



Knowledge is Power
PRIA

Participatory Research in Asia

research paper

[November 2014]



Gauging the Impact of Community University Engagement Initiatives in India

Wafa Singh
Programme Officer, PRIA

Abstract

Today, the world we live in is challenged with the co-existence of ‘prosperity and poverty’. In India, in particular, although we are witnessing staggering increase in various economic indicators, our Human Development Indicators remain unenviable. It is in this context that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have assumed profound importance as having the potential to offer sustainable solutions to such societal challenges. Therefore, the practice of Community University Engagement (CUE) has gained prominence, as a phenomenon seeking a two-way discourse between the communities and the universities, in an attempt to produce ‘socially relevant knowledge’ which is inclusive and sustainable. Considering the importance and value of such an initiative, an attempt was made to tap such engagement practices between the HEIs and communities in India. In addition to plain documentation of a work/practice, another very crucial parameter in this regard is the measurement of the impact of such initiatives, on all the stakeholders involved in the process. Although it appears to be the case of binary stakeholders (Community and University), CUE envisages engagement, integration and cross linking among a number of sub-stakeholders, getting impacted in a multitude of ways. Therefore, measurement of impact of such interventions, on all the concerned stakeholders has been an extremely important component of the study. This is in light of the fact that impact measurement, along with functioning as a yardstick to tap the relevance of an initiative, is also a true indicator of the promise of a particular action, its significance and potential in the future.

Key Words: community, university, engagement, stakeholders, social responsibility, impact

Introduction

As the world strives to progress towards increased and holistic development, and boosting economy and materialistic growth, human development has somewhat lagged behind. This is particularly true in the case of India which is witnessing an enormous expansion in its economy, while it fares extremely poorly with respect to human development indicators. This statement gets verified by our economic and human development indicators respectively. While the former continues to increase by leaps and bounds, our position with respect to the latter remains unenviable and stagnated. As per the global GDP (Gross Domestic Product) rankings released by the World Bank in 2013, India secured the 10th position, among a total of 194 countries, while it ranked at 135 out of the 187 countries, as per the UNDP’s (United Nations Development Program) Human Development Report’ 2014.

As a result of this, we live in times where ‘prosperity and poverty’, and ‘plenty and scarcity’ co-exist. Along with this, staggering industrial growth and urbanization has been accompanied with degradation of our natural resources, increasing political prowess exist simultaneously with

insecurity and likewise, democracy has been coupled with exclusion. The co-existence of such contrasting processes questions the sustainability of our societies and our existence itself. As the social concerns slowly but gradually outweigh other significant achievements, the time has come for us to introspect the social relevance of our actions and initiatives, and the ways and means whereby which, we can help seek answers to such pressing problems. Although there is a need to re-examine the role and activities of various stakeholders in the society, who have the potential to contribute in the process, one of them which stands out as being extremely important are our Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

HEIs have a crucial role to play in a country's development, along with addressing various social concerns. Termed as '*Social Responsibility of Universities*', it is this role of the University that has the potential to erase the discrepancies and inequalities existing in our societies, through the sea of knowledge it holds. However, today, in India, it is easy to sense the alienation that has crept into the University premises and which has made it 'islands of plenty amidst scarcity'. As we witness enormous massification and globalization of education, there has been an enormous increase in the number of students enrolled into the Universities and Colleges, and the empire has expanded in manifold ways. This massification of Universities, in an era where they are mostly owned and run by political/business power centres, has led to their essence to fall into oblivion.

With increase in business like practices and the Universities responding to the needs of the corporate world, or vested interest, questions are starting to be raised which question the social relevance, identity and the purpose of such Universities and the knowledge/education imparted therein. Along with this, the other parameters that are put to scrutiny and critical analysis are the quality of education imparted, relevance of curriculum and significance of pedagogy practiced in the HEIs today.

