

**Universities as anchor institutions:
Integrating the element of trust for developing transformational community
university partnerships**

Diana Scott Hornby# and Savathrie Margie Maistry

Rhodes University

#Corresponding Author: d.hornby@ru.ac.za

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Abstract

The deep and entrenched inequality existing in Makhanda is a microcosm of South Africa. The relationship between the community of Makhanda and Rhodes University is interdependent and interconnected. Community engagement has the potential to mitigate the past image of universities as institutions disconnected from the realities of the local context. However, trust becomes an imperative first step towards unravelling the local radical entanglement and for enacting transformative collaborative partnerships between community and university. This paper is based on a qualitative study which examines the conceptualization of an anchor university for the South African context through community engagement using Rhodes University as a case study. The study proposes that the element of trust is imperative to establish transformational community-university partnerships that supports anchoring Rhodes University in Makhanda. The findings reveal community engagement's role in anchoring the university and the extent to which the element of trust pervades the relationship between the two systems to unravel radical entanglements of the past that impede holistic development.

Keywords: university as anchor institution, community engagement, community university partnership relationships, trust

Introduction

Much of the literature on trust in higher education focuses on teaching, that is, the relationship between students and academics in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Macfarlane, 2009). Without negating the significance of this connection between student and academics, we alert the academe to another meaningful relationship which extends beyond the walls of the HEI and that is, the developmental and transformative relationship that universities are required to have with local communities in South Africa post 1994. The White Paper for the Transformation of



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Higher Education (1997) expects universities to contribute to the social and economic development of communities and inculcate social and civic responsibilities in students. However, the apartheid legacy of separation, division and fragmentation make trust a crucial element in the relationship between universities and communities, specifically those that were previously marginalised and disadvantaged.

As one of the three core functions of universities, community engagement (CE) is required to promote the developmental role and the public good purpose of HEIs, inculcate social and civic responsibilities in students and contribute to anchoring universities in the local community (Hall, 2010; Fongwa, 2022; Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025). These responsibilities of CE require the establishment of authentic community-university partnership (CUP) relationships. Developing CUP relationships have and often remain a sensitive and challenging process. Communities doubt the authenticity of universities' commitment to CE because they believe the university's interest in social matters is solely to facilitate student learning and research (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021). They assert that university-community engagement in South Africa continues to be characterised by extractive research and 'in the process, not acknowledging community needs and also not contributing to sustainable benefits for the community' (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021: 89). When this kind of power imbalance exists between university and community, it becomes clear that building strong, trusting and sustainable CUP relationships are key to effective CE where mutual benefit and reciprocity are consequences of such a relationship (Hornby & Maistry, 2022). Hubbard, et al., (2025) remind us that at the heart of this mutually beneficial endeavour lies a critical yet often underexamined element: trust. As a multifaceted construct, trust permeates various aspects of partnership dynamics and plays a pivotal role in shaping collaborative efforts (Frerichs, et al., 2017 in Hubbard, et al., 2025:2). In community engaged scholarship, and other forms of CE, trust is described as 'an invisible thread that binds researchers [academics, students] and community members, enabling open communication, shared decision-making, and collaborative knowledge creation. Understanding the dynamics of trust is crucial for fostering impactful partnerships' (Hubbard, et al., 2025: 2).

This paper focuses on Makhanda, which is in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa and the location of Rhodes University (RU). It presents preliminary findings of a doctoral study which examines the conceptualization of an anchor university for the South African context through CE, using RU as a case study. Universities as anchor institutions is a new concept in South Africa. Birch, et al. (2013: 7-8) describe an anchor institution 'as place-based institutions that are at once fluid and dynamic and, at the same time, rooted in place'. The March 2023 special edition of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (SAJHE) on CE and engaged universities called for the redefinition and reconfiguration of CE to transform universities into potential anchors for communities and the country at large (Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025). Fongwa (2023) maintains that the role of universities as anchor institutions in towns and small cities is an issue that is directly related to CE because it pertains to universities playing a developmental role, especially in small cities and towns.

The profound inequality existing in Makhanda (a small city) is a microcosm of South African society. RU's anchoring in Makhanda becomes significant if it is to contribute to community development. The relationship between the marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Makhanda and RU may be described as an entangled relationship, one that is interdependent and interconnected requiring transformative collaboration between these two systems. Jones (2022) asserts that we are entangled, with each other, with our environments, architectures, other species, infrastructures, technologies, politics and more, in ways that are increasingly threatening our own conditions of existence. Negating collaborative CUPs for transformation has the potential of negatively impacting on both the university and the overall well-being of Makhanda. The assumption we make in this paper is that trust between the local community of Makhanda, specifically those who have been previously disadvantaged and marginalised, and RU is a significant determinant of the extent to which RU is anchored in Makhanda and this trust is an integral component of authentic CUP relationships.

Trusting CUP relationships becomes important to contribute to transforming those psychological, social and economic conditions that are detrimental to the wellbeing of all in Makhanda and for anchoring RU in Makhanda. Despite this significance, the entanglements are not understood nor explored in-depth yet. The necessity for systemic change appears to be obvious, but how to enact transformations that are sufficiently radical is still unclear (Jones, 2022). We propose that CE's strength lies in fostering change through community university relationships; its capacity to foster solidarity between communities and universities; enhance the agency of communities, students and academics through CUP development and promote universities as anchor institutions. We reiterate that building trust for transformative partnership relationships is not a straightforward process, given the legacy of apartheid generally and particularly in relation to the education sector.

