

Toward Functional Community Engagement in Academia: The Nigerian University Experience

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ABSTRACT

Academics who choose to engage in community service to fulfil their internal professional obligations often face challenges that force them to turn to private consultancy work outside of their university obligations. This is often for better remuneration and personal fulfilment, rather than a perceived importance to scholarly engagement in service to the immediate community. Although much research has been conducted on community engagement in higher education, few studies have explored how such work is sustained, especially among academics in non-Western universities. In response, this study sets out to explore sustainable community engagement among academics in Nigeria, where academic community engagement has recently been given a renewed emphasis by policy makers. The study utilized a qualitative case study approach, by way of in-depth interviews with nine professors from diverse academic fields of study in a community-based Nigerian university. The findings point to several potential strategies for making community engagement more sustainable, including incorporating community engagement into university policies, providing a more supportive institutional culture, facilitating engagement through reward and recognition of engaging academics, conducting continuous research into community problems, and encouraging engagement based on academics' area of specialization. Implications to practice and suggestions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: Community engagement, functional services, University Professors, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement has been established as an integral part of the pedagogy and mission of many mid-sized and large urban universities (Medley, n.d.). According to Koliba (2007), the basis for integrating partnership-based outreach and civic responsiveness with other academic roles was initiated by Ernest Boyer, who stressed the importance of public universities to return to their historical responsibility of being civic-minded and making meaningful contributions to local communities. Boyer (1990) redefined academic scholarship noting that applied research and engagement should be part of the crucial roles of faculty. Ifedili & Ifedili (2015) and Adekalu et al. (2017) assert that through community engagement by academics and students, the well-being of the community resident can be improved, while the general mission of the university upheld.

Ideally, when university academics engage in community engagement activities, they use their knowledge and skills to support the development of local communities. Community engagement has emerged as a growing trend within higher education driven by the desire to achieve human resource and sustainable development goals. Although the knowledge about how higher education can sustain community engagement outreach in non-western universities remains limited, in specific, within the community of practice little is known about the advantages towards offering impactful value-adding functional community engagement outreach for sustainable development, in turn, career development of faculty members that are result oriented (Shitu, 2016, Adekalu et al. 2017b). In this study, the researchers conduct a comprehensive literature related to community engagement and approaches to advance the understanding of how to sustain community engagement in higher education.

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Community engagement can be performed through research, teaching and outreach work that can take various forms including provision of water boreholes, health care facilities, and educating communities for the development of entrepreneurial skills. In this study, the researchers define functional community engagement as university members' involvement in solving real-world problems in concordance with the mission of the institution (Lynton, 1995; Bloomfield, 2006). Engagement in this study includes all forms of community-based research, service learning and applied research involving the use of academic expertise in collaboration with local expertise to address felt needs as identified by communities themselves (Driscoll & Lynton, 1999).

The importance of institutions of higher education in enabling sustainable development has been well-documented (Obaya 2011; Abdulkareem, 2014; Shittu, 2016; Alege & Ajanla, 2016; Adekalu et al. 2017b). In the context of developing nations, many universities within academics engage in community development activities, teaching, research and scholarship as part of their obligation to contribute to sustainable development. Green (2011) argues that the role of academic and community development officers is more of facilitators, rather than that of directors, because community development is regarded as a process of helping the community achieve a goal. Even though community engagement has been recognized by many researchers as an integral part of the work of institutions of higher learning, the sustenance of community engagement among academics in non-western universities is not well-documented. In response, this current study attempts to explore, understand and describe the ways through which community engagement can be sustained among academics in non-western universities. These ways of sustaining community engagement are based on the experiences shared by university professors that participated in the current study.

