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Beyond Engagement

Exploring Tensions between the Academic Core and Engagement Activities at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa[§]

François van Schalkwyk[‡] & Tracy Bailey[*]

ABSTRACT

The contemporary South African university faces persistent pressure to transform in order to contribute to regional and national development. However, change (or transformation) is likely to be characterised by multiple and competing ideologies which may undermine attempts to position the university as a contributor to development. Using the notion of engagement as exemplified by development-related projects at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), this paper seeks to establish whether there is evidence of multiple notions of engagement, whether these notions are in alignment across three system levels, and whether the development-related activities of academics are strengthening the core functions of the university. We find that there are three dominant notions of engagement at NMMU, that they are not in alignment and that, generally speaking, the development-related activities of academics cannot be said to be strengthening core activities. Given these findings, we propose that competing ideologies in a transformative context make it both difficult and necessary for the emergence of a pact to ensure coherent and consistent change towards a common goal.

‡ **François van Schalkwyk** is an independent researcher (francois.vanschalkwyk@uct.ac.za)
* **Tracy Bailey** is a researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Transformation, South Africa (tgbailey@iafrica.com)

Introduction

As in the rest of the developing world and in developed countries where regional development is high on the political agenda, there is pressure on South African universities to be part of the transformation and development agenda, and in so doing to contribute to economic growth and the upliftment of the country's citizens.

The assumption made on the part of stakeholders external to the university, particularly those who seek a positive return on their investments (be they monetary or non-monetary), is that if universities engage with industry, business, the state and with their local communities, this will result in a closer relationship between the university and society. Such a relationship, it is postulated, will ensure that higher education makes a contribution to development.

Increasingly, these constituencies external to the university – the state, donor agencies, the labour market, students and the attentive public – are demanding change based on this belief that there is a correlation between investment in higher education and economic development. And there is an immutable and ever-insidious expectation on the part of these constituencies of a non-negotiable positive return on their investment made in higher education (Jongbloed *et al.* 2008).

In this context, Manuel Castells, speaking at the launch of *Universities and Economic Development in Africa* (Cloete *et al.* 2011), pointed to the tension between university relevance and autonomy. Castells argued that in a world where universities rely on government, industry, supra-national agencies and, increasingly, students for their financial security, they must deliver a return on these stakeholders' investments by making a contribution to the development of society. This requires universities, in general, to make their activities and programmes 'relevant'. At the same time, however, the university remains, according to Castells, the last truly autonomous institution. It is this autonomy that fosters freedom of thought, curiosity-driven research and innovation.

The study on the relationship between universities and economic development in Africa conducted by Cloete *et al.* (2011) highlights this interplay between the out-warding looking and inward-looking orientations of the university, and argues that a delicate balance needs to be maintained between the two. In other words, while universities need to be connected to external stakeholders and be responsive to national and regional priorities, they also need to focus on strengthening their academic core, that is, their core functions of teaching and knowledge production (research and doctoral graduates).

While in the case of universities in general there exists a complex tension between relevance and autonomy, in the case of so-called "comprehensive universities", the picture is further complicated in terms of competing functions within a single organisational structure. As Burton Clark (1983: 193-194) wrote close to twenty years ago:

> [T]he nationalized public university alone cannot zigzag in all the many directions called for by an increasing heterogeneity of function. It does not adapt well to new types of students, new connections to labour markets, or new academic fields, especially when they are viewed to be of lower status [...] the university becomes overloaded and risks a loss of concentration of resources and attention upon its traditional activities. Everyone then feels caught in a difficult situation, leading to a sense of continuing crisis.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) is one such comprehensive university in South Africa. The university came into existence in 2003 as the result of a merger between three institutions with very different histories and cultures – the former University of Port Elizabeth, Port Elizabeth Technikon and the Port Elizabeth campus of the Vista University. We believe that NMMU offers an ideal case to explore the possible relationship between the university and development, specifically in a transformative context which is likely to be characterised by tensions around purpose and function. This chapter, then, is concerned with the following key question: to what

extent is a university such as NMMU able to contribute to the transformation agenda in the form of a sustainable contribution to development?