This paper is based on a doctoral study that is currently being undertaken, which assumes that universities as anchor institutions can serve to mitigate past local entanglements and promote the developmental and transformative roles of universities. The study attempts to answer the following questions: How is university as an anchor institution conceptualised in South Africa? To what extent is RU anchored in Makhanda and how does CE contribute to anchoring RU in Makhanda? In answering these questions, the study attempts to understand the extent to which the element of trust pervades the relationship between two systems-the surrounding community, specifically the previously disadvantaged and marginalised community of Makhanda (hereinafter referred to as the community) and RU, to unravel radical entanglements of the past that impede human and community development.

The sample of this qualitative study comprises of community partners, students, academics and the leadership of Rhodes University. While a number of meaningful CE programmes and projects have been undertaken over the years, no study has been conducted to date to determine the extent to which RU is contributing to the public good in Makhanda and the extent to which it is anchored in Makhanda. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide some direction,

albeit in a small way, to RU generally and CE in particular to contribute in a more purposeful and strategic manner to firmly anchoring RU in Makhanda.

The first section of the paper outlines the context or “place” of the study, which is followed by literature reviewed of the study’s key concepts. The eco-systems theory as a framework guiding the study is presented in this section. The second part of the paper provides details of the study covering the objectives, design, methodology, sample, data collection, preliminary findings, discussion and concluding remarks.

Context: The city of Makhanda and Rhodes University

As a small city, Makhanda is a microcosm of South African cities where the profound inequality, clear racial divide and division between privilege and exclusion exists as part of the apartheid legacy. The city reflects South Africa’s problems and to varying degrees, the rest of the world where poverty, inequality and unemployment persists and have done so for a long time. The population of Makhanda is estimated to be 70,000, of which about 78.9% described themselves as “Black African”, 11.3% as “Coloured” and 8.4% as “White”. The first language of 72.2% of the population is isiXhosa, while 13.7% speak Afrikaans and 10.8% speak English (SSA, 2019).

Included in this microcosm is the poor provision and delivery of essential services by local municipalities. Makhanda, falls under the Makana Local Municipality in the Cacadu District. Polycrisis refers to ‘a collection of interconnected, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing crises that comprise a constellation of ecological, social, and economic issues’ (Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025: 126). Among others, the water crisis in Makhanda is one such issue that affects both the university and the surrounding communities. Since 2012, the local municipality has been unable to reliably provide water to its citizens and this has negatively affected the city and its people, including the university. Irvine (2021) affirms that the delivery of basic services and the maintenance of key infrastructure are under threat and points out that good local governance and management are necessary ingredients in creating a positive future for the city.

Conversely, the city is well renowned for two annually held festivals: the National Arts Festival in June/July and SciFest Africa in the first term of the year (RU IDP, 2017). Both these festivals attract thousands of people to the city and assists to boost the failing economy of the city. Apartheid’s legacy of disparate education is blatantly evident in the public schools of Makhanda, specifically in secondary education and in the township of Joza, where significant discrepancies in matric pass rates and general quality of infrastructure and education exists (Westaway, 2014; Ntlabezo & Westaway, 2024), while the city boasts some of the most prestigious independent schools in the country with excellent facilities, education resources, and a 100 percent pass rate as the norm (Lemon, 2004).

In contemporary South Africa, RU is one of the key role players of development in Makhanda. Until recently, the university was seen as a remote, disconnected “ivory tower” by the Black communities surrounding the university. They lacked access and opportunity even though it is the main employer of the local community. The “ivory tower” description applies to all universities that were designated for white students only during apartheid. With the advent of

democracy and change in the leadership of the university, much consideration has been given to understanding the developmental role of universities generally and in particular to the transformation of the relationship between the local Black communities and RU. A reconsidered pathway has been set in motion by RU's current vice-chancellor (VC) Prof Sizwe Mabizela, when he repositioned the university in his inaugural speech by stating that 'we are not only geographically located in this city, but we are also of and for this city' (RU, 2019: 3). As part of the repositioning strategy, RU has developed a number of multi-disciplinary models based on the nexus of teaching, research and CE, which contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of Makhanda, as acknowledged in the IDP of 2018 to 2022 and the current IDP of 2023 to 2028.

The Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division was established in 2008 to enable and contribute to the developmental purpose of the university, which is not dissimilar to the purpose of anchor universities. The eco-systems theory and the principles of reciprocity, mutuality, participation and sustainability, among others, guide RUCE in its engagement with all community partners (RUCE Policy, 2021). The foundation for enacting the various forms of CE is based on establishing transformative CUP relationships underpinned by trust even though the relationship building processes are time consuming and labour intensive. Penman and Thaluri (2017) affirm that effective CE does not just happen; it requires much work. Given that the extent to which RU has anchored itself in the local community is yet to be established, it is hoped that the doctoral study on which this paper is based will be able to provide some knowledge in this direction.

Literature review: Key concepts

This section presents literature reviewed on the following key concepts which are relevant to the study in this paper: community engagement, universities as anchor institutions, community university partnerships and the principle of trust.

Community engagement

CE is identified as a fundamental part of teaching and research and thus a means to enhance teaching and research with a deeper sense of context, locality and application in higher education institutions (SA DoE, 1997). Universities are required to be developmental, demonstrate social responsibility and commitment to the common good through CE programmes. The definition of CE is a contested terrain and differs vastly across different countries and different universities (Lazarus, et al., 2008 in Johnson, 2020: 88).

The Glossary of the Higher Education Quality Committee's Framework for Institutional Audits provides a rudimentary definition of community engagement as:

initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to the community. Community Engagement typically finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and

relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed at particular community needs and some projects might be conducive towards the creation of a better environment while others might be directly related to teaching and learning and research (HEQC, 2004:19).