Therefore, there is a need to re-visit and re-examine the essence, relevance and credence of the Universities, as a stakeholder in the process of societal development and the one contributing to its sustainability. Notwithstanding the facts mentioned above, it is also important to note that the education institutions are faced with both, challenges and opportunities. Challenges are in the form of issues such as growing inequality, problems of migration, urbanization, health, sanitation, access to drinking water, etc. Opportunities are in the form of increasing demand from the society at large, and the availability of a wide number of options for both the students and the researchers. The HEIs can therefore, utilize the opportunities at hand to re-establish the connect between itself and the society, and in the process, bail the latter out of the churning it is witnessing today.

The Impact of Community University Engagement

The critical issues that challenges our society today, calls for a meaningful and socially relevant engagement between the Universities and the community, in mutually beneficial ways, which can offer lasting solutions to critical problems and be able to ensure the sustainability of our existence. The Universities are required to engage with the community in ways that offer opportunities for a dual-interaction, which encompasses not only the flow of information from the University to the community, but also facilitates the incorporation of indigenous knowledge in the traditional research process.

Community University Research Partnerships (CURP) focusses on co-production of knowledge, which is based on the acceptance of the value of knowledge in practice, from those who are non-academic. This interplay of academic and non-academic partners helps to produce new knowledge which neither partner had before. Such a perspective in these partnerships respected the active engagement of community partners in knowledge production, not mere ‘consumers’ and passive beneficiaries of knowledge and related services offered by academic partners. Therefore, it can enable the co-production of valuable, actionable knowledge, especially in the areas of livelihoods, environment and governance and their intersection. (Tandon & Jackson, 2013). Effective knowledge partnerships build better communities. A strong knowledge democracy movement can build a better world (Hall, et.al, 2013). However, the challenge of community university engagement is the development of initiatives that enable the integration of the three dimensions enhancing teaching, research and outreach or service (Hall & Tandon, 2014). Such is the amount of positive impact that such engagement activities can have over the stakeholders in the process and the society as a whole.

In this process, the empirical evidence of the impact on each of these stakeholders assumes great importance and significance. This is because this then serves as the yardstick to determine the relevance of such initiatives and determine ‘way-forwards’, which then designs a framework on how to take this initiative further worldwide. Therefore, the impact of such ‘engaged initiatives’ needs to be tapped for each stakeholder involved in this process, and much importance is accorded to the documentation and the quantification of the impacts of such engaged initiatives. Keeping this mind, the sections outlined below presents the study which looks to capture such impacts and the accruing benefits on the various respected stakeholders.

Study Description

With the aforementioned background, and as a part of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, we, here in India, embarked on a empirical study to map the about the community engagement practices in the HEIs in India, and

their impact. For the purpose of this study, the Universities which were selected included *Punjab University*, Chandigarh; *North Bengal University*, Siliguri; *Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishvavidyalaya*, Haryana; *Indian Institute of Technology*, Guwahati; *Cotton College State University*, Assam University and *Tezpur University*, Guwahati, Assam; and the *North Eastern Hill University*, Shillong, Meghalaya. The study made use of a several instruments. They are:

✓ Survey questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed at seeking answers with respect to the kind, nature, and most importantly, the *impact* of the engagement practiced by the respective University.

✓ Personal interviews

In addition to the questionnaire, personalized experiences and view-points were captured through face to face interviews with academicians and the students. This gave an opportunity to capture individual perceptions and feedback, which was extremely essential to the essence of the study.

✓ Dialogues/Consultations

Complementing the questionnaire and the interviews were the dialogues/consultations, in the respective universities. It led to exhaustive deliberations, sharing of model practices, and zeroing in into concrete and significant action for promoting community engagement in HEIs in the future.

Emerging Findings

Prima facie, the process of CUE appears to include only the community and the university, however, it unfolds many more sub-processes, which again incorporates a number of sub-stakeholders. The survey findings and interviews gave clarity and empirical evidence of the impact on each of these stakeholders, which is of great importance and significance. This is because it then serves as the yardstick to determine the relevance of such initiatives and determine ‘way-forwards’, which then designs a framework on how to take this initiative further worldwide. The sub-stakeholders that get involved in the process include the teachers, researchers, students, in cases where the two primary actors engage in a direct interaction. Alternatively, sometimes this engagement is facilitated through civil society groups/voluntary organizations, who then get accounted for a stakeholder in the process themselves, although an indirect one. Further, the government and its departments function as subsidiary stakeholders in the process, by way of their involvement and key role in designing the whole governance and development framework. An account of the impact on all such stakeholders, as emerging from the survey findings and interviews are accounted for as under:

1. Students

Students are the centre point, around which such initiatives revolve. They are impacted by such engagements with the community in a multitude of ways. Some of them are:

- ✓ Subjective learning, by engaging with the communities and providing service to them. Often known as ‘Service learning’. Exposure to the practicalities outside the classroom grooms them more knowledgeable persons.
- ✓ Generalized learning about the dimensions of the society, their problems on sustenance, livelihoods and concerned implications.
- ✓ Moral learning, concerned with ethical and normative value systems, concerned with implications of human actions, institutions and ways of life
- ✓ Practical experiences through direct engagements and exposure contributes in the development of new and the refining of existing skill sets, a parameter which has assumed great importance in employability circles today.
- ✓ Opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the society in a meaningful way. This plays an important role in the development of students as more responsible, concerned and alert citizens.
- ✓ Hands-on practical experience during their learning days broadens their thought process and they are not constrained to bookish knowledge. This widens their horizons and broadens their career opportunities and choices.

CASE STUDY

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati

Under the framework of linking learning with community service, the students and teachers apply their knowledge and skills in a chosen community to improve the lives of people in that community by providing various engagement opportunities. The students at the mechanical engineering department at IIT-G have formed a facilitator group named Rural Technology Action Group-North East (RUTAG-NE), which aims to upgrade rural system to most effective levels for boosting the rural economy, along with providing R&D solutions to technical problems in the rural sectors. For example, to improve on the traditional process of Eri Silk production which is time consuming and laborious, RUTAG-NE has developed a machine which can complete a day’s work in an hour. Additionally, by engaging artisans and communities, it has also set up a pilot project on production of plain Muga Silk fabric with power loom at the Export Promotion Industrial Park in Amingaon, Guwahati. To solve the problem of high transportation cost among the farmer in Goalpara region which host Darrangiri banana market, the largest banana market in Asia, RUTAG-NE has developed a robust user friendly modified bicycle for carting more number of banana bunches. Using this technology the vendor saves an additional amount Rs. 150 per day. Further, the development of low and affordable Pirn Winding

machine for power looms and handloom requirements has increased the productivity and earning potential of weavers at Sualkuchi in Kamrup district. The machine was made with local materials, and demonstrated to the local weavers.

2. Researchers

Researchers are another important actor in this regard. By nature of being an important part of the University structure, and the projects they embark upon, their participation in such engagement ought to have a significant impact, both on themselves and the communities. Some of the ways in which the researchers are impacted in this process are:

- ✓ Broadening of their knowledge base, through incorporation of experiences from the field.
- ✓ The research work per se, gains authentication and validation, if done in collaboration with the same communities, on whom the research work is based. This enhances their academic trust-worthiness.
- ✓ This authentication gives way to holistic recognition and acceptance of the research work, which thereby contributes to their professional credibility.
- ✓ Community engaged research produces socially relevant knowledge, which then takes the shape of valuable publications.
- ✓ Opportunity to emerge as 'better and engaged' researchers and contribute to the well-being of the society.

CASE STUDY

North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong

At NEHU, since its inception, social science research and the respective researchers have been oriented towards the problems and issues pertaining to the different aspects concerning the lives of the local communities. The researchers at the department of Political Science and History, in particular, have been carrying out an engaged research on such themes, an example of this being regionalism, ethnic identity politics, culture among the local communities. Direct engagement with the community in the course of such research takes the form of documentation of the traditional arts, crafts, folk dances by way of documentary films, video clips, which are then used as important evidence to support the research work. This sort of an engagement provides an opportunity to the researchers to step out of the University premises and experience and witness the social relevance of their research. Such engagement also gives their work validation and credence, as it offers the research work an opportunity to integrate with the lives of the subject of the research itself.

