedding community engagement as a strategic, sustainable institutional priority. The article draws out material implications for curriculum leaders, particularly in private and resource-constrained higher education contexts, to promote CE as a facet of the curriculum rather than as co- or extra-curricular.

Keywords: Community Engagement; Social Justice; Graduate Employability; Social Citizenship; Private Higher Education; Curriculum Transformation

1. Introduction

Universities today are entrusted not only with creating and disseminating disciplinary knowledge but also with advancing the public good, preparing graduates to respond to complex social, environmental, and economic challenges while deepening their understanding of democratic participation, social responsibility, ethical leadership, and sustainable futures. This expectation is especially pronounced in societies marked by historical inequality, where universities are called to act as agents of social transformation rather than merely producers of human capital. In this landscape, CE has emerged as a defining characteristic of the socially responsive university and, alongside teaching and research, constitutes higher education's "third mission". This marks a fundamental shift from the historic conception of universities as isolated knowledge producers towards institutions that actively collaborate with and integrate into communities to co-create knowledge, address societal challenges, and promote reciprocal learning. Importantly, CE has also evolved beyond voluntary outreach or philanthropy. At its best, CE operates as an integrated pedagogical approach that enables students to connect disciplinary knowledge with authentic societal challenges while fostering civic responsibility, ethical reasoning, and professional competence.

The South African context intensifies these imperatives. Emerging from a history of systemic exclusion (“apartheid”), South African higher education carries an explicit policy responsibility for social justice, democratic citizenship, and national development, articulated in the national Education White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997), the 2013 White Paper (DHET, 2013), and the Council on Higher Education's quality assurance and institutional audit frameworks and manual (CHE, 2020; 2021). Yet, notwithstanding these clear national policy statements, implementation remains uneven. In the absence of prescriptive implementation frameworks, differing institutional missions, resource constraints, and competing priorities have led to considerable variation in how institutions conceptualise and resource CE. These challenges are particularly acute in private higher education. Operating without state subsidies and relying predominantly on tuition income for sustainability, private HEIs most often adopt funding models that privilege student recruitment, retention, teaching quality, and graduate employability. Other imperatives, such as CE, thus receive comparatively less attention, with the

effect that CE, where implemented, has developed as a series of isolated, ad hoc projects rather than a planned, strategically embedded component of curriculum design and institutional identity.

A second pressure compounds the first, namely, mounting demands to demonstrate graduate employability. While employability discourse has strengthened curriculum relevance, it has also narrowed higher education's social purpose, as activities whose value cannot be immediately translated into labour market outcomes risk marginalisation. CE again sits at the intersection of two competing narratives – the civic mission versus economic productivity and graduate employment. The paper coheres these two often competing university objectives.

Existing research presents CE as beneficial for both students and society but largely assumes broad stakeholder consensus on its intrinsic value. Far less attention has been paid to the possibility that stakeholder groups hold fundamentally different expectations of CE's role and purpose – differences that create a significant yet under-examined tension within higher education policy and practice. Understanding these divergent stakeholder perceptions is essential if CE is to function as a genuine vehicle for social justice rather than merely a policy aspiration. Rather than ignoring the challenge or assuming consensus and alignment, universities today have a responsibility to identify where expectations converge and diverge, and to examine how these differences shape curriculum design.

More ambitiously, the paper contends that CE, if properly applied, can uniquely connect the social justice, graduate employability, and responsible leadership for social citizenship agendas, all of which are more often pursued in silos in higher education. Applying this alignment lens, social justice becomes not merely an additional curriculum outcome but an organising principle for reimagining graduate development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Third Mission