Netshandama and Mahlomaholo (2010) locate the knowledge development process at the crossroads of the divide between higher education and society and position CE within this parameter of knowledge development as dialogue. CE should be viewed as a platform for interacting forms of knowledge with that of a society and therefore dialogue described as ‘free and uncoerced communication’ (Netshandama & Mahlomaholo, 2010: 9) becomes necessary between community and university. CE therefore ‘would re-integrate the excluded socio-cultural and historical experiences of the powerless and impoverished majority into the processes of developing and codifying knowledge’ (Netshandama & Mahlomaholo, 2010: 6). Implicit in this understanding of the role of CE is the need for trust as the foundation for dialogue between the community and university.

Mohale describes CE ‘as a distinct mission that would strengthen the democratic ethos, sense of shared citizenship and commitment to common good in South Africa’ (2023: 113). Located within the transformation agenda, CE is increasingly being recognised as a tool for transforming pedagogy and introducing a more democratic and socially just higher education system that propels higher education towards the public good (Mohale, 2023). Saidi points to reciprocity and bidirectionality as a distinguishing feature of engagement, which underscore the fact that “engagement” activities should be undertaken within the context of partnership, collaboration, mutuality, collectivity, cooperation, and two-way flow of information (2023: 4). Akintobi, et al. describe CE as

the process of building sustainable relationships through trust and collaboration that strengthens community well-being. The process should be enduring, equitable, and culturally sensitive to all participants, with a shared goal of addressing the concerns of the community. The principle of trustworthiness is seen as a fundamental element in sustaining community engagement (2025: 1).

A conception of CE, proposed by Shawa (2020), (which is reflective of RUCE’s philosophy), combines collaborative knowledge production and holistic development of students, faculty members, parents and communities. Shawa argues that:

we need a notion of community engagement that responds to the South African context as well as the global environment by providing a platform on which universities assist students, faculty members, parents and communities to attend to “their becoming”, responsible citizens, that are ready to contribute to the transformation of society at large (2020: 106).

He proposes a combined epistemological-ontological conception of CE that draws on knowledge collaboration (epistemology) within a cultivated sense of humanity (ontology) (Shawa, 2020: 110). He draws from Nussbaum's (1997) notion of cultivating humanity and states that:

... a responsible citizen has the capability to cultivate humanity by attending to three capacities: 1) the capacity for critical self-examination and critical thinking about one's own culture and traditions, 2) the capacity to see oneself as a human being who is bound to all humans with ties of concern, 3) the capacity for narrative imagination – the ability to empathize with others and to put oneself in another's place. With these abilities, one develops the values of reason, respect, empathy, deliberation and generally agency to correct social injustices (Shawa, 2020: 106-107).

Shawa asserts that an ontological shift means engaging with being-in-the-world differently, which HEIs are ideally situated to inculcate by providing a forum for challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and promote ways of being that integrate knowing, acting and being. He proposed the advancement of the following tenets of the epistemological-ontological conception of community engagement:

collaborative knowledge production; self-critique and critical thinking about one's own culture and traditions or critiquing the lifeworld-the taken-for grantedness (applying reason); seeing oneself as a global citizen; being empathetic, respectful and deliberative; and having agency to correct injustices (Shawa, 2020: 110).

These tenets could assist in integrating knowing, acting and being or the forming of holistic human beings, or the cultivated humanity necessary for agency to challenge social injustices.

The lack of critical engagement with the conceptualization of CE from a policy perspective leaves the door open for each HEI to determine its own definition and focus of CE depending on context, strengths of the university, and diversity of local communities (Muller, 2010; Johnson, 2020). While variations exist and the definition of CE remains a complex and contested terrain, a few key common characteristics have been identified: CE is a link between the university and its communities; it is a belief that knowledge obtained in the academic setting can be reinforced and enhanced by the real-world experience found in communities; and it provides the possibility of a mutual, reciprocal, and respectful exchange of ideas\knowledge, practices, and applications among the engaged partners (Whiteford & Strom, 2013).

Universities as anchor institutions

New conversations on a global level about the purposes of higher education have included the extent to which universities are upholding their commitment to public service (Gupta, 2021). With regards to the South African context, universities can no longer remain as 'ivory towers', detached

and aloof from the local communities that surround them, disconnected from community issues (Bender, 2008; Weinberg & Kistner, 2007), and perceiving themselves as the monopolies of knowledge, 'sitting on an ivory tower' (Buckley, 2012: 333).

Universities as anchor institutions is an emerging concept in the South African higher education arena. Importance is being given to the role of place and the place-based institutions which are being recast as one of the driving conditions of development and change in the 21st century (Birch, et al., 2013: 7-8). Examples of such place-based anchor institutions are universities, hospitals, community foundations, local governments, and key infrastructure services. Anchor institutions are defined as

those non-profit or corporate entities that, by reason of mission, invested capital, or relationships to customers or employees, are geographically tied to a certain location... the leadership of such place-based institutions seeks to understand and evolve their impact on their urban and rural communities. (Birch, et al., 2013: 7-8)

An important question that they ask of all local anchor institutions is, 'What do anchor institutions do to advance their communities' development' (Birch, et al., 2013: 7-8)?