According to Garlick and Langworthy (2008), several efforts have been made by researchers in different countries to establish a connection between universities and local communities through community engagement, which in turn leads to sustainable development. One such example is the efforts made by Garlick and Langworthy (2008) to develop a national approach which will measure the engagement of universities in local communities. Also, in the United States of America, community engagement is emphasised by the higher education system as the most significant part of its mission and identity. Therefore, institutions have demonstrated their commitment to community engagement by allocating of resource to support university members in community engagement (Bernhardt 2015; Weerts & Hudson 2009), supporting research on universities' civic missions (Kellogg Commission, 1999; Driscoll, 2009), incorporating community engagement into curriculum (UMass Civic Engagement and Service Learning, 2015) and encouraging community engagement by changing policies and practices (Michigan State University, 2015).

These efforts by institutions of higher learning to promote community engagement can be attributed to its importance in producing high level manpower and development of national awareness. Other functions include: 1) dissemination of existing and new information, 2) rendering of services to the community and 3) being a storehouse of knowledge (Fafunwa, 2004; FGN, 2004). However, promoting community engagement is not just sufficient to sustain it. There is more to community engagement than merely preaching it; it must be sustained so that its impact will be continuously felt in the communities. Against this backdrop, this study was conducted to explore the experiences of engaged professors, how community engagement can be sustained among academics in non-western universities.

Background of the Study

Even though Nigeria has the largest number of universities in Sub-Sahara Africa, the documentary evidence of university and academics staff involvement in community engagement service is still lacking (Ifedili & Ifedili, 2015). Despite these universities having been established to contribute to the human, socio-cultural and community development of the country, academic activity in research, teaching, community service has, in general, not measured up to public expectations (Ahmed, Umar & Paul, 2015). In this study, functional community engagement involves continuous community engagement outreach amongst academics. It is important for community engagement amongst academics to be sustained, by ensuring that universities continues to ensure that faculty members with their wealth of experience do not stop participating in community development activities, so that its benefits can be continuously enjoyed by academics, the institutions, communities and the nation at large. Furthermore, community engagement must be sustained because it also facilitates the development of human resource within the academia (Boyte, 1999). In the current study, nine Nigerian university professors were asked to describe the ways through which community engagement can be sustained. The findings of the study aim to contribute to the existing literature on community engagement, by describing the ways through which community engagement can be sustained, specifically in non-western universities. Thus, the main research question is: What contributes to the sustained participation of academics in community engagement? The purpose of this research question is to find out perceptions of the university professors in enhancing academics active participation in community engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative approaches to collect data by way of participant observations, case study, and in-depth semi-structured interviews (Das, 1983). The qualitative data also consist of interview transcripts, observations from the researcher, detailed descriptions from case study, field notes, and documents and academic and professional journal publications (Patton, 2002). Kwara State University, Nigeria which is the university in which the professors are employed was also selected using purposive sampling technique. This technique allows the researchers to choose specific samples that provide insights into the issues related to the study area (Alston and Bowles 2003).

Nine university professors participated in the study. All participants were full professors with at least fifteen years of work experience in academia, had regular engagement in community service, had received recognitions and awards within and outside of the university for community engagement activities in their related fields of study and had been acknowledged by the university authorities. The study data were obtained at the Kwara State University, Malete, being an institution with a philosophy of community development. The university was approved as a “University for Community Development” by Kwara State Government with a reputation for excellence in teaching, research and community interventions.

The professors were from nine different academic departments at the Kwara State University. The participants were selected from within the College of Agriculture, Applied Sciences, Education, Engineering, Humanity, Information Communication Technology, and Social Sciences. Among the nine participants, seven were males and two were females. The age of the participants ranged from early 40s to early 70s, the average age being in the late 50s. They all had more than 15 years of work experience in academia. Within the sample, three of the professor received their doctoral degrees in Nigeria, while the remaining six graduated from overseas institutions, namely the United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, and Canada. They were all Nigerian nationals.

Each participant was interviewed between 1 to 4 times during the study. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes to 2 hours. A total of nineteen (19) one-on-one interviews were conducted. Documentary review was carried out during fieldwork when no interviews were carried out. The documents were reviewed to support the data collected through interviews, participant observation, memos and field notes. Table 1 below shows details of the professors who participated in the research.