3. *Teachers*

Teachers assume importance by way of being the pioneers in such a practice. It is they who innovative pedagogy techniques and encourage students to get involved in innovative interventions. Therefore, their role in the process of community university engagement assumes huge significance and importance alike. The impacts on the teaching fraternity can be gauged with the below mentioned parameters:

- ✓ Enhances their knowledge base, by providing them with an opportunity to interact with the community and work in collaboration with them.
- ✓ Integration of indigenous knowledge and practical implications into any particular activity opens avenues for holistic thinking. This knowledge can then be utilized and disseminated in the classrooms as well.
- ✓ Community engaged activities provide a social relevance to their efforts, thereby contributing to its authenticity.
- ✓ Such engagement increases their recognition and respect among academic and professional circles.
- ✓ Direct engagement with the community opens avenues for joint collaborative initiatives such as workshops, where there can be a two-way disbursement of information between the academics and the community.
- ✓ They are in a better position to transfer the positive impacts to the students, in order to develop them as responsible citizens, in sync with the society around them.

CASE STUDY

Gauhati University, Guwahati

Professor Nani Gopal Mahanta, Associate professor, at the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University has been the key person behind the design and execution of the concept of a two year post-graduate diploma programme on Peace and Conflict Studies, at the Centre for peace and Conflict Studies, at the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University. This programme was offered under the 'Innovative Programme' scheme launched by the University Grants Commission. The programme offered opportunities for interaction between the students and the community leaders (the rebel group leaders in particular). Under this, along with the regular courses, a lot of field work was also done, which included a number of round table conferences, which brought together different stakeholders on a common platform. An initiative under the UGC's innovative program, it aimed at mapping of the conflict, how people coped with it, their plight in the displaced camps, how they negotiated conflict situation and the role of the state in the same. Therefore, this program attempted to merge the interests of the students, HEIs and the communities. As the co-ordinator of the centre, Professor Mahanta gained immense respect and credence in the academic and the social circle alike. In an interview with

him, he shared that as a result of his involvement in such an initiative, he was able to rope in political leaders, media personnel, significant members of the civil society, senior academicians into the process. As a result, today, Professor Mahanta is a known name in various circles of Assam, and this has also added a number of research papers and publications in esteemed journals to his credit, which has increased the academic credibility of the inspiring academician as well.

4. *Community*

Being a primary stakeholder in the process, the communities are in a ‘win-win’ situation in this context. Engagement with the Universities impacts their lives and improves it for the better in a multitude of ways. Some of such impacts are:

- ✓ Beneficial results, which emerge through such engagements contributes to the well-being and better sustenance of livelihoods.
- ✓ Due recognition of their indigenous knowledge instills in them a confidence, which encourages them to participate in more such interventions.
- ✓ Participation in such activities encourages them in the direction of self-initiated endeavors, in attempt to better their living.
- ✓ Engagement in a give and take, mutually beneficial relationship with the HEIs, plays a role in integrating them to the mainstream of the society, thereby putting an end to their exclusion.
- ✓ Awarded with respect, recognition and value in academic circles, opens for them a multitude of opportunities for future, both personally and professionally.

CASE STUDY

North Bengal University (NBU), Siliguri

The Department of Biotechnology, North Bengal University, through its various agri-based initiatives has been engaging with the local rural community for knowledge exchange and dissemination of best practices in agricultural sector. The Centre of Floriculture and Agri-Business Management (COFAM) has been the key factor behind such practices and initiatives. At the dialogue on ‘Strengthening Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions’, held at NBU, Dr Ranadhir Chakraborty (Head, Department of Biotechnology) shared with the participants as to how the process of community engagement is integrated into the structure and design of the unit. COFAM is mandated to provide hands-on practical training to the growers/entrepreneurs on various aspects of floriculture, produce disease free quality planting material by tissue culture, and establish linkage between growers and buyers. Through various initiatives, the COFAM unit at NBU was engaging with the nearby communities, in order to strengthen their capacities in the field of floriculture and agriculture. It also sought to use the

indigenous local knowledge and expertise of the communities in the plantation of different types of crop varieties. The unit then also supported the community by helping them find a market for their products and earn a sustainable living in the process. As a result of such engagement, not only did COFAM expand its technological data-base, the communities too experienced a sea change by way of secure and sustainable livelihoods. New technologies, which combined academic expertise and traditional knowledge, resulted in increased returns from agriculture, which in turn contributed to a better and sustainable mode of living of the local communities.