As a consequence of deindustrialization in the 1960s in the United States of America (USA), (Ehlenz, 2018), some institutions such as universities were conceptualised as anchor institutions to revitalise social and economic conditions of local communities. Anchor institutions have a significant investment of infrastructure in a specific place, resulting in relative immobility. Rather than simply driving economic development, anchor institutions also value and advance the social development of their cities (Harkavy, 2016). From a development perspective, anchor institutions possess local connections and community relationships as well as the ability to scale resources that can serve as a valuable foundation for development strategies. Bawa (2018) directs us to the importance of CUP relationships for anchoring universities when he mentions that 'the recent exploration of universities as anchor institutions deserves serious consideration as a framework for a range of experiments around the world as a way of facilitating higher education-community partnerships in a variety of contexts' (Bawa, 2018: 11).

According to Fongwa

universities can serve as a place based anchor institution through four main facets or roles, [which include] (i) fulfilling their core academic functions of teaching, research, and engagement with a range of stakeholders, (ii) actively serving as a stimulus for economic development, (iii) leveraging infrastructural development and (iv), serving a public good function as an agent for socio-cultural development and advancing democratic values. (2023: 100)

In an earlier paper, he mentioned four core principles which are necessary to guide the key roles or facets of anchor institutions: (i) a strong and clear anchoring policy driven from the

topmost office of the university, (ii) institutionally embedded structures, policies and resources towards serving an anchoring role, (iii) strong local mutually beneficial collaboration and partnerships and (iv) leveraging institutional resources and capabilities towards an anchoring role (Fongwa, 2022: 34).

The notion of 'development of place' as a characteristic of anchor institutions resonates with the South African government's notion that universities contribute to community development. Many South African universities are located in communities characterised by extreme poverty, inequality, unemployment and social decay, exacerbated by Covid-19 challenges. As reflected in the four key roles and guiding principles above, there is much more that is required of an anchor university in South Africa from structural, policy and operational perspectives than CE as a core function of higher education may be able to achieve. However, we propose that CE has the potential to contribute to anchoring universities in any one or a combination of the above roles, underpinned by the principles described by Fongwa (2022) through building transformative CUP relationships based on trust.

Community University Partnership Relationships and the Principle of Trust

Hall writes that

CE is a process of creating a shared vision among the community (especially disadvantaged) and partners (local, provincial, national government, NGOs, HEIs, businesses and donors) in society, as equal partners that result in long term collaborative programmes of action with outcomes that benefit the whole community equitably (2010: 25).

A CUP refers to a bond or rapport built between two entities: the university and a non-academic partnering community and is defined as 'collaborations between community organisations and institutions of higher learning for the purpose of achieving an identified social change goal through community engaged scholarship [and other CE programmes] that ensures mutual benefit for the community organisation and participating students' (Eckerle-Curwood, et al., 2011: 16).

Relationships form the core of CUPs, and the foundation grounded in relationships is key to authentic engagement of community members to inform research and the other forms of CE (Olabisi, et al., 2023). Focusing on engaged research, Olabisi, et al. (2023) point out that humility, empathy, deep listening, and the ability to admit mistakes are important characteristics for researchers engaged in partnerships, yet these are not characteristics that are encouraged or rewarded in academia (Olabisi, et al., 2023: 18-19) and neither is the cultivation of humanity as proposed by Shawa (2020). Consequently, a set of ethical principles are compulsory for collaborating with communities, specifically those who were disadvantaged and marginalised during apartheid. Some of these principles include trust, transparency, equity, valuing of

community voice, and respect. Importantly, mutual trust, based on a recognition of the worth of the other person, is necessary to build trust (Olabisi, et al., 2023:3).

Christopher, et al. (2008: 1398-1401) point out that often the university community is unaware of the critical role of, or efforts required in, developing and maintaining trust. And most often many disadvantaged, marginalised, poorly resourced communities have been analyzed, stereotyped, and exploited by outside groups, including the university community (academics and post-graduate students) resulting in community members weariness and mistrust of outsiders (Smith, 2013). How then do we measure trust between previously disadvantaged communities and HEIs in South Africa? Using concept mapping, a study by Dave, et al. (2018) identify the following five clusters that contribute to trust in community-university research partnerships (CURP): i) authentic, effective and transparent communication, ii) mutually respectful and reciprocal relationships, iii) sustainability, iv) committed partnerships, and v) communication, credibility and methodology to anticipate and resolve problems (Dave, et al., 2018: 6).

Other research conducted by McKnight and Chervany (2001), cited by Macfarlane (2009: 227), identified four meta categories of trust: benevolence, integrity, competence and predictability. Benevolence refers to caring and acting in the interests of others. Integrity is about honesty and truthfulness and the keeping of promises. Competence means possessing the power or the ability to perform a role and predictability is where the actions of the trusted party are consistent enough to be predictable. However, certain barriers to trust building prevail and every CUP relationship will have its unique challenges. Undoubtedly, some issues such as differences in cultural background, gender, race, education level, urban versus rural setting, and economics must be grappled with, irrespective of the specific community, when people come together from diverse backgrounds to work together. Therefore, building transformative CUP relationships is a prolonged process.

RUCE is committed to building strong transformative CUP relationships based on trust and to the holistic development of students and community members. Emphasis is placed on collaboration and participatory processes between community partners and the university community (academics and students) to ensure that the relationship addresses community concerns, that community partners participate in the decision-making processes and that both partners are learning from each other. Mutual learning is essential to acknowledging and reconciling past abuses and entanglements inflicted upon the majority communities. RUCE understands that relationship building and maintaining trust entails ongoing attention, it is a never-ending process, requiring continued engagement (Ziqian Zhiou, 2023) for “anchoring” RU in the city of Makhanda. Details of RUCE's programmes and projects can be found [here](#), which includes a section on CUPs.