Our point of departure in developing approaches to inform this question is based on three assumptions.[1] The first is that in order for a university to make a sustainable contribution to development, there must be some agreement amongst national and university stakeholders about the role of the university in general, and specifically in relation to development. The second is that there should be some 'articulation' or 'alignment' between the engagement activities[2] of the university, on the one hand, and national and university priorities and objectives, on the other. The third is that the engagement activities of academics should serve to strengthen, and not distract from or weaken, the academic core of the university. The rationale for this last proposition is that the activities of the academic core are what make universities unique as organisations and distinct from other organisational types such as research-focused NGOs, centres, quasi-governmental councils, etc. (Cloete *et al.* 2011; Van Schalkwyk 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, these assumptions are restated as three questions:

- Is there evidence of definitional and policy cohesion around the role of the university within and between national and university stakeholders?
- Are the development activities of academics in alignment with both national and university policy and strategic ambitions?
- Are the development activities of academics strengthening or weakening the academic core of the university?

We present two approaches in answering the above questions. The first study (Cloete *et al.* 2011) on the relationship between universities and development in Africa was conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation's Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) programme. This study included eight African countries and universities in its sample.[3] The authors describe the aims of the project as follows (Cloete *et al.* 2011: xvi):

> *[...] to investigate the complex relationships between higher education and economic development in selected African countries with a focus on the context in which universities operate, the internal structure and dynamics of the universities, and the interaction between the national and institutional contexts. It also aimed to identify factors and conditions that facilitate or inhibit universities' ability to make a sustainable contribution to economic development.*

The second was a study undertaken by Van Schalkwyk (2011).. Among other things, this study proposed a typology of university engagement which was developed into an engagement—function matrix with which to assess the alignment between engagement activities, institutional policies and national policies, as well as the relationship between alignment, engagement type and university function. The matrix was tested at two African universities (NMMU and the University of Mauritius) (Van Schalkwyk 2011).

Both studies drew on the same data collected by the HERANA research team but the data was analysed independently and in accordance with the particular research focus of each study. Both studies developed independent methodologies for exploring whether the development-related activities of academics (represented by projects or centres) were in alignment with the objectives of policy, and whether these activities strengthened or weakened the core academic technologies of the university. Both studies provide a unique perspective on the state of affairs at NMMU vis-à-

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1 These assumptions are taken from those underpinning the Cloete *et al.* (2011) study on the relationship between higher education and development in Africa.
2   Engagement in this paper is understood to be those university activities which are specifically regarded by the university as likely to make a direct contribution to development. In other words, development-related activities are regarded as constituting engagement. This is not to suggest that non-engagement activities (i.e. core functions such as teaching or basic research) do not make a contribution to development, but rather that such contributions are more nuanced.
3 These included Botswana and the University of Botswana; Ghana and the University of Ghana; Kenya and the University of Nairobi; Mauritius and the University of Mauritius; Mozambique and Eduardo Mondlane University; South Africa and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University; Tanzania and the University of Dar es Salaam; and Uganda and Makerere University. Except for NMMU, all of the universities were regarded as 'flagship' universities in their respective countries.

vis multiple notions of function and purpose, and the impact of these on academic endeavour and, ultimately, on the potential of the university's engagement activities to contribute to the development of the region and the country.

The HERANA study

Policy cohesion around the role of the university

Cloete *et al.* (2011) found that there was a lack of clarity and agreement about a development model and the role of higher education in development, at both national (South Africa) and institutional (NMMU) levels. The study began its analysis by exploring four notions[4] of the role of higher education from the perspective of the national authorities and the university leadership. This included an investigation of the ways in which these stakeholders spoke about development and the role of higher education, whether and how these notions were articulated in relevant policy documents, and the extent to which specific structures had been established to give expression to the intent of the policies. The four notions of the role of the university in development can be summarised as follows (Cloete *et al.* 2011: 22-23):

- The university as ancillary: In this notion, there is a strong focus on political/ideological starting-points for development. Consequently, it is assumed that there is no need for a strong (scientific) knowledge basis for development strategies and policies. Neither is it necessary for the university to play a direct role in development since the emphasis is on investments in basic healthcare, agricultural production and primary education. The role of universities is to produce educated civil servants and professionals (with teaching based on transmitting established knowledge rather than on research), as well as different forms of community service.

- The university as self-governing institution: Knowledge produced at the university is considered important for national development – especially for the improvement of healthcare and the strengthening of agricultural production. However, this notion assumes that the most relevant knowledge is produced when academics from the North and the South cooperate in externally-funded projects, rather than being steered by the state. This notion portrays the university as playing an important role in developing the national identity, and in producing high-level bureaucrats and scientific knowledge – but not directly related to national development; the university is committed to serving society as a whole rather than specific stakeholders. This notion assumes that the university is most effective when it is left to itself, and can determine its own priorities according to universal criteria, independent of the particularities of a specific geographical, national, cultural or religious context. It also assumes there is no need to invest additional public funds to increase the relevance of the university.

