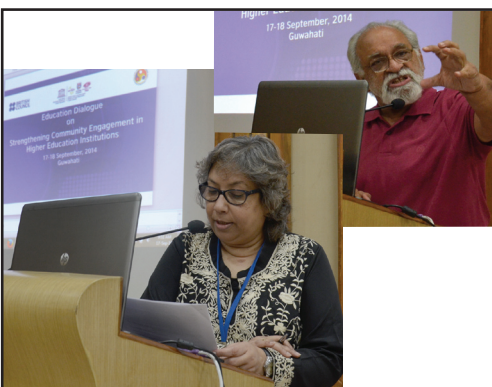# Knowledge is Power
PRIA
Participatory Research in Asia

research paper

Community engagement in higher education institutions: Status report 2015

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UNESCO Chair in Community Based
Research and Social Responsibility
in Higher Education

Contents

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UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education

Introduction

Community-University Engagement (CUE) is a multifaceted, multidimensional concept that may be applied to a vast range of activities, as well as to a certain view of the role the university has to play in societies. Engagement as a concept implies activity, interaction, sharing, a dynamic that is in constant change and flux. It implies relationships between the university and the targeted communities, be this at local, regional, national, international or even virtual levels, for reciprocal benefits using knowledge sharing and dimensions of co-creation that impact society and community, which is the central crux.[1]

CUE through its rich and continually evolving practices is the way to connect the three institutional missions: teaching, research and service. Some ways and practices of CUE, such as service learning, community based research, engaged scholarship or academic enterprise, to mention just a few, are currently linking engagement within the teaching and research dimensions. The challenge of CUE is the development of initiatives that enable the enhanced integration of all the three dimensions (teaching, research and outreach or service).[2]

Global perspective

Globally, the issue of community engagement and social responsibility in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is gaining relevance and acclaim steadily. There are examples from various parts of the world where policy makers, funders and the community themselves have started to question the relevance of higher education for society. Many countries and institutions worldwide have started scrutinising research through the lens of its validity to society. One such example is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) conducted by Research Councils, UK (http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/), which ensures the social relevance of a particular research before funding is provided. Such arrangements have made sure that the research conducted by HEIs is of use to society.

Similarly, the Science Shop model (http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/ScienceShop/) in Europe is an example of an interface structure between the community and the university, through which both can filter out mutually beneficial issues and work on them together. It provides dissertation topics and curriculum based research projects for undergraduate and postgraduate students across all disciplines. Such an example of co-produced research not only enjoys the advantage of incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems, but can also be regarded as research having social relevance and value to the community.

Apart from these two academic arrangements, there has been a remarkable growth in the number of networks and institutions across the world engaged in promoting the cause of social responsibility in higher education. One example in this regard is the National Centre for Co-ordinating Public Engagement and Research (NCCPE) (http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/), which is actively involved in seeking a culture change in universities. Its vision of the higher education sector is to make it a vital, strategic and valued contributor to the 21st century through public engagement activities.[3]

The PASCAL Universities on Regional Engagement (PURE) Project of the PASCAL Observatory (http://pure.pascalobservatory.org/), which is in operation in 17 regions of the world, is involved in exploring and promoting the idea of community engagement.

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1   Hall, B. & Tandon, R. (2014). *Higher Education in the World 5, Knowledge, Engagement & Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change*, Palgrave Macmillan.
2   Ibid.
3   Dr Paul Manners, coordinator of NCCPE, is closely associated with PRIA in its activities to promote community engagement within academia.

It pays attention to what higher education is offering to their regions in the form of economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits.[4]

The Global Universities Network Innovation (GUNi) (http://www.guninetwork.org/) is an international network composed of members from 78 countries, including UNESCO Chairs in higher education, higher education institutions, research centres, and other networks related to innovation and social commitment in higher education. GUNi encourages HEIs to redefine their role, embrace the process of transformation and strengthen their critical stance within society.

UNESCO has formed a separate Chair focusing on this theme – the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/unesco/).

The co-Chairs of this initiative are Dr Budd Hall, Professor, University of Victoria, Canada and Dr Rajesh Tandon, President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). The UNESCO Chair supports North-South-South and South-South partnerships that build on and enhance the emerging consensus in knowledge democracy. It strengthens collaboration between the higher education section in UNESCO, GUNi and the Global Alliance on Community University Engagement (GACER) (http://www.gacer.org/). It also co-creates new knowledge through partnerships among universities (academics), communities (civil society) and government (policy makers) leading to new capacities; new solutions to pressing problems related to sustainability, social and economic disparities; and enhanced scholarship of engagement.