The literature review traces the evolution of CE from Boyer's (1996) Scholarship of Engagement, which challenged the teaching-and-research conception of the university by treating communities as partners in knowledge creation, to Hall and Tandon's (2017) knowledge democracy, which requires universities to acknowledge ways of knowing that were historically excluded from academic discourse. The research (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Favish, McMillan & Ngcelwane, 2012) describes CE as the defining feature of the contemporary third mission. However, purposeful institutionalisation and directed faculty development are increasingly recognised as essential to creating enabling environments in which CE can flourish. This shift reflects the broader transition from transactional CE to transformational engagement. Whereas traditional outreach models were unidirectional, with universities transferring knowledge to communities, contemporary CE emphasises mutual learning, knowledge co-creation, and reciprocal benefit, with students as active participants in addressing real-world challenges. Its pedagogical corollary is significant for curriculum design, with CE acknowledged as no longer an extracurricular add-on but a curriculum-embedded pedagogy that should carry credit, be integrated into assessment, and include structured reflection. Against this backdrop, intentional curriculum design and pedagogical construction are vital, bearing in mind Butin's (2010) caution about the dangers of poorly designed engagement, which, he notes, may easily lapse into feel-good volunteerism, reinforcing unequal university–community relationships.

2.2 CE and Social Justice

CE is inherently linked to social justice because it enables students to engage directly with structural inequality rather than merely studying it. Freire's (1970) concept of praxis, which holds that meaningful education requires continual interaction between critical reflection and transformative action, is central to this discussion, alongside Kolb's (1984) experiential learning and Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theories. Encounters with communities affected by poverty, exclusion, and marginalisation tangibly deepen students' understanding of societal challenges and inequality and cultivate critical consciousness, prosocial behaviour, and ethical reasoning, all of which are increasingly recognised as essential graduate capabilities. In South Africa, with its legacy of exclusion and inequality and an emphasis on transformation, reconciliation, and redress, CE, when effectively integrated into the curriculum, becomes an educational strategy through which students develop the dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship in a deeply unequal society.

2.3 CE, Graduate Attributes and Employability

Employers consistently identify communication, teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving as among the most desirable graduate attributes (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017; Khoo et al., 2020). Empirical work confirms both the centrality of these competencies and persistent gaps between graduates' self-assessed and demonstrated proficiencies (Jackson, 2014). Yorke and Knight (2006) argue that employability is best developed when embedded in the curriculum rather than bolted on, while Bridgstock (2009) adds that the capacity to recognise, articulate, and deploy one's skills matters as much as the skills themselves. The competencies employers seek closely mirror those developed through CE, yet employers rarely identify CE itself as an explicit recruitment criterion (Singh, 2026). Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) helps explain this paradox, recognising that under conditions of information asymmetry, employers recruit on observable signals of capability rather than the underlying educational experiences that produced them. In most instances, graduates also fail to properly claim CE-derived capabilities as part of their emergent professional identity. There is, however, emerging evidence that CE-developed socially responsible learning experiences can themselves serve as employability assets when deliberately articulated (Singh, 2026).

2.4 CE in South African Scholarship and Private Higher Education

South African CE research is almost entirely concentrated in the public sector (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005; Lazarus et al., 2008; Osman & Petersen, 2013; Preece, 2016; Johnson, 2020), while CE in private higher education remains significantly under-researched. This is not surprising, given that private HEIs have not, in practice, focused on CE. Analysing institutional commitment, Holland (1997) notes that engagement is shaped by mission, promotion and reward policies, budget allocation, and leadership signalling. Where these are structured around financial sustainability, as in South African private HEIs, CE risks remaining peripheral irrespective of individual academic goodwill. The present study contributes to this debate by examining whether stakeholder groups ascribe similar or different meanings to CE, and what these differences imply for institutions, using a South African private HEI as its empirical setting.