- The university as instrument for development agendas: In this notion, the university has an important role to play in national development – not through the production of new scientific knowledge, but through expertise exchange and capacity building. The focus of the university's development efforts should be on contributing to reducing poverty and disease, to improving agricultural production, and to supporting small business development – primarily through consultancy activities (especially for government agencies and development aid) and through direct involvement in local communities.

- The university as engine of development: This notion assumes that knowledge plays a central role in national development – in relation to improving healthcare and agricultural

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4   The four notions were developed from the work of Maassen and Cloete (2006) and Maassen and Olsen (2007).

production, but also in relation to innovations in the private sector, especially in areas such as information and communication technology, biotechnology and engineering. Within this notion the university is seen as (one of) the core institution in the national development model. The underlying assumption is that the university is the only institution in society that can provide an adequate foundation for the complexities of the emerging knowledge economy when it comes to producing the relevant skills and competencies of employees in all major sectors, as well as to the production of use-oriented knowledge.

Table 1 summarises the notions of the role of higher education held by national (South African) and university (NMMU) stakeholders, and indicates whether the notion was strong, prevalent, or simply present.

Table 1: Comparing national and NMMU notions of the role of the university in development

Notions	National stakeholders		University stakeholders	
Ancillary	•	Strongly present in some policy documents	☐	Some academics thought that this is how the university is perceived
Self-governing	■	Accepted in a number of policies; expected to provide general education and train researchers	☐	Very strong amongst some stakeholders
Instrument for development	■	Probably most directly expressed by Cabinet document	☐	Many academics saw the 'technikon' model as the future with technology application
Engine for development	☐	Very strongly favoured by the Department of Science and Technology	☐	Some academics saw globally competitive research and innovation as the way to go

■ Strong   ☐ Prevalent   • Present

At the national level in South Africa, the notion of the role of the university varied – from training for the labour market and training researchers (Department of Higher Education and Training), to a strong emphasis on research and innovation (Department of Science and Technology), to skills and innovation policies aligned to sectoral priorities from the Cabinet's *Industrial Policy Action Plan*. These different government positions basically covered all four notions of the role of knowledge and universities in development. A senior university leader argued that the Thabo Mbeki administration did not see higher education as central to debates on macro-economic development and that it was only towards the end of his administration that the issue was raised intermittently. Now, the Minister of Higher Education and Training was focussing on training for the labour market.

This lack of agreement about the role of the university at the national level was reflected in the variety of views expressed by NMMU leadership and senior academics. For instance, one respondent suggested that current demands required political tradeoffs which might result in a view of the university as a luxury at worst, or at best an institution that should deliver skills for the labour market. Other views included that the university's real contribution to development is broadening the researcher pool; that it is through technology development and transfer; and, that it lies in stimulating economic activity in the immediate vicinity of the university. There was also a view that linking the university to economic development was a recurring fad. Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the discussion in the interviews was about the ongoing internal debates about the identity of the newly-merged 'comprehensive' institution. Broadly speaking, people from the former university seemed to favour the self-governing and the engine view, while staff from the former technikon leaned more towards an instrumental role.

In summary, at NMMU there was no dominant view; instead, there were a range of competing views representing all four notions. Of the eight African universities in the HERANA sample, NMMU was experiencing the greatest contestation over the role of the university in development amongst its own leadership and senior academics, and between university stakeholders and the national authorities. By contrast, there was considerably more convergence amongst the University of Mauritius stakeholders and the national authorities in Mauritius, particularly around the engine of development notion (strong) and, to a lesser extent, the self-governing notion (present). On the whole, across all eight universities, the most obvious unresolved tension was between the self-governance and instrumental roles, reflecting the age-old tension between institutional autonomy and engagement or responsiveness (Cloete *et al.* 2011: 25). Where the engine of development role was evident, this was usually stronger at the national than the university level.

Connectedness between university engagement activities and development: articulation and the academic core

According to Burton Clark (1998), the 'heartland' of enterprising universities, with strong steering cores and developed outreach structures, remains in traditional academic departments built upon disciplines and some interdisciplinary fields. This 'heartland' is where traditional academic values and activities reside including teaching, research and training of the next generation of academics.