TABLE 1
Research Participants, College, Area of Expertise and Gender

Participants	College	Area of Expertise	Gender
PK1	Agriculture	Plant bridging and Genetic	Male
PK2	Education	Sport Management	Male
PK3	Agriculture	Agricultural Extension	Male
PK4	Engineering	Soil and Water	Male
PK5	Humanity	Gender and English Literature	Female
PK6	Humanity	Linguistics	Female
PK7	Applied Science	Geology	Male
PK8	Social Science	Political Science	Male
PK9	ICT	Computer Science	Male

RESULTS

Based on the responses by the study participants on the study main research question, six themes emerged from the data. The themes describe the participants' views on how community engagement can be sustained within universities. The themes are: 1) incorporation of community engagement into university policy, 2) institutional support culture, 3) facilitation of community engagement through reward and recognition of engaging professors, 4) continuous research into community problems, 5) community engagement based on professors' area of specialization and 6) knowledge sharing.

Incorporation of Community Engagement into University Policy

The participants were asked what they thought could facilitate the participation of academics in sustainable community engagement. Many of them opined that sustainable community engagement could be enhanced if the university made participation in community development part of its policy. This can be achieved by making participation compulsory, ensuring that every academic is committed to community outreach so that they can

help in solving the problems of the community. By making community engagement compulsory there will be continuity in participation because academics will continuously research into community problems and find solutions to them. Participant PK1 noted saying:

“Like my university, Kwasu, the university has to ensure that every academic is committed to community outreach. So, once you are here, part of your assignment will be to address the problems of the community. If there is any problem in your area you ought to solve it; because if you don't, people will have no respect for you as it will be glaring that you are not up to the task.”

He further said that in order to facilitate sustainable community engagement of academics, the university should be committed to employing academics and researchers whose primary task is to look into community problems and find solutions. Moreover, the university should make it part of its mandate to employ academics from different areas who can look into different problems of the community and proffer solutions to them. Similarly, participant PK5 shared the same view with participant PK1:

“Sustainable engagement in community services by academics can be facilitated by university management if they make it a requirement just like Kwasu has done. Many universities don't make it compulsory, so their academics don't engage. For example, Kwasu expects every academic staff to be engaged in community development; even for promotion you need to show evidence of what you have done for the community. That is the only academics can structure it into their curriculum. Every academic staff in Kwasu knows that he/she have to engage in community development; this is now a normal thing in Kwasu.”

Based on these responses, it can be said that participants think that making community engagement part of the university's policies can facilitate sustainable engagement.

Institution Support Culture

While several participants recommended a policy approach to sustaining engagement among academics, others expressed the need for institutional support to facilitate sustainability. The participants included both moral and financial support as both are paramount to the sustenance of community engagement. However, greater emphasis was placed on financial support which they said is very important in facilitating community engagement among academics. Participant PK2 who stated that sustainability in engagement can be facilitated by financial expressed his view saying:

“Encouragement will be the top and as an academic this encouragement can come in different ways. You give financial support because some of these projects might be cost intensive; you have to spend money and sometimes salary may not be enough. But, if you have support from institution like here in Kwasu, if this kind of support is given, the interest of academics in community engagement will be sustained because they will be motivated to do more. I think the funding aspect is very important, if this support is not there, honestly, I think a lot of people will not want to continue engaging in community development services.”

Participants viewed moral support in the form of giving talks as a means to awaken the interest of academics to engage in sustainable community development. Similarly, participant PK3 noted that financial support can also facilitate sustainability in community engagement. Participants commented that it is important for the university to be committed to this kind of support by setting aside funds for the execution of community development projects:

“Like what Kwasu is doing, I don't think there is any university doing that here in Nigeria—put out some money from the university budget for community services is something that is very good. As a result of this kind of support, every year not less than 30 staff members are busy with community development projects. I think this kind of thing should be encouraged by the university management and they should be able to devote more money to this aspect and also encourage other universities to learn from this type of system which Kwasu is trying to encourage.”