2.5 Responsible Leadership and Sustainability

A final strand of literature links CE to the growing expectation that higher education should cultivate responsible citizenship and that graduates should be aware of and understand the principles and values of social justice and democratic citizenship. At its core, this requires transformative learning that reshapes how students see themselves and their relationships with others, which will not be achieved by merely adding content to the curriculum alone. Global futures work reinforces the importance of this convergence for effective, ingrained change. The OECD's Learning Compass 2030 (2019) places student agency, co-agency with peers and communities, and transformative competencies at the centre of future-oriented education. This convergence frames the conceptual argument developed in Section 6.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is primarily informed by Nancy Fraser's (1995) multidimensional theory of social justice, complemented by transformative learning theory and decolonial perspectives. Fraser's framework originates in her seminal work on the redistribution–recognition debate (Fraser, 1995; Fraser & Honneth, 2003), in which she argues that economic equality and cultural recognition, while analytically distinct, remain practically intertwined, with neither reducible to the other. In her later work, Fraser (2008) adds a third dimension, namely representation, which recognises that justice requires not only equitable access to resources (redistribution) and the valuing of diverse identities and knowledges (recognition), but also meaningful participation in decision-making (representation). Applied to higher education, CE can advance all three simultaneously: redistribution, as universities mobilise intellectual resources towards societal challenges; recognition, by valuing community knowledge alongside academic knowledge; and representation, as communities become active partners in knowledge production and curriculum design. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) complements Fraser's model by explaining how engagement experiences reshape students' assumptions, values, and professional identities, while decolonial scholarship adds a critical edge, challenging universities to question whose knowledge counts, whose voices are represented, and whose interests higher education ultimately serves (Mignolo, 2011; Mbembe, 2016).

4. Research Design and Methodology

The study is situated within a pragmatist paradigm that privileges research questions over methodological orthodoxy and supports combining qualitative and quantitative evidence when each illuminates a different facet of a complex institutional phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Consistent with this position, the study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design in which documentary policy analysis and secondary analysis of institutional survey datasets were conducted in parallel, analysed separately, and integrated at the interpretation stage through triangulation. Mixed methods were well suited to the central construct because stakeholder expectations of CE require both quantitative measurement of attitude prevalence and qualitative interpretation of the meanings that stakeholders attach to engagement (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The unit of analysis was the stakeholder perspective, examined across four groups: national policymakers (through policy documentation), academic staff, students, and employers. The research formed part of a broader institutional project on CE's role in curriculum transformation at a South African private HEI, a context that embodies, in concentrated form, the tension between financial sustainability and social responsiveness that frames this study.

Four data sources were triangulated. The national policy corpus, which set the normative expectations against which stakeholder perspectives were compared. Academic staff perspectives came from a 2024 institutional survey (97 valid responses across Schools and disciplines) on attitudes, institutional support, implementation challenges, and curriculum integration. Student perspectives drew on a 2021 survey of more than 4,000 incoming 1st-years, annual 1st-year Student Profile Surveys (2022-2025), and a 2025 survey on CE relevance and participation. Employer expectations were investigated through an industry survey on graduate employability attributes, in which employers identified key competencies considered in graduate recruitment. These findings were interpreted alongside the existing employability literature. University leadership perspectives were not collected as a separate dataset, but leadership's strategic dilemmas were analysed through the policy corpus, institutional context, and staff and industry perceptions, with leadership retained as a distinct stakeholder in the conceptual framework.

Quantitative survey data was analysed descriptively using frequencies and percentages to identify dominant trends. Because the purpose was to map patterns of expectation rather than to test hypotheses, inferential statistics were not required. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach and coded both inductively and deductively, with Fraser's (2008) dimensions serving as sensitising concepts. Integration occurred through a triangulation matrix that juxtaposed themes emerging from each stakeholder group against the normative expectations identified in the policy documentation, enabling systematic identification of convergence and divergence and providing the empirical foundation for the proposed alignment Framework. Interpreting the findings through Fraser's interconnected dimensions enabled the study not only to describe stakeholder differences but also to explain why perspectives diverge and what this implies for curriculum transformation.