Instead of 'heartland', we use the term 'academic core'. While most universities also engage in knowledge activities in the area of community service or outreach, our contention is that the backbone or the foundation of the university's business is its academic core – that is, its teaching via academic degree programmes, its research output, and the production of doctorates (those individuals who, in the future, will be responsible for carrying out the core knowledge activities).

Following Cloete *et al.* (2011), our analytical assumption is that it is this core that needs to be strengthened if universities, as key knowledge institutions, are to make a sustainable contribution to development. More specifically, engagement activities will make a more sustainable contribution to development when they are well-connected to external stakeholders, whilst simultaneously strengthening the academic core.

Cloete *et al.* (2011) operationalised this 'connectedness' between external stakeholders and the academic core along two axes. The first was the notion of 'articulation' which comprises the following dimensions:

- The extent to which the aims and outcomes of development-related activities articulate with national development priorities and the university's strategic objectives;
- The linkages the project/centre has with an 'implementation agency' (i.e. an external body which takes up the knowledge and/or its products generated or applied through research or training);
- The linkages generated through sources of funding in two respects: whether the project/centre obtains funding from one or more of the three stakeholder groups (government, an external funder or the university itself); and the extent to which the project/centre develops a relationship with its funders over time (financial sustainability).

The second axis indicates whether the development-related activities strengthen or weaken the academic core of the university. The five indicators for this axis were the extent to which the work undertaken in projects/centres: fed into teaching or curriculum development; linked to the formal training of students; was published in academic publications; linked to international academic networks; and generated new (rather than apply existing) knowledge (Cloete et al. 2011: 53).

For the HERANA project, NMMU leadership identified six major development-related projects or centres for inclusion in the study.. Combining the concepts of articulation and the academic core, the HERANA project plotted the connectedness of each of the NMMU projects (see Figure 1).

Following the analytical assumption, we would regard the ideal to be that engagement activities fall in the top right-hand quadrant of the graphic – meaning that their activities were well-connected to external stakeholders whilst also strengthening the academic core.

Figure 1: The connectedness of development-related projects/centres at NMMU
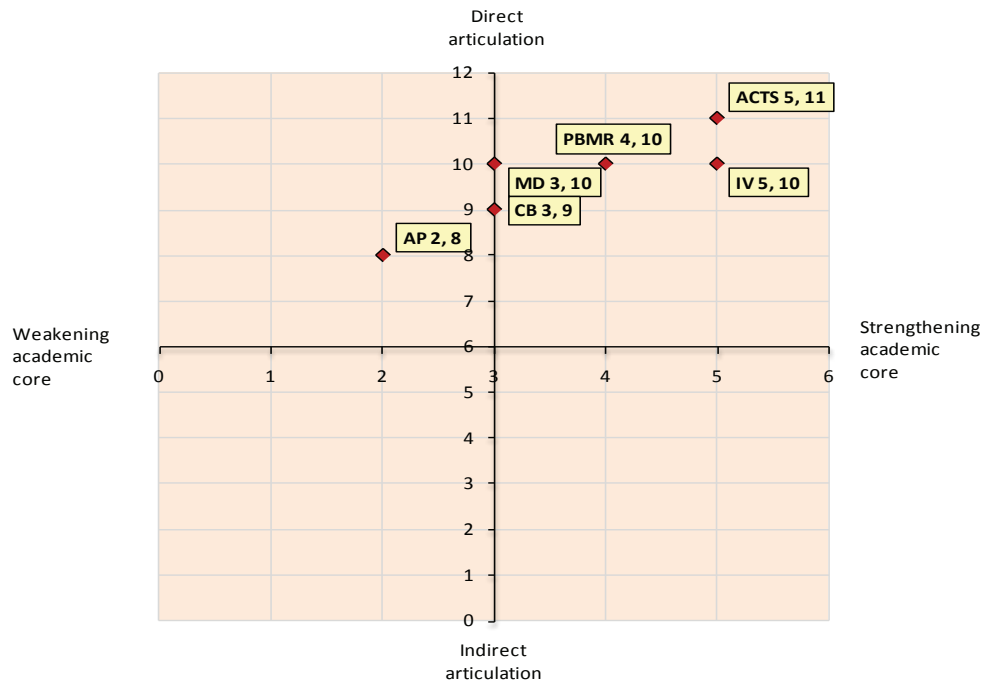
As can be seen from Figure 1, three of the six projects/centres fell with the top right-hand quadrant. Two of these – the Automotive Components Technology Station (ACTS), and InnoVenton (IV) – engaged in a large number and variety of consultancy projects for industry, which in part explains their strong articulation rating. Despite their strong orientation towards consultancy projects, these two centres also managed to make significant contributions to strengthening the academic core of the university (they both scored the maximum rating of 5 on this axis). It is perhaps not surprising that the short-term consultancy project (the agro-processing project [AP]), as well as the two projects which were characterised more as 'community service' type activities within their respective departments, scored quite high on the articulation rating. However, one of these especially – the consultancy project – was largely delinked from teaching and research, and was potentially drawing academic staff away from these core activities.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, compared to the other universities in the HERANA sample, the NMMU development activities scored well in terms of strengthening the academic core whilst having strong connections to external stakeholders and national development priorities (Cloete *et al.* 2011: 60).