5. University As An Institution

In addition to the individual impacts on respective stakeholders, the institution of University as a whole is also impacted by such practices in some of the following ways:

- ✓ Emerges as an institution of academic and social relevance, thereby breaking the glass ceiling associated with academic knowledge.
- ✓ Amidst the emerging consensus and thrust on 'University Social Responsibility', it projects itself as an institution complying with this important principle, and contributing to societal development in the bargain.
- ✓ Gains respect, recognition and popularity among national and international university circles.
- ✓ Opportunity to improve on its rankings, both nationally and internationally, considering the growing importance placed on the generation of socially relevant knowledge, while compiling the university rankings.
- ✓ Opportunity to contribute to 'Knowledge Democracy' in the real essence of the term.

CASE STUDY

Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya (BPSMV), Haryana

BPSMV has been involved in exceptional efforts for promoting holistic community engagement within its regular academic curriculum. It is one of the very few Universities in India, which has institutionalized its community engagement initiatives through a structure known as the *Centre for Society University Interface & Research (CSUIR)*. Established in August 2010, the centre was founded on the premise that there needs to be a connect between the University and the society. Through various add on courses, which include extensive field work, the centre provides for engagement opportunities between the students and the communities. By way of encouraging and guiding the students to use their knowledge to better the lives of the community and also to learn from them in the bargain, is a stand-out example of how a University-society nexus can do wonders for the betterment of the humankind as a whole. As a result of such outstanding initiatives, BPSMV has been increasingly attracting attention in not only the national academic circles, but it has also gained prominence in international academia, which has also been giving an increasing thrust to

this area of work. At the national level, BPMSV is involved in a number of projects/interventions, in collaboration with the civil society and the government, in order to further its objectives. In recognition of its efforts, BPMSV has also featured numerous times in the international academic circles, and its authorities been invited to prestigious international conferences, such as the First International Forum on Social Responsibility, held in Seoul, Korea in March' 2014, for presenting their model which can be followed and adapted by others, in accordance with their contexts. The University is also involved actively involved with the UNESCO Chair in Community based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, and has participating and contributing on an extensive scale.

6. Civil Society

Often acting as a connecting link between the two ends of the table (community and university), the civil society actors play a major role in facilitating such partnerships all across the globe. In India, PRIA has taken up this cause for a long time, in an attempt to bring the university and the community on a common platform. In the process, it too has been impacted in some of the ways mentioned below:

- ✓ Recognition and respect from academic circles, and credibility among the communities.
- ✓ Opportunity to fulfill its broad objective of attaining participation and democracy, by the championing the cause of community university engagement, as it facilitates 'participation' and promotes 'knowledge democracy'.
- ✓ Opportunity to expand its horizon and work area, which allows more exhaustive networking and dialogues. This then positively contributes to its work in other sectors as well.

CASE STUDY

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), New Delhi

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) began in 1980 as a network of practitioners involved in awareness generation, community organizing and adult education to empower the poor and marginalized. In order to bridge the divide between the world of practice and the world of research, PRIA undertakes a number of initiatives to promote engagement of institutions of higher education with civil society and local communities to foster knowledge generation and mutual learning. This sort of an engagement which PRIA has facilitated is best brought out in the study, which was conducted on the 'Status of Primary Education and Scheduled Castes in Five Districts of Haryana', in association with Dr Ambedkar Study Centre, Kurukshetra University. Twelve young Scheduled Caste (*dalit*) women (coming from marginalized sections of society) aged between 18 and 25 years (most studying in colleges, others working in community-based organizations) were encouraged to come forward and actively undertake this participatory study.

The young girls not only conducted the study but also analyzed the findings with the help of professors of the university and PRIA facilitators. This initiative not only helped the girls in generating their own knowledge about the existing practices of social discrimination in their society but also motivated them to challenge some of them. The academic institutions involved in the process found deeper meaning in their role of bringing issues that could influence policy dialogues and outcomes, particularly for SCs.