Surveys were administered in accordance with institutional ethics and data governance policies, with voluntary participation, anonymised and aggregated data, institutional permission for secondary analysis, and aggregate-only reporting. Rigour was supported by triangulation, an audit trail, testing interpretations against distributions and verbatim responses, and an explicit analytic procedure and theoretical lens. Limitations are acknowledged candidly: the single-institution setting precludes statistical generalisation; the datasets were designed for planning rather than research, so Fraser's framework operates interpretively rather than as a measurement lens; cross-group comparisons are thematic rather than statistical, as datasets span different years (2021-2025); and, given that all data is self-reported, it may be subject to social desirability effects, especially on questions relating to social responsibility. Notwithstanding these limitations, the stakeholder groups reflect tensions increasingly experienced across HEIs, supporting analytic generalisation.

5. Findings

The findings are presented by stakeholder group.

5.1 National Policy Expectations

There is overall consistency in the national policy documentation, which situates universities within national reconstruction and positions CE as an essential expression of higher education's social mandate. Critically, however, implementation guidance is limited as the national frameworks offer no practical guidance on implementation, leaving institutions with considerable discretion in interpreting and operationalising CE. For

private HEIs, this lack of certainty, together with the clear public-university focus in the national documentation, exacerbates uncertainty about CE resourcing and the allocation of funds for private HEIs to embed CE at the institutional level and integrate it into curricula.

5.2 Pedagogical Expectations

Academic staff demonstrated overwhelming support for CE, with more than 95 per cent agreeing that it is important in higher education and over 90 per cent believing it enriches student learning. These findings are consistent with international scholarship (Jacoby, 2015; Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Yet philosophical support did not translate into sustained implementation - almost half of respondents described institutional commitment as only moderate, despite widespread recognition of its educational value. The most significant implementation challenge, however, was insufficient institutional resources for CE. In the absence of dedicated support, academics frequently struggled to integrate meaningful community experiences into already demanding teaching responsibilities, and there were very limited institutional structures to sustain the long-term reciprocal relationships that are key to effective CE. More than 80 per cent of respondents also identified the absence of recognition and incentives as a material constraint. These findings bear out Holland's (1997) organisational analysis that academic commitment alone cannot institutionalise CE without leadership that signals strategic priority through resources, incentives, and culture. They illustrate an important distinction between belief and behaviour: academics largely accept CE as good educational practice yet require enabling institutional conditions for its widespread, coordinated implementation.

5.3 Student Expectations

Student perspectives were considerably more complex. The 2021 first-year survey found that respondents were generally aware of social issues and recognised the importance of contributing positively to society. However, this awareness did not consistently translate into willingness to participate in CE. Approximately half of student respondents reported actively considering others' problems, but significantly fewer identified community consciousness as a core personal value. Most notably, voluntary community participation received the lowest behavioural scores across all social responsibility measures. Subsequent First-Year Student Profile Surveys conducted between 2022 and 2025 revealed similarly nuanced findings. While between 59 and 65 per cent of respondents generally supported universities promoting CE, enthusiasm declined markedly when participation involved additional responsibilities for themselves during their first year of study, while students were still transitioning into higher education. Qualitative responses confirmed the contradiction: students described CE as helping them understand others' realities and as a key instrument to promote social justice, yet their immediate priority was settling in and navigating the first year. Many explained that their immediate priority was “finding my feet” and “settling in”.

Rather than signalling an outright rejection of social responsibility, these findings point to competing developmental priorities, consistent with evidence that first-year students’ intentions to volunteer are shaped by adjustment demands and prior engagement experience (Cruce & Moore, 2007). Timing may therefore matter as much as motivation, and CE introduced later in undergraduate study may attract far higher participation than activities introduced during the transition to university.