Engagement at NMMU

Van Schalkwyk (2011) developed a set of indicators and a matrix for mapping engagement policies (both national and institutional) and activities (as exemplified by development projects) at two African universities, one of which was NMMU. In order to develop the matrix, Van Schalkwyk (2011) plotted the three purported functions of universities (teaching, research and service) along one axis, and five types of engagement along the other axis. Among other endeavours, he sought to use the matrix to establish whether there is alignment around the notion of engagement between the

three higher education system levels proposed by Clark (1983) – the super (national), the middle (leadership and administration) and the under structure (the academic disciplines or 'heartland') levels. (Alignment refers to the degree of overlap between the super, middle and under structures in terms of both the purpose and the perceived benefits of engagement.) The matrix was also used to indicate the extent to which academic activity is strengthening or weakening the core academic activities of teaching and research, and to establish whether there is a relationship between engagement type, university function and a tendency to strengthen or weaken the academic core.

Types of engagement

In developing the matrix, four of the five types of engagement were drawn from Muller (2010): struggle engagement, community engagement; Mode 2 engagement and engagement as development. Van Schalkwyk (2011) renamed two of these classifications and added a fifth.

The first stage in Muller's four stages of engagement is what he terms 'struggle engagement' which saw academics in 1980s apartheid South Africa attempting to connect their academic endeavours with the broader socio-political project of resistance.. The second stage, which took root in post-apartheid South Africa in the mid-1990s, was that of community engagement (or service learning) which is described as an attempt at transferring skills and knowledge, primarily by students, to local communities. This phase was strongly influenced by an American notion of community service, imported to South Africa in part through philanthropies such as the Ford Foundation. This tradition remains strong in the United States where universities are being encouraged to engage with their local, doorstep communities (Center for Studies in Higher Education 2005). Because of the preponderance of terms such as 'community engagement', 'service learning' and 'outreach', Van Schalkwyk (2011) proposed a singular, all compassing term, 'civic engagement', for the typology where 'civic engagement' describes that type of engagement activity which attempts to leverage the existing intellectual assets of a university to address localised social ills in collaboration with doorstep communities.

In the late 1990s, engagement with a different kind of community took centre stage according to Muller. With the de-politicisation and democratisation of knowledge within the globally networked communities in which South African academics could increasingly gain access to, 'Mode 2' engagement predominates. Communities are broader and more global – no longer only located on the university's doorstep. The community is more heavily populated with other academics as a means of bolstering the knowledge project while at the same time seeking validation from within a community of scholars (rather than from a community imbued with lay or tacit knowledge). A key concept and prime driver is both the creation of new knowledge (predominantly 'applied' or 'use-inspired') as well as the innovation of new technologies. Mode 2 knowledge, coined by Gibbons, is however a slippery term and one likely to trigger unwanted associations and non-relevant debates. It was therefore suggested by Van Schalkwyk (2011) that Muller's 'Mode 2' stage of engagement be renamed 'scientific engagement' for the purposes of the typology.

The fourth and final stage is what Muller terms 'engagement as development'. The overarching imperative during this stage is the attempt to increase the number of linkages between government and industry on the one hand, and universities on the other, in order to drive development. This development is national and is primarily economic with the assumption that social development will follow.. The qualifier 'economic' is added to development engagement in order to differentiate this specific form of engagement from the overarching engagement imperative of social development.