Likewise, participant PK8 pointed out that financial support is the most important kind of support that a university can provide academics who engage in community development. He went further by suggesting that the university can also support academics by helping to find out where there are problems so that they (professors) can just go straight away into finding solutions rather than using resources, like time and money, for community engagement. Participant PK8 explained that this can help in reducing the resources needed by the professors to perform community engagement.

Based on their responses, having a supportive institutional culture in the form of financial and moral support is one of the ways through which continuous community engagement can be facilitated. Moreover, greater emphasis was placed on financial support due to the high costs involved in executing community-based projects.

Facilitation of Community Engagement through Reward and Recognition

When asked what the professors think can sustain community engagement by other academics, some of the study participants stated that continuous engagement in community development can be facilitated through a system that recognizes and rewards the efforts of professors that engage in community development. They explained that this can help in facilitating continuity because recognition and reward can be a source of motivation for academics. They further added that the system of reward and recognition can introduce a kind of competition to incentivize active engagement in community development. Participant PK2 expressed his view in this regard saying:

“The university can also facilitate continuous participation through appreciation; [and this] appreciation might not be in term of money. Kwasu should talk about it, it’s something they should publicize and recognize one for engaging in. The university can also come up with a form of ranking in terms of project impact. For example, this year the best performing academic in community development can be rewarded accordingly. This implies the introduction of some sort of competition which can stimulate continuity of excellence. If this is done, academics will be interested in doing more because if am appreciated I will want to do more. That means you want to sustain my interest because I will feel proud and I will want to do more. That is the trick to sustainability of interest in community engagement.”

In like manner, participant PK4 also expressed that reward and recognition are ways through which the university can facilitate continuity in community engagement. However, this participant stressed the need for the reward to be an equitable one:

“If the reward for a particular project is equitable, people will continue to get involved because there is no point if I spend all my energy doing this and there is no reward like some kind of financial reward. If there is no reward, the next time you call me I won’t come. So, the university should ensure some kind of equitable reward for community engagement, even if it means writing a recommendation letter it is something that maybe enough. It can also be announced in public, like this person did so and so. So financial reward and recognition; these are the things that the university should do to encourage other academics.”

The responses of the participants indicate that continuous participation in community development can be facilitated through a system of reward and recognition. They indicated that the reward can be either financial or in-kind.

Continuous Research on Community Problems

Participants said that one of the ways sustainable community engagement can be facilitated is through continuous research on community problems. Continuous research will facilitate participation in community development because the problems in the society are continuous. They added that any research that has no impact on the community is pointless because solving the problems of the community is the major aim of research and these problems are evolving. One of the participants who expressed his view in this regard said:

“I think conducting research is one of the ways continuous participation can be facilitated. The process of research is continuous. Problems evolve; you solve one problem today another will come up tomorrow. We conduct research so as to deal with issues that are disturbing to the community. So research is continuous because the problems in the society are unending. So, you as a researcher will be busy trying to find solutions to any problems--you will continue researching in the community.”

Likewise, participant PK3 said that continuous community engagement can be facilitated by conducting research that has a direct impact on the community rather than just locating theoretical problems from literature and conducting research that has little or no actual impact on the community. If the former approach to research is taken community engagement will be sustained because researchers will occupy themselves with real problems and their solutions. He said:

“Continuity of community engagement by academics can be ensured if academics stop sitting in their offices and going through the literature and formulating problems and conducting research without contacting the community. We have many useless research conducted by academics and students. We need to train students that can be able to solve the problems of the community and not just training them for the qualification.”

Participant PK4 expressed a similar view in relation to the kind of community services he renders. As a specialist in water resource management, PK4 acknowledged that problems related to water management will never end as new problems will continue to emerge. Therefore, the need for ongoing research will continue along with the need for community service. These responses by the professors indicate that by focusing on long-term community issues that require continuous attention and research, community engagement can be facilitated and sustained.