Theory guiding the study

The eco-systems theory guides this study and RUCE's work. It resonates to some extent with Shawa's (2020) epistemological-ontological conception of community engagement and the notion of entanglement as being emergent, process oriented, always dynamic and more-than-

human based on a relational ontology (Lisle, 2021). This theoretical framework provides the base for an intensive examination of the relationships between universities and surrounding communities. The essence of Bronfenbrenner's eco-systems theory (1994-2005) is that human and social phenomena cannot be perceived and addressed in an isolated and fragmented manner. Unfortunately, the situation in democratic South Africa is that fragmentation, segregation, and division continue to remain a way of life and 'the social fabric and morality of our society is slowly being eroded' (RSA, DPME, 2019: 236).

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) eco-systems theory identifies history, change, systems of oppression/privilege, and power dynamics in culture and structure that promote or inhibit agency and solidarity as key factors in improving behavioural and developmental outcomes. The essence of the theory is the interdependent and interconnected relationship between systems and sub-systems, their respective components or parts and with their environment\context for holistic human and community development. The idea is that the parts of a system are interdependent, and that changes in one part will by necessity be reflected in changes in all other parts. The eco-systems theory organises the contexts of development into five systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem through which social interactions take place (Bronfenbrenner, 1994: 37).

The eco-systems theory affirms that there is an interdependent relationship between two complex systems. In this study the complex systems are RU and the community of Makhanda, their respective subsystems and component parts, and between CE, teaching and learning, and research. The theory enables an interrelated understanding of issues through engaged research and the co-creation of knowledge that offers scope for a variety of solutions that may draw in a number of different role players (Germain & Gitterman, 1980).

Epistemic justice and social justice are key principles that underpin the eco-systems theoretical framework adopted by RUCE because they support the voices\knowledge and issues of otherwise marginalized and disempowered communities through engaged research, service learning and other related activities. This requires establishing meaningful collaborations between universities, community-based organizations, and community members that can move forward together to address social and epistemological issues (Catala, 2015; Hall & Tandon, 2017). The underlying objective of the process is to initiate a process of change (Darlington, et al., 2021). Accordingly, RUCE connects the 'big picture' and local realities by attempting to understand the interdependence of systems from a micro (individual), meso (family, group, and community) and macro (societal) levels.

Summary of the first section of the paper

The focus of this paper which is based on a current doctoral study is the emerging concept of universities as anchor institutions and how it is understood in South Africa. It emphasises the importance of trust for developing transformational CUPs that underpins the core function of CE, seen as the bridge between the university and local communities. Through transformational CUP relationships, CE has the potential to contribute to the anchoring of a university and mitigating

the radical entanglement of the past between the university and previously disadvantaged communities surrounding the university. Given that RU is adopted as a case study, its context\place is discussed, the key concepts of CE, anchor institutions and CUPs and principle of trust are explicated. Finally, the eco-systems theory which guides CE at RU and the study is described. This theory affords a better understanding of the entanglement between RU and the communities in Makhanda. The next section covers the study and concluding remarks.

The Study

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the doctoral study (of the first author) titled *Conceptualizing an Anchor University for the South African context through Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Case Study of Rhodes University* are to:

- i) Conceptualise universities as anchor institutions for the South African context
- ii) Determine the extent to which Rhodes University is understood as an anchor university
- iii) Explore the ways in which community engagement, which is regarded as a core purpose of universities in South Africa, contributes to anchoring Rhodes University in the city of Makhanda.

Design and Methodology

The research design is exploratory, descriptive and conceptual and the methodology qualitative with RU as a case study. A part-participatory approach is adopted as it involves a small critical reference group comprising two community partners, two academics and three students from Rhodes University who have experience in CE. This group assisted to finalise the questions in the data gathering instruments for the different samples of the study. It further serves as a critical reference group during data collection and analysis and has the responsibility of alerting the researcher to any research bias. The intention of using the case study method is to seek a deep description of the relationship between RU and the community of Makhanda and to achieve the objectives of the study. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Approval Committee on 11 July 2023 (No 2023-5771-7416).

Sampling, data collection and analysis

Purposive sampling was utilized in this study. Purposive sampling techniques, primarily used in qualitative studies, are defined as 'selecting units based on specific purposes (rather than randomly) associated with answering a research study's questions' (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 154). The sample of the doctoral study comprises of community partners, students, academics, the leadership of RU, business partners, and key informants, making a total number of forty-eight participants.

Focus group and individual interviews, observations and study of documents are used for data collection. This paper presents the findings of twenty participants who were interviewed

from Aug 2023 to April 2024 through individual interviews and a focus group interview. The focus group interview covered five student leaders and the fifteen individual interviews comprised of RU executive leadership and academic staff, community partners and RUCE staff members. In the case of qualitative data, analysis is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data and asking analytic questions (Creswell, 2009: 184). While data will be analysed thematically for the entire study, for the purpose of this paper and as a reflective process, data is analysed according to the three research questions:

- How is university as an anchor institution conceptualised in South Africa?
- To what extent is RU anchored in Makhanda?
- How does CE contribute to anchoring RU in Makhanda?

Findings of the study

Preliminary findings in relation to the above questions are presented and discussed below. The extent to which the element of trust pervades the relationship between the two systems (the community of Makhanda and Rhodes University) is extracted from these findings to unravel radical entanglements of the past that impede holistic development.

Conceptualisation of the university as an anchor institution

The majority of the participants conceptualised the university as an anchor institution through the following terms:

place based large institution; rooted institution that has an enduring presence in an environment; larger institutions which bring resources to cities; the future of the institution is intertwined with the future of the surrounding community, if it thrives, the community will thrive as well and vice versa'

One of the participants described an anchor institution as a foreign concept but added that universities have a critical role to play in the community because

they support the growth of the local economy and create new knowledge for the universities, students and the community.