In addition to the proposed name changes to Muller's stages of engagement, a further distinction was proposed by Van Schalkwyk. This distinction revolves around an interrogation of the 'Mode 2 engagement' stage (renamed 'scientific engagement'). Muller explains as follows: 'Key to the concept, however, is that all partners bring something that can be exchanged or negotiated and, second, that they also have the resources (scientific as well as material) to be able to take something from other participants' (Gibbons 2006 in Muller 2010: 77). Further on, he makes the

point that 'what the mode 2 account did have going for it was a focus on the knowledge project, and an incipient if not explicit social or explanatory theory [...] that brought it back to the political and economic realms, and began to suggest a way of re-connecting the knowledge project with the social project' (Muller 2010: 79). This reconnect with the knowledge project, suggests two related but ideologically separate categorisations within the Mode 2 phase, both of which nevertheless sit comfortably within Gibbons's 'transaction spaces'. The first, as Muller points out, is the reconnect to the knowledge project but, in a manner which is not predicated on any material form of exchange. Knowledge is transacted for knowledge within a global network ('community') for the purpose of advancing knowledge as well as to bolster the status of the 'knowledge traders' within the network. And the imperative beyond personal, elevated academic status may be as noble as to make a contribution to the social development through research and knowledge exchange.

The second type of knowledge transaction has a very different imperative. It is predicated on the potential financial reward of knowledge exchange within a network. This is more akin to the academic entrepreneurialism of Clark (1999) or the academic capitalism of Rhoades and Slaughter (1997). And the communities in question here – and those most likely to reap the rewards of such engagement – are the academic communities that populate universities. This form of engagement ensures the survival of their own academic communities in the face of dwindling budgets, while ostensibly simultaneously transferring knowledge from within the hallowed walls of these academic communities (regarded as isolated from society) to the non-academic world. As such, it is suggested that for the purposes of the engagement typology an additional categorisation – 'entrepreneurial engagement' – be added to those set out by Muller (2010).

It is evident from Muller's modified historical taxonomy, that each category (or phase) is underpinned by an ideological imperative. This focus on the ideological imperatives splits the entrepreneurial category (with a financial imperative) from the scientific category (with its knowledge creation imperative). The struggle engagement category is underpinned by a political imperative – to ensure social transformation through political change. Civic service engagement has social responsibility as its imperative – developing social awareness among university students and academics while at the same time transferring knowledge to the community as part of a greater social project in which the university must play its part. The economic development category has as its ideological imperative the development of the national economy in globally connected trading zones, and it is assumed that such economic development will drive social development and change.

Alignment: national policy, NMMU policy and project engagement imperatives

Van Schalkwyk (2011) determined the predominant type of engagement at the three system levels proposed by Clark (1983) by devising five questions aimed at establishing the predominant ideological imperative for engaging. An affirmative answer to any of the questions posed would be indicative of the type of engagement.

At the level of the super structure (or national level), the higher education policies of the then Department of Education as well as the Council on Higher Education were analysed. It was found that civic engagement predominated in the super structure with evidence of an emerging development engagement ideology. At the middle structure level, three engagement ideologies were evident at NMMU – civic, scientific and development engagement. This finding is in accordance with the evidence of multiple notions around the roles of universities at both the super and middle structures in the HERANA study.

Engagement activities in the under structure (the level of the academic disciplines) were plotted on one axis according one of the three purported university functions, and, on the other axis, according to the type of engagement activity. An examination of the positioning of development-related projects on the matrix revealed that three projects were found to be of the 'civic engagement' type of engagement while the remaining four projects were dispersed across three other types of engagement.

Figure 2: The alignment of national policy, university policy and development-related activities at NMMU

At NMMU, the fact that the greatest number of projects were found to be of the civic engagement type is in line with the predominant discourse at middle-structure level. One project was categorised as 'entrepreneurial engagement' and one as 'scientific engagement'. Two projects were categorised as 'development engagement' which supports the emergence of a discourse around engagement being necessary to drive development.

In other words, Van Schalkwyk's findings reveal that although, historically, engagement had been interpreted primarily as 'civic engagement', there appears to be a shift at both the super and middle structure levels towards the 'development engagement' notion. Interestingly, this shift appears to be driven by a combination of new leadership and the observable success of certain projects in the under structure. More broadly, then, change appears to be driven by endogenous rather than by exogenous factors.

In summary, based on the state of affairs at the time of the study and regardless of any perceived shifts towards development engagement, there was no evidence of alignment on a single notion of engagement across or within the three levels analysed.

Relationship between engagement type, university function and bearing

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the matrix reveals a close relationship between civic and entrepreneurial types of engagement and the service function of the university, as well as a close relationship between scientific and development types of engagement and the research and teaching functions. However, when factoring in whether engagement activities strengthen or weaken the academic core, the seemingly intuitive conclusion that service function—civic/entrepreneurial type engagement activities are more likely to weaken the academic core, does not appear to hold true.