Community Engagement Based on Professors' Areas of Specialization

Participants spoke much about continuity in community engagement through specialization-based activities. By providing community development services based on areas of specialization, academics will experience more sustained engagement through the identification of problems related to their specialization. One of the participants suggested that academics should be open-minded and versatile in their engagement because it leads to the acquisition of knowledge. Participant PK8, who emphasized that engagement be based on specialization, said:

“Well, I think community engagement based on one's discipline should be able to facilitate continuity in community service. I mean if you are from social sciences or humanities you cannot do what someone from physical sciences will do. So, it depends on the field. Microbiologist can study about disease prevention and inform communities about the prevention of diseases and if you are in humanities like myself, you can deal with public issues like civil engagement, sharing knowledge about governance, elections and all that. So, academics should engage in community development service according to their discipline”.

Participant PK5 also suggested that academics should be versatile in delivering service to the community rather than just focusing on one aspect of their specialization. This, she said, will not only facilitate continuity of community engagement, but will also help in developing one's academic career. She shared her experience:

“You should be broad minded and focused; you should not limit yourself and your vision. For example, I started as a Professor of English and focus on literature, but I saw that I have to understand the history of African women, the sociology, their struggle, their needs and capacities, their achievements. So, I don't just look at the literary text and teach it. I also look at the society and the life of people and slot myself into it. That is how to be useful to the community not just through the pen. You can achieve a lot when you go beyond your boundaries, see needs and participate. This kind of attitude can sustain one's community engagement”.

As indicated by the participants, continuity of community engagement by academics can be facilitated through a participation that is specialization-based. Others noted that even though academics engage with community based on their discipline, they should be versatile within their discipline as this can also sustain their academic career.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to find out perceptions of the Nigerian university professors in enhancing academics' active participation in community engagement. Findings of the study revealed the ways through which academic community engagement can be sustained. Some of the participants, when asked what they think can facilitate the participation of other academics in sustainable community engagement, indicated that sustainable community engagement can be enhanced if the university makes participation in community development or part of its policy. The participants said that the university can make participation compulsory and ensure that every academic is committed to community outreach so that they can help in solving the problems of the university. They explained that when this is made compulsory, there will be continuity in participation because academics will continuously research into community problems and find solutions to them; it will be an unending process. This finding supports the view of Holland (1999), who noted that community engagement can be favourably influenced at the universities by strong pre-existing service missions. This approach has been used by many institutions to facilitate community engagement (Boyer, 1990; Driscoll,

2009). This approach has helped universities that engage in community development in the sustenance of community engagement among academics.

The findings further revealed that sustainable community engagement among academics can be facilitated through institutional support. This institutional support they said could be moral or financial, as both were deemed important by the participants. Financial support, in particular, serves as an important form of motivation. The importance of financial support is evidenced by its use in countries, such as Germany, USA, Sweden, Ireland, Korea, Japan and Belgium, which universities set aside billions of dollars for community engagement work (Adesomoju, 2008). Gorski and Metha (2016) have also noted that financial support is one of the driving factors for community engagement because without this kind of support, faculty members who want to be heavily engaged in rendering community development services may not be able to do so. According to Weerts and Hudson (2009), lack of funding, lack of compensation for time which faculty members invest in community engagement and inadequate financial support can hinder the incorporation of community engagement by academics into their professional activities. It was also found that another form of support which the institution could give is moral support, such as giving talks, which can awaken the interest of academics to engage in community development; this he said can help in sustaining community engagement.

Continuous engagement in community development can be facilitated through a system that recognizes and rewards the efforts of academics that engage in community development. Study participants explained that this recognition and reward system can help in facilitating continuity because they can be a source of motivation. Researchers (Sorcinelli, 2007; Ziker, 2014) have stated that for community engagement to be sustained, a reward and recognition system should be put in place to offset the workload of faculty members, which can deter them from engaging in community work. The aim of such a recognition and reward system is to motivate academics to continue engaging in community development activities. O'Meara (2002) stated that faculty engagement can be hindered by lack of such a system. Although it is assumed that community engagement should be voluntary, and volunteers often engage in community development out of their desire to make an impact in their communities, many researchers in the area of volunteerism have argued that some form of recognition is desirable (Bradner, 1999; Little, 1999). In addition, Widjaja (2010) noted that rewards could also facilitate community engagement and can be in the form of financial or non-financial remunerations.