Another participant pointed out that the concept of anchor institutions could also have a negative connotation. It could denote

being stuck in place or being a heavy piece of metal that crushes things beneath it.

Additionally, the following characteristics of an anchor institution were extrapolated from participants' responses:

- i) Collaboration and mutually beneficial relationship: The quality of the engaged relationship is important. A dynamic enduring engagement is necessary because anchor also implies staid and non-engaged and anchor institutions can be totally self-interested.
- ii) Democracy: A democratic anchor institution is the idea of working in a transparent, democratic relationship designed to advance the public good, the good of the community. This differentiates a mere anchor from a democratic anchor.
- iii) Interdependency and interconnectedness: Anchor universities should recognize their interdependence, help students to realize their interconnectedness and equip them to engage with people who may be from vastly diverse backgrounds.
- iv) Developmental: Working together towards a shared vision for the community, universities must see themselves as part of 'a bigger whole'.

RU as an anchor institution

The extent to which RU is considered an anchor institution produced mixed responses, ranging from RU being fully anchored in Makhanda to the need to be more deliberate\intentional, and to being 'incomplete' and 'maturing'. A response from an academic which depicts the view that Rhodes University is fully anchored in Makhanda is presented below:

RU is an anchor Institution in Makhanda. The university is a major employer in Makhanda, providing jobs and career opportunities for residents, which has a positive economic impact on the local community. RUCE is committed to community engagement and public service. RU is a fundamental component of the city's social, economic and environmental context and welfare.

The need for Rhodes University to be more deliberate and intentional in its anchoring is described in the following two responses:

We're really well anchored in terms of the partnerships between students and community partners. I think we've done a really good job in bridging the space and keeping our university open physically and cognitively- it's much more porous than other universities I have experienced. While we've done a pretty good job of being anchored in our space, I think that there's just some more intentionality that we could include in those decisions.

We have not fully intentionally articulated being anchored. We've made some intentional choices such as in-sourcing, that really do anchor us as a key economic driver in the city. We've not intentionally thought about where we're positioned and how we can grow that commitment to being anchored fully in the city and country.

A response of 'incomplete' from a post-graduate student highlights that Rhodes University's anchoring in Makhanda is challenged by its history.

[it was] designed as a result of a white settler population, but also as a result of the fact that there was no university institution in Rhodesia at the time. So, it was a space for white settlers and white Rhodesians to have an experience of higher education. [it was] connected to Rhodesia and the white settlers. A stark boundary in the town itself that only a select few in the town actually had access to the space. So, it was never designed to anchor the town...to become an anchor institution, it's not starting from a neutral ground. It's starting with like a negative, which of course was many, many years ago, but has shifted. it has played a really big role in the identity of the institution in the 20th century. So, there have been massive efforts, I think there are intentional deliberate efforts to anchor Rhodes, but it is incomplete.

Community engagement's contribution to anchoring Rhodes University in Makhanda

All participants agreed that CE has contributed to anchoring RU in Makhanda through its intersections with teaching and learning and research in the forms of critical service learning, engaged research and engaged citizenry. The following response from community partners bring to the fore critical issues for consideration between the two systems and their relationship to each other.

Anchoring at the level of engagement between the RUCE office and the communities on the ground, in the level of reciprocity when it comes to developmental initiatives that are done together in being open to partnership and in being open to finding co-created solutions to challenges. But it would be nice if it could be more than just the RUCE office. And without it, I think it's going to be a huge challenge for the community to access the universities and also for the lecturers themselves, for the staff to be able to access community if there's not that middle person that's able to facilitate and help negotiate that zone.

A critical and novel perspective from a post-graduate student and former volunteer at RUCE on the eventual purpose of the RUCE division, which may eventually be applicable to all CE structures at HEIs in South Africa is as follows:

Community engagement has historically formed the bridge between the two groups, but in a way that it's working to get rid of the bridge entirely. The purpose of community engagement is to drive itself out of existence. It's to make the term community engagement have no meaning because you never talk about engaging with your own community. Community engagement often implies, oh there's this other community that

we need to engage with, but I think the purpose of community engagement then is to anchor the university in such a way that community engagement no longer exists, which is a really big, a big role and I think it has been the driving force... But then I don't know if those community partners are engaging with Rhodes University or if they're engaging with RUCE. So, community engagement, of course, has a fundamental role to play, but it should not be the only player.

Discussion

The conceptualisation of university as an anchor institution

The conceptualisation of university as an anchor institution is not dissimilar to that described by Birch, et al. (2013:7-8) as place-based institutions, rooted in place. The response that 'the future of the institution is intertwined with the future of the surrounding community, if it thrives, the community will thrive as well and vice versa' and other responses that mention the interdependent and interconnected relationship between the university and the community of Makhada, resonates with the eco-systems theory as a guide to anchoring RU in Makhanda. Collaboration and mutually beneficial relationship underscore the need for transformative CUPs. The importance of and need for trust and more especially, the lack of it, is revealed in the response that 'the concept of anchor institutions could also have a negative connotation'. It could denote 'being stuck in place or being a heavy piece of metal that crushes things beneath it'. We propose that this may be a valid conceptualization of 'universities as anchor institutions', but this description better suits a number of universities during the apartheid era. In the current democratic context, universities are required to contribute to the transformation agenda of the country by being responsive to the social and economic development of local communities who have been historically marginalised and disadvantaged. While most universities may remain physically "stuck in place", the requirement for them to be developmental and transformative is a paradigmatic shift, which has the potential to mitigate the extent to which universities may remain "psychologically" or "emotionally stuck" in place (Ashade & Mutereko, 2021).