5.4 Labour Market Expectations

Employers introduced perhaps the greatest tension. Consistent with international literature, they overwhelmingly prioritised practical workplace experience, digital literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and discipline-specific knowledge, with only a very small proportion (2 of the 49 respondents) identifying social responsibility or cultural awareness as primary selection criteria. At first glance, these findings appear to challenge the value of CE; yet many CE-developed competencies – communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, ethical reasoning – closely align with what employers value. The disconnect lies not in the competencies themselves but in how they are recognised and signalled during the graduate recruitment process. This is precisely the dynamic that signalling theory (Spence, 1973) predicts, with employers recruiting on observable capabilities rather than the educational experiences that produced them. In this setting, CE risks invisibility unless universities explicitly articulate its contribution to graduate capability development. Therefore, rather than asking whether employers value CE, the more constructive question is whether universities make the employability value of engaged learning visible and claimable.

6. Discussion

The triangulated findings reveal a striking pattern: no stakeholder group rejects CE, yet each ascribes a fundamentally different purpose to it, and implementation falters in the spaces between those purposes. Policy frames CE as social justice but offers little implementation guidance, leaving institutions to translate a normative mandate unaided. The staff data exposes the consequences of this vacuum, highlighting a deficit of enabling conditions, not of conviction. The student data inverts this pattern, showing positive support for CE but deferred participation. The qualitative responses strongly locate the gap in timing rather than values. Institutional leadership must reconcile these competing registers of value under financial constraints and mounting accountability for graduate employability.

Fraser's (2008) framework helps to cohere this fragmentation. National policy foregrounds redistribution (mobilising resources towards societal reconstruction); academics foreground recognition (reciprocal learning and the valuing of community knowledge); students raise recognition and representation, with their developmental realities insufficiently recognised and their voices in engagement design limited; and employers engage CE almost exclusively through the economic register of redistribution, with its other dimensions invisible to them. The challenge for higher education is therefore not persuading stakeholders that CE matters; rather, it is to construct an integrated narrative and institutional architecture that demonstrate how CE simultaneously advances educational quality, graduate employability, and social justice. In this context, curriculum transformation should not position social justice and employability as competing priorities but should deliberately design CE experiences that develop professional capabilities through socially responsive learning.

Building on this analysis, the paper proposes a Policy–Pedagogy–Partnership (P^3) Alignment Framework, emphasising that the challenge facing higher education is fundamentally one of alignment rather than acceptance. The P^3 Framework positions CE at the intersection of three mutually dependent institutional domains: policy, which establishes the normative purpose of higher education; pedagogy, which operationalises these purposes through curriculum and student learning; and partnership, through which universities co-create knowledge and value with communities, industry, and other stakeholders. Rather than treating CE as a separate institutional function, the P^3 Framework positions it as the connecting mechanism through which these domains reinforce one another, producing graduate outcomes in civic agency and social responsibility, critical thinking and ethical judgement, work-ready skills and employability, and responsible leadership, which in turn generate societal impact.

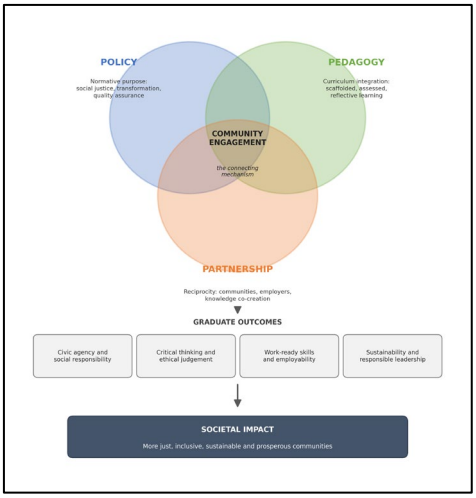


Figure 1: P^3 Alignment Framework for Social Justice through CE – Policy, Pedagogy, and Partnerships