Another way that participants felt that community engagement can be sustained is through continuous research on community problems. Their views reflect those of Lynton (1995) who noted that the only way through which real-world problems can be solved by academics is through continuous community-based research that are conducted in ways that fulfill the mission of the institution. However, Bloomgarden and O'Meara (2016) found that continuous research on community problems is influenced by individual factors, like "flexibility in faculty research interests and personal commitment levels to collaborative work" (p. 13). Some researchers have noted that one of the approaches that can be used in grooming students to conduct community-based research is by designing their academic programs in such a way that the students will have to be engaged in community development projects during the course of their study (Neumann, 1992; Colbeck, 1995). This can ensure sustainability in community engagement. This view is in accordance with that of Lombardi (2001) who opined that sustainable community engagement can be facilitated through continuous research designed to solve community problems.

Lastly, the results showed that sustainable community engagement by academics can be facilitated through specialization-based activities. Basing engagement on a specific area of specialization allows academics to go deeper into community issues, which can lead to greater insights into the root causes and contributing factors. Denson and Jayakumar (2010) pointed out that specialized-based engagement is often more desirable for academics that are hired specifically for specialized research. This means that for sustainable engagement to be ensured, academics should engage in community development based on their area of specialization so that there will not be any form of hindrance that they will not handle. Abes, Jackson and Jones (2002), who conducted a study on the factors that motivate and deter faculty use of service-learning, found that community engagement is influenced by faculty perceptions about the fit between their discipline and their involvement. However, academics should be open-minded and versatile in their engagement in community development service because it helps in expanding their knowledge. Engagement that is not specialization-based also serves as a means of career development while enhancing critical thinking and deeper understanding of content in real-world settings.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The participants of the study, based on their experiences suggested that the sustainable engagement of other academics can be facilitated through incorporation of community engagement into university policy, institutional support culture, facilitation of community engagement through reward and recognition of engaging

professors, continuous research on community problems, community engagement based on professors' area of specialization and knowledge sharing. Findings of the current study reveal that sustaining community engagement is not just the responsibility of the university, but also that of the academics. The university must play its role to ensure that community engagement is sustained among academics. As revealed in the study, the roles of the university include the formulation of policies that ensure continuous engagement, providing rewards and recognition and ensuring that academics engage according to their specialization. However, those that are capable of engaging in areas outside of their respective specialization should be encouraged by their institutions to do so, as it can lead to an expanded knowledge base. On the other hand, academics are meant to play their own part in sustaining community engagement by continuously engaging in community-based research which can change help in solving real world problems. It is hoped that these findings of this study will be used by policy makers in framing policies of community engagement in tertiary institutions so as to improve the participation of more academics in the community development activities.

More importantly, these findings will help to start changing the orientation and attitudinal perceptions of university authorities and lecturers towards rendering functional service to the community, particularly in the area of volunteering service that will provide them with the information on how to encourage their students to participate in service to the community as volunteer. The findings of this study would be useful to those in place of authority within and outside of the university, who deny their lecturers the exposure and participatory community engagement experience that could be useful in enhancing their academic career development. More so, this study would be useful as an eye-opener to industries, stakeholders, government agencies/non-government organization (NGOs) and the public in knowing the right institutions of higher learning to partners with, towards discharging their Cooperate Social Responsibility (CSR) to the people in the community.

This study, like many other studies has some limitations. One of them is the scope; the study was only conducted among professors. The researchers suggest that future studies should include non-academic staff of tertiary institutions, since one of the aims of community engagement is to promote national development. Exploring the case of other non-academic staff participants in a study may further enhance community development which in turn promotes national development.

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