As part of their study on 'how early involvement or non-involvement influences project communities to trust the project handlers and give support towards sustainable infrastructural development', Ashade and Mutereko (2021: 270) found that the private partners received more support because they involved the communities in all its activities right from the onset of the project. The community should be 'emotionally involved' right from the planning stage' [of a project] (Ashade & Mutereko, 2021: 276). A lesson that may be learnt from this finding is that universities cannot remain "emotionally stuck as ivory towers", neither can they ignore the voices of communities if they wish to authentically enact their developmental role and establish trusting relationships with local communities.

The extent to which Rhodes University is an anchor institution

The extent to which RU is an anchor institution is revealing because while there is keen understanding by the participants of the significant role that CE plays in anchoring RU in

Makhanda, their responses clearly indicate that RU is not yet fully anchored in Makhanda. The response of the community partners that 'it would be nice if it could be more than just the RUCE office. And without it, I think it's going to be a huge challenge for the community to access the universities' and the final statement from the post-graduate student 'So community engagement, of course, has a fundamental role to play, but it should not be the only player' strongly resonates with Fongwa's (2022) ideas that anchoring of the university includes but extends beyond the core function of CE. All four facets of RU should be involved in anchoring the university in Makhanda. That there is much more work for RU to be done to be fully "anchored" in Makhanda "is reflected in the following responses: 'RU needs to be more deliberate and intentional (by two academics), and that anchoring is 'incomplete' (post-graduate student).

Assessed against Fongwa's (2023) key facets of an anchor university, the academics response gives RU credit for all the roles being implemented and believe that RU 'has done a pretty good job of being anchored in our space' but requires to be more intentional in its decisions. In his Foreword of the 2023-2028 IDP, the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Sizwe Mabizela states that:

As our University is located in an economically depressed rural community, we have a particular responsibility of discharging our research-intensive mandate in a manner that draws on the nexus of teaching and learning, research and community engagement to make a positive difference in our surrounding community while simultaneously contributing to our accumulated global stock of knowledge ... we value and treasure the engagement, collaboration and partnerships we have with our surrounding Makhanda community ... As a University that is committed to the public good, we will endeavour to place our knowledge, skills and competencies at the service and benefit of our society and humankind and we will work with communities to advance positive, inclusive and sustainable change. (IDP, 2023-2028: 13-14)

While the VC's Foreword is indicative of the university's commitment to the development of Makhanda, the intent to contribute to the holistic development of the disadvantaged communities in Makhanda and establish RU as an anchor institution is yet to be clearly and deliberately articulated by RU as noted in the responses of the two academics.

Fongwa (2023) asserts that the values that underpin the four key roles of the place-based approach, for transforming the socio-economic outcome of locality, are one way of declaring intent and being deliberate about being an anchor institution. They include:

- i) *an anchor mission and vision* clearly articulating the university becoming an anchor institution within its institutional documents;
- ii) *institutionalisation of the mission and vision*, embedding the well-articulated anchor institution policy throughout institutional structures, policies and implementation plans to ensure that the policy becomes an action plan through all levels of governance and relationship with external stakeholders;

- ii) *establishing pact with local stakeholders* which include collaborative structures, networks and partnerships towards a mutually benefiting relationship with local stakeholders; and
- iv) *leveraging institutional resources* towards achieving the anchor vision.

He adds that 'the university must clearly identify how it will leverage its human, physical and social resources towards socio-economic wellbeing and revitalisation of its immediate and extended communities' (Fongwa 2023: 99). While the VC's foreword has connotations of an anchor institutions, the IDP (2023 to 2028) does not explicitly articulate its intentions of anchoring RU in Makhanda.

Unlike the American context which emphasises place (Birch, et al., 2013), the 'incomplete' response of the postgraduate student compels us to question the impact that colonial and apartheid history has on the conceptualization of universities as anchor institutions in South Africa. Domination\oppression is implied in the response by an academic that "anchor" could also be seen negatively as 'being a heavy piece of metal that crushes things beneath it'. RU has both a colonial and apartheid history (Lemon, 2004; IDP, 2023-2028). Even though much has changed over the years, the university's history makes the building of strong, sustainable and trusting partnership relationships with the previously disadvantaged and marginalised communities challenging and even more important for effective human and community development in the current democratic context.

Community engagement's contribution to anchoring Rhodes University in Makhanda

The responses from all the participants confirm CE's contribution to anchoring RU in Makhanda through building transformative CUP relationships and as the nexus between teaching and learning and research. The academics responses of 'RUCE is committed to community engagement and public service'; and 'We're really well anchored in terms of the partnerships between students and community partners' is indicative of the effect of transformative CUP relationships established by RUCE. It is not possible to gauge the actual impact of the "really well anchored partnerships between students and community partners" from this response. However, it presents adequate scope for future research to explore the impact of transformative CUPs on students, community partners and academics "becoming" responsible citizens who are ready to contribute to the transformation of society based on Shawa's (2019) combined epistemological-ontological conception of community engagement that draws on knowledge collaboration within a cultivated sense of humanity.