In support of the suspicion of the contribution of certain types of engagement activities and despite

the shift in ideology, and potential (if not actual) alignment described by Van Schalkwyk (2011) and the findings of the HERANA study as represented in Figure 2, a senior institutional leader at NMMU questioned the impact of NMMU's engagement activities in contributing to economic development. For him, this was due to weak co-ordination between NMMU, government and industry as well as between universities in the region. This lack of co-ordination, he argued, resulted in engagement activities that were responsive in a purely reactionary and opportunistic way amounting to short-termism and questionable sustainability.

This comment appears to be substantiated by Van Schalkwyk's (2011) finding that four of seven projects studied fall into the 'services' function category on the typology. In addition, three of the seven engagement activities could be regarded as projects rather than longer-term programmes, reinforcing concerns expressed by short-term opportunism undermining sustained contributions.

However, measuring the engagement activities' bearing (i.e. their contribution to teaching and research dissemination in the form of publications and participation at conferences) in order to assess whether they strengthen or weaken core academic endeavours, Van Schalkwyk (2011) shows that only one of the projects in the sample is seen to be weakening the academic core. This suggests that most of the projects plotted are in fact strengthening the academic core and therefore, by implication, are more likely to make a sustained contribution to development. Therefore, while greater co-ordination would possibly result in fewer service-type projects and more long-term programmes, making for a more sustainable impact on teaching and research, based on the findings presented here, it is nevertheless possible for short-term projects to strengthen the core activities of the university.

Limitations

Attention needs to be drawn to the conceptual quagmire as well as the process of sampling the development-related activities by the HERANA project from which the data for both studies were drawn.

The notion of what constitutes a development-related activity was poorly defined and conceptualised in the HERANA study. Terms such as 'engagement', 'responsiveness' and 'poverty alleviation strategies' – each loaded with a host of possible interpretations – were taken to be synonymous with activities contributing to development. Development as a concept is equally fraught. Moreover, development activities were generally conceived of as projects and were included based on the recommendations of selected institutional leaders at both universities thereby introducing a possible bias in the projects included in the analysis. It is also acknowledged the sample size was small with fewer than ten development-related activities at each university being studied.

It is suggested, however, that despite these obvious shortcomings, both approaches are replicable and remain useful in garnering a better understanding of academic activity and higher education policy as they relate to development and its possible impact on core academic functions. Using the basic tenets and approaches presented in this paper, future studies could further refine the concept of what constitutes a development-related academic activity and improve sampling methods in order to further the initial observations and build on the tentative conclusions offered.

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In closing, caution should be exercised when considering the causal relationship between policy/discourse alignment and agency. Van Schalkwyk's engagement type—university function matrix for the University of Mauritius (see Figure 3) reveals that national policy and university policy are – with the exception of an additional preoccupation by the university on entrepreneurial engagement – in perfect alignment; and that the engagement imperatives of the under structure are, by and large, in accordance with the policies that are in place at both the organisational and national levels. The

bearing of the projects plotted is, however, less uniform; as is the clustering of projects around the university function axis.

Figure 3 Alignment and bearing of development-related projects at the University of Mauritius
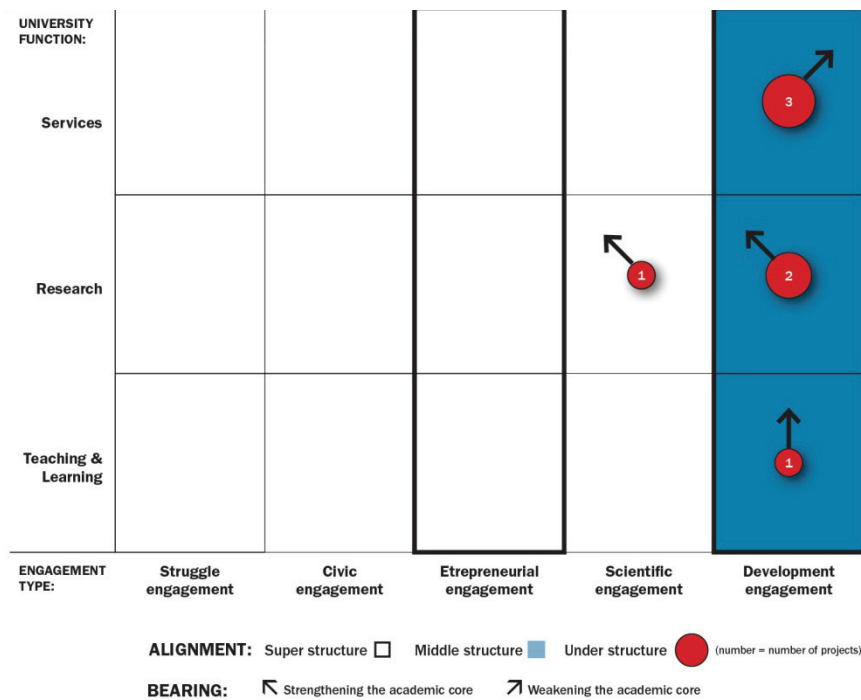
A possible explanation is that while there is strong alignment and a consistent discourse around the developmental role of the university as reflected in the matrix, action at the project level is inconsistent in terms of the bearings of the projects studied. A belief in the knowledge economy, globalisation and the role of the university is shared across all levels and yet there is still a lack of consistent direction in the bearings of the projects studied. The academics, while not suspicious of the state in a subversive sense, are nevertheless prone to acting in ways that do not necessarily exhibit a common plan of action or common understanding of how projects relate (or should relate) to the core functions of the university. In other words, the pact that exists appears to be more explicit than implicit in the case of the University of Mauritius.