Relevance in India

Despite India's economic growth, new forms of social exclusion, urban poverty, environmental degradation, conflict and violence have emerged in the past decade. Ensuring inclusive development, democratic governance and sustainable growth requires new knowledge, enhanced human competencies and new institutional capabilities in the country. It was expected that education would seek solutions to these problems to some extent. However, in spite of enhanced investment leading to increased enrolments, these issues remain largely unattended. The role of institutions of higher education in societal development seems to be the potential missing link.

The 12th Five Year Plan, therefore, aimed to promote greater social responsibility in higher education in the country, as per the recommendations of the Steering Committee on Technical and Higher Education. While many institutions have already been involved in programmes like the National Service Scheme (NSS), they are largely designed to 'help' the community. The new approach to community engagement being recommended by the expert committee set up by the (former) Planning

Commission emphasises mutually beneficial and respectful partnerships between communities, civil society and institutions of higher education.

It is important, therefore, to more clearly and forcefully mandate that the core purposes of 'community engagement' by institutions of higher education is to serve mutually agreed interests of both communities and institutions. This implies that the partnership is mutually beneficial and based on give and take by both sets of parties. Its translation in practice would entail recognition of authentic and actionable knowledge that communities have, which institutions can learn from, and empirical and theoretical knowledge of a macro nature that institutions have from which communities can benefit. It also implies that the thrust of this engagement is mutual empowerment in the quest of supporting more democratic citizenship in communities, and amongst students and academics.

The Steering Committee for Higher Education and Technical Education decided to set up, on 25 August 2011, a sub-committee on Strengthening

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4   Dr Michael Osborne, who is closely associated with the PURE project, has been a supportive resource person for PRIA and partners in a number of activities.

Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions.[5] In October 2014, as a result of the recommendations of this sub-committee, the University Grants Commission (UGC) finally rolled out a scheme on fostering community engagement in HEIs. Under this scheme, the UGC provides for the establishment of a Centre for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement (CFSRCE) in select eligible universities. The main objectives of the scheme include promoting community-university partnerships to develop knowledge for improving the lives of the people and to encourage participatory research, in alliance with community based organisations, in planning and executing projects. It seeks to propagate integration of service, service-learning and experiential learning into curricular/co-curricular programmes. It also aims at creating neighbourhood networks of educational institutions, including schools, and providing policy suggestions and technical assistance to help foster community engagement and social responsibility in higher education. The UNESCO Chair recently convened a consultation of interested universities under this new scheme and offered full technical support in the preparation of proposals to be submitted to the UGC.

Project details

In an attempt to further the cause of community engagement, to systematise and strengthen community engagement in Indian universities and for generating awareness on the issue, the UNESCO Chair in association with the British Council embarked on the project on strengthening 'Community Engagement in HEIs' in India. This project aimed at:

✓ Systematisation and analysis of innovative practices of community engagement in HEIs; identifying them and understanding its impact

✓ Understanding the perception, attitude and priorities by HEIs in relation to their responsibility towards society.

In line with these objectives, the project covered four states (Punjab, West Bengal, Assam and Karnataka), carried out in association with Punjab University, North Bengal University, Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati and Jain University. The research was conducted in Punjab and West Bengal in early 2014, Assam was covered in mid-2014, and the last leg of the project in Karnataka was wound up in late 2014-early 2015.

In each of the states, the research involved both qualitative and quantitative methods for understanding the attitudes and opinions of HEIs on community engagement. In an attempt to generate data on this fairly new topic in academia, a well-structured questionnaire was used for mapping the existing practices on the ground. The survey was complemented with interviews of resource persons from academia, and qualitative data was generated to support the quantitative data. The interviews helped to capture the general understanding of academicians, how they perceive community engagement in the future and its prospects on being mainstreamed in academia. The interviews also helped in identifying the barriers to the process in addition to eliciting important suggestions to overcome them.

The survey was followed by state based regional dialogues. The dialogues served as an opportunity for leaders in higher education, academicians, students, community leaders and civil society organisations to come together on one platform. At the dialogue, practical examples of direct support, active engagement and long-term contributions to the community by institutions of higher education of the region were shared, along with exhaustive brainstorming on the issue. The dialogue concluded with a session on ways forward in which crucial action points for the future by various stakeholders involved in the process, such as academia, civil society, government, etc, were highlighted.

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5 Key recommendations of the sub-committee are available in Tandon, R. (2014), "Fostering Social Responsibility in Higher Education in India", Occasional Paper (OP/2014/001E), PRIA

Key features emerging out of the research

The survey and the state based workshops held in the four states highlighted some very interesting points, which hallmarked the efforts and activities that were undertaken on the ground.

Punjab

Punjab broadly presents a case of routine activities being carried out in the name of community engagement, mainly through the channel of the NSS and National Cadet Corps (NCC). However, there are a couple of encouraging initiatives being pursued by Punjab University.