7. Government

Government as an actor, in community university engagement is often viewed from the lens of policy developments. Although an external actor in the process, it is impacted in the following ways:

- ✓ Partnership between the university and the community opens opportunities for roping both the stakeholders in development plans. This bottom up approach, thence, ensures better execution of programs and mutually beneficial results.
- ✓ The emerging positives of such an engagement process also feeds into the process of policy making, and contribute to the designing of policies which can further the scope and opportunity for such community engagement practices.

CASE STUDY

Government of India

Recognizing the growing importance of social relevance of the Universities and their responsibility towards the society, the Indian Government has been closely following the international developments in this regard. Taking cue from international experiences, national requirements, and the challenges of the social sector, the policy makers have been involved in conceptualizing and designing numerous policies in line with the gradually emerging framework of CUE. The latest and a very important development in this regard has been the setting up of a National Universities Ranking System, which will include its social contribution as a crucial assessment criterion. The government on the other hand, will press for funds to be used to boost universities' social and policy role, which will count towards rankings. Another significant initiative in this regard has been the 12th Five Year Plan document proposes an innovative aspect of furthering the quality of higher education in the country in terms of strengthening community engagement and promoting social responsibility. Along with this, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has also been promoting the idea of the launch of a National initiative to foster social responsibility in higher education. This initiative envisages the creation of an alliance for community engagement (an independent association of practitioners, academics and community leaders would be created to support the implementation process. The Government of India (MHRD) and the Government of UK have also signed a Memorandum of

Understanding (MoU) on a framework for the development of community colleges under the UK India Education and Research Initiative. The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) has also been closely associated with formalizing the scheme on community colleges in India.

Conclusion

The importance of impact of any particular social intervention or otherwise is uncontested. It is this impact which determines the sustainability and value of the concerned activity, and provides prescriptions for future actions. In light of this, the aforementioned account on community university engagement practices in India and its impact on all stakeholders gives an opportunity to gauge its benefits and relevance to the times of today. The socially relevant and the co-constructed knowledge that such an engagement aims to produce is of tremendous importance to the society which is today at the crossroads and amidst turmoil. Knowledge, which is generated in such mutually beneficial manner, between the two important actors, viz, the university and the community goes a long way in bailing the society out of its troubles and guiding it towards sustainability. Illustration of positive impacts, as a result of engagement initiatives is a major source of incentivisation as well. It provides positive re-inforcement for such activities and enthuses the stakeholders with increased vigour and confidence. Such incentives along with boosting individual efforts, also goes on to influence larger networks, such as the policy framework of the country. Good results drive the enforcement of supportive strategies at the policy level, which, in turn, re-energizes such efforts.

In addition to this, impact measurement as a monitoring mechanism, also helps reflect, review and improve the framework, in a way which allows for better results. By analyzing how the impact of a particular engagement is shaping up, it can be better contextualized to suit a particular situation, for boosting the positives emerging out of it. Any social enterprise looks at bettering the lives of the people and the society as well. It is here that judging the empirical evidence of impact of community university engagement practices assumes great significance. It serves as the yardstick to determine the relevance of such initiatives and strategize 'way-forwards'. This then feeds into the process of designing the framework on how to take this initiative further worldwide.

References

Hall, B., Jackson, E., Tandon, R., Fontan, J.M., & Lall, N. (2013). *Knowledge democracy and action: Community University Research Partnerships in Global Perspectives*. UK/USA/Canada: Manchester University Press

Hall, B., & Tandon, R. (2014). *Higher Education in the World 5, Knowledge, Engagement & Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change*. UK/USA: Palgrave Macmillan

Tandon, R. & Jackson, E., (2013). Building Blocks of Partnerships: Lessons from case studies of South and North. In B. Hall, E. Jackson, R. Tandon, J. M. Fontan & N. Lall (Eds.) *Knowledge Democracy and Action: Community University Research P Partnerships in Global Perspectives* (Chapter 2, pp. 17-32). UK/USA/Canada: Manchester University Press.

United Nations Development Program (2014). Human Development Report 2014; Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience. Accessed on Oct 16, 2014 from <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr14-report-en-1.pdf>

World Bank (2013). Gross Domestic Product (2013). Accessed on Oct 16, 2014 from <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>