The community partners responses are similar to that of the academics, but they substantiate the nature of the partnership with descriptors such as 'reciprocity' 'done together', 'open to partnership' and 'co-created solutions' which aptly fit the description of transformative CUP relationships based on trust. The mention of a 'middle person' indicates that CE is seen as the bridge between the university community and the communities of Makhanda. However, the response from the CP that 'it would be nice if it could be more than just the RUCE office' points

to the lack of a more holistic approach to the relationship between the university and the local communities, which aligns with Fongwa's (2023) idea that anchoring a university is more than the responsibility of the core function of CE. All aspects of RU should be involved in the anchoring of the university in Makhanda.

The post-graduate student also identifies CE as the bridge between university and community, and adds

that it's working to get rid of the bridge entirely ... I think the purpose of community engagement then is to anchor the university in such a way that community engagement no longer exists, which is a really big, a big role and I think it has been the driving force.

We are of the view that the ideal situation in any higher education institution would be for CE to be an integral part of teaching and learning, and research and not seen as a separate core function.

We present Bender's (2008: 88-91) seminal paper on conceptualising CE models in HEIs in South Africa in support of this view. The first is the "silo model" which sees the three roles of HEIs-teaching and learning, research and CE mostly pursued as independent of each other. The second which is the intersecting model acknowledges that some intersection exists between the three core functions of HEIs in the forms of service learning and some form of community-based research. Other non-intersecting forms manifest as community outreach and volunteerism (Bender, 2008: 88). A commitment to ongoing engagement with a strong emphasis on co-operative, collaborative development and mutual benefit is important. This model 'acknowledges that the university does more than merely prepare students for employment, it also prepares them to be responsible citizens as demonstrated through civic engagement and social responsibility' (Bender, 2008: 91). An extension of this line of thought has the potential to 'cultivate humanity and to 'becoming' as contained in Shawa's (2020) conceptualization of CE.

Bender describes the third model, the Infusion (cross-cutting) model, as follows:

The HEI has two fundamental roles – teaching and learning, and research – and defines CE as a fundamental idea and perspective infused in and integrated with teaching and learning, and research. This third model of community engagement is referred to as the "community-engaged university". ...This vision of CE requires complete infusion across all structures, policies, priorities, and so on ... engagement should be embraced and promoted as a means of improving the quality and relevance of teaching and learning, and research (2008: 89).

According to Bender, the three models are not static. A university could begin with a particular model and gravitate over time to another model. The post-graduate student's response of CE 'working to get rid of the bridge entirely' aligns with Bender's description of the infusion model. The student's response implies that CE at RU could be currently positioned as an

intersecting model working its way towards the infusion model. Irrespective of the model of CE at RU, Bender (2008) emphasises that the development of partnerships is pivotal to both the intersecting and infusion models.

Finally, the student also echoes the thinking of the community partners that CE should not be 'the only player' - all facets of the university should be involved in engaging with relevant community partners. Building trust then becomes the responsibility of the whole university, and we should pay heed to Bender's suggestion about transformative collaborative relationships which implies that trust is essential:

To build the [transformative] collaborative relationships ... the university system has to understand fully the dynamics of the communities with which it seeks to work and be prepared to adapt and develop structures and processes to make them accessible and relevant to these communities. In this way, the term engagement warns us against making assumptions about communities: it calls for a dialogue. It also implies that the development of the relationship itself will have to be the focus of attention: the "university" will have to engage with communities as well as asking communities to engage with it. (2008: 86-87)

Concluding remarks


The preliminary findings of the study demonstrate that there is an interdependent relationship between RU and the general community of Makhanda, but specifically with those that have been previously disadvantaged and continue to be so. As national policies dictate, universities are required to contribute to the social and economic development of poor communities to mitigate the acute inequality pervading not only in Makhanda, but South Africa as a whole. Is the emerging concept of universities as anchor institutions aptly suitable to currently describe the role that universities need to play in the transformation agenda as signified in higher education policies? From this study, we can tentatively say that the description of universities as anchor institutions originating in the American context is not dissimilar to the findings of the study. As large, place-based institutions, universities have the resources to "root" itself in the community and contribute to community development. However, the findings of the study cautions that history will impact on the conceptualisation of universities as anchor institutions, so that we may not have a "one size fits all" definition of an anchor institution for South Africa. The findings also reveal that it requires the whole university, its structures, policies and personnel to deliberately and intentionally work towards the anchoring process. Anchoring is not the responsibility of CE only. It encompasses the three core functions of a university (teaching and learning, research and CE) and more, even though CE plays a significant role as the bridge between the university and the community.

The preliminary findings indicate that much more work needs to be done by RU to be considered an anchor institution. RU as a whole, including RUCE will have to deliberate on further strategies collaboratively with the community of Makhanda on how to firmly anchor RU in Makhanda. Trust, the invisible thread remains an essential element of transformative CUP

relationships and to mitigate the mistrust and unravel entanglements of the past that impede human and community development. If we are to nurture the cultivation of humanity in South African HEIs, then universities as anchor institutions have a significant role to play in developing trustworthiness with previously disadvantaged communities.

Author Biographies

Diana Hornby is Director of Community Engagement at Rhodes University. With 25 years in early childhood and community development, her work has been nationally recognised, including the RUCE team's first-place MacJannet Prize (2021) for the 9/10th Matric Mentoring Programme. She contributes to city-wide efforts that have improved Makhanda's Grade 12 results to best-performing status for three consecutive years. She holds a BEd (Honours) and a Master's, is reading for a PhD at Rhodes, and has published in community engagement and development. 

Currently a Research Associate at Rhodes University, Dr **Savathrie Margie Maistry** is an established scholar in social work, community development, and higher education. She has published extensively on community engagement, social work, participatory research, community development and higher education. She supervises postgraduate and postdoctoral research, has co-led national research projects on community engagement and higher education, and is chief editor of the *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement*. 

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