Even when alignment is observable, this is only an enabling, not a determinative, condition. A finding related to the observation at NMMU that a shift towards development engagement and activities that strengthen the academic core appear to be driven by internal rather than exogenous factors (Van Schalkwyk 2011). As Clark (1983: 25) writes: 'Formal goals may help to give meaning to the general character of the system, for insiders and outsiders alike […] But they hardly give you a clue about what to do.' Engagement driven by the super and middle structures may not be internalised and may not therefore leave permanent institutional traces because it does not penetrate the academic core to a significant degree.

Concluding comments

Based on the findings of the two studies presented in this paper, there are competing, multiple notions operating within NMMU – both in terms of the university's function and in terms of how engagement is conceptualised. There are competing notions at the level of core academic activity as well as between the academic and administrative levels of the university.

Johann Olsen (2007b) differentiates between the university as an instrument and the university as an institution. From an instrumentalist point of view the university is engaged in a contractual relationship with its stakeholders. Stakeholders' demands do not, however, remain constant or consistent. This, Olsen claims, causes the organisation to change as it shifts to respond to its contract with its stakeholders. From an institutional perspective, however, the university is regarded as a more enduring or robust organisational form with predetermined rules, norms and values that validate (or invalidate) the demands of both external and internal stakeholders. Viewed exogenously, this reiterates the tension between the university as a developmental instrument (and as potentially responsive) and the university as institution (as autonomous and predictably nonresponsive). Within the university itself, the lack of a pact and the inevitable ambivalence of signals (from without and within the university) result in competing notions and ideologies around the role of the university vis-à-vis society. And this translates into confusion at the level of agency (daily academic activity).

This tension between autonomy and innovation on the one hand, and relevance and development on the other, points, we think, now more than ever to the need for a clear and unambiguous, mutually accepted, taken-for-granted understanding of the purposes of contemporary universities. What is possibly needed is an implicit agreement (or 'pact') across the span of university stakeholders; in essence, a set of values that, over time, have a high likelihood of becoming taken-for-granted by all stakeholders. The existence of a pact between national and university stakeholders, as well as external stakeholders such as industry and foreign donors on the role of higher education, is a key factor in the extent to which universities will be able to make a sustained contribution to development. Further research on current developments in the higher education is required to substantiate this conjecture on the perceived value of a pact in ensuring a more co-ordinated, enduring and impactful contribution to development.

In the South African context, current macro-level signs are at least encouraging on two fronts. First, there appears to be an increasing acceptance of the need to differentiate the South African higher education system (CHET 2011, National Planning Commission 2011). Such differentiation will allow for a clearer, more singular understanding of function and purpose within universities and across the higher education (as opposed the university) system. Second, there appears to be an emergent new national dialogue. With government, labour, business, and the growing number of unemployed youth, all pulling in different directions, there appears to be an awareness of the imperative of plotting a more certain future (Hofmeyr 2012: xi-xii). And the role of universities will be key if such a future is to be one which sees the economic development of South Africa in a teetering and less than certain global economy as well the upliftment of all of its citizens.

It is hoped that the approaches presented in this paper will provide useful instruments that will be tested, refined and deployed at other universities in order to assess the university's changing role in general and its possible contribution to development in particular.

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