Integrally, the Policy dimension requires moving beyond compliance statements towards strategies that embed CE across planning, quality assurance, resource allocation, and performance management, with university leadership articulating CE as an approach in which teaching, research, and societal impact are mutually reinforcing. This matters especially for private HEIs. Unless embedded in planning, budgeting, and resourcing, CE remains dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than institutional commitment. The Pedagogy dimension calls for curriculum-integrated CE within programme outcomes, graduate attributes, and assessment, and for developmentally sequenced CE across the student lifecycle, without burdening the first year of study. The Partnership dimension requires reciprocal relationships of mutual respect, shared authority, and knowledge co-

creation. This study extends the principle, arguing that alignment requires continuous dialogue among the five interdependent stakeholder communities - the four groups examined empirically and university leadership - which must orchestrate their alignment. Beyond its practical value, the P^3 Framework advances the paper's broader claim that CE integrates three agendas of social justice, graduate employability, and professional identity formation, which are usually pursued by HEIs as discrete objectives. Each agenda on its own is vulnerable: justice without employability risks marginalisation in market-driven institutions; employability without justice narrows higher education's purpose; and civic responsibility without pedagogy remains rhetorical. Authentic, curriculum-integrated CE facilitates educational practice in which all three converge.

The findings and the P^3 Framework have significant implications for institutional leaders responsible for curriculum transformation. Universities should treat CE as a core pedagogical strategy for intentionally developing graduate attributes, rather than as an extracurricular activity; recognise it within employability frameworks as evidence of transferable professional capability, using graduate transcripts, co-curricular records, and digital badging to communicate the value of community-based learning to prospective employers; and measure success not by counting projects but by evaluating learning outcomes, reciprocal community benefit, partnership sustainability, and graduate capability development. HEIs must also address the "Cinderella complex" rewarding CE as teaching and research are incentivised. As the academic staff survey shows, goodwill alone will not sustain the added workload and necessary quality partnerships.

7. Conclusion

CE occupies a distinctive position in contemporary higher education because it simultaneously advances educational quality, civic responsibility, and institutional responsiveness; yet this study shows that the actors who shape higher education ascribe markedly different purposes to it, leaving institutional leadership to negotiate these divergent expectations amidst competing strategic priorities. However, these differences are not evidence that CE lacks relevance. Achieving CE's potential to advance all three of Fraser's dimensions coherently requires committed, integrated institutional strategies. The P^3 Framework offers one pathway to achieving this integration, providing a practical model for HEIs to strengthen both their mission and graduate preparation. Importantly, the findings also challenge the assumption that higher education must choose between social justice and employability; the evidence suggests the opposite. Graduates who have learned to work collaboratively with communities, appreciate diverse knowledges, navigate complex social environments, and respond ethically to real-world challenges possess many of the capabilities employers increasingly require. Properly integrated into the curriculum, CE is not an alternative to graduate employability but can be one of its most authentic foundations.

The study offers a multistakeholder analysis of the value of CE, comparing policy, academic, student, and employer perspectives within a single analytical framework and applying Fraser's theory to explain where expectations diverge and converge. The principal contribution, however, lies in the conceptual synthesis advanced through the P^3 Alignment Framework, which positions CE as the integrating mechanism. Several limitations qualify these contributions and are discussed in Section 4. Future research should replicate the P^3 Framework across public universities, other private providers, and international contexts; test its dimensions using instruments aligned with Fraser's categories; and follow graduates longitudinally into employment.

Ultimately, however, universities remain uniquely positioned to shape not only what graduates know but also how they understand their responsibilities to others (Singh, 2020). The question is thus no longer whether CE belongs in the curriculum, but how institutions can design CE to advance social justice, enrich learning, and prepare graduates for responsible leadership in a complex and interconnected world.

Ethics Declaration

The institutional ethics committee granted ethics clearance for each research survey conducted. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were sent an invitation letter outlining the study objectives, voluntary nature of participation, and data confidentiality safeguards.

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this paper, the author sometimes used ChatGPT and Claude to improve the quality of the writing. After using the tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the information in the published article.

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