1. Action projects initiated in association with the community

Action projects undertaken by the students aim at identifying underlying problems and initiating efforts to solve them. This takes place by involving local youth in addressing their problems and providing them with a solution, for example, the action project on women's education and health undertaken by Centre for Social Studies, and that on drugs amongst men and youth carried out by the Department of Lifelong Learning and Education. The characteristic feature of such projects is that it adopts a bi-directional approach, with equal participation by the university students and community youth alike, as opposed to the usual practice which witnesses uni-directional flow of information from the university to the community.

Additionally, the participatory nature of these action projects plays a crucial role in involving the youth in solving the problems they face on a daily basis. Being the victims of such problems, they can provide the best ideas to reach sustainable solutions. Together with the university students, who provide appropriate assistance to the community, they reach an amicable solution, as a result of which such action projects enjoy a high degree of success compared to other efforts of extension and service carried out by the university.

2. Adoption of villages and concerted efforts towards building the skill sets of communities

Notwithstanding the fact that the activities were carried out under the lens of 'extension', this particular initiative of adoption of villages did not ideally qualify under the category of service-learning as advocated by the UNESCO Chair. However, certain efforts at Punjab University do show the potential to reach the desired level. This is showcased in the efforts of the Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension which is involved in adopting villages in the vicinity of the university. One such village is Khuda Lahora. In this village, students are actively involved in providing service to the communities, by way of improving the latter's skill sets and capacities and by making use of their academic knowledge in the field. For instance, the students were involved in conducting workshops for building basic computer skills of village youth. In addition to this, the students also assisted in the enhancement of skills in occupations such as carpentry, plumbing, block printing, etc. By helping the communities build their skill sets and capacities, especially in occupations which play an important role in their daily sustenance, the students provide service to the communities.

Although such initiatives do not qualify as ideal interventions, they are definitely examples which have the potential to snowball into good practices with due care and the right orientation. The need is to move away from the perception of extension/outreach, and educate students on the value of community engagement by encouraging them through suitable institutional incentives and arrangements.

West Bengal

West Bengal presents a case of a select number of good efforts being pursued patchily throughout the state. Considerable variations in the approach and activities are an important pointer which emerged from the survey findings. Although the perspective of extension/outreach continues to dominate, some good work symbolises hope for the future.

1. Joint initiatives by the Department of Biotechnology, North Bengal University, in association with local communities for promoting horticulture

The Department of Biotechnology, North Bengal University, through its various agri-based initiatives has been engaged with the local rural community for knowledge exchange and dissemination of best

practices in the agricultural sector. The Centre of Floriculture and Agri-Business Management (COFAM) has been key in furthering such practices and initiatives. At the dialogue on 'Strengthening Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions' held at the university, Dr Ranadhir Chakraborty (Head, Department of Biotechnology) shared 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 growers/entrepreneurs on various aspects of floriculture, produce disease free quality planting material by tissue culture, and establish linkages between growers and buyers. COFAM was engaging with the nearby communities through various initiatives in order to strengthen their capacities in floriculture and agriculture. It also seeks to use the indigenous local knowledge and expertise of the communities in the plantation of different types of crops. The unit also supports the community by helping them find a market for their products and earn a sustainable living. As a result of such engagements, not only has COFAM expanded its technological database, the communities too have experienced a sea change by way of secure and sustainable livelihoods. New technologies, which combine academic expertise and traditional knowledge, have resulted in increased returns from agriculture, which in turn has contributed to sustainable living for the local communities.

2. Activities pursued by the Christian colleges

The Christian colleges under North Bengal University, St Xavier's College in particular, engage in a number of activities for uplifting local communities, primarily as a result of their broader mission statement rather than community engagement per se. The vice principal of St Xavier's College, Dr Hadida Yasmin, believes that '*A college is a storehouse of resources and personnel which can contribute significantly towards the educational and skill development aspirations of the poorer sections who cannot aspire or afford such an education*.'

As the coordinator of the community college section of the college, Dr Yasmin quoted its vision as being '*of the community, for the community, and by the community*', in order to give responsible citizens to society. The community college section of St Xavier's College is a stand-out example among the North Bengal colleges, doing commendable work in promoting social outreach of the college and playing a role for the good of society. One of the objectives of the community college is to motivate students of the vernacular medium to take up skills training programmes and spoken English programmes. It is worth mentioning that the community college is situated in the same campus, thereby providing students with the opportunity to use college resources and faculty expertise. Apart from the community college initiative, other dimensions through which the college engages with the community include village extension programmes, departmental projects and social awareness programmes.

- Community College Programme

This includes computer training, spoken English with life skills, tailoring and embroidery courses, etc.

- Social Outreach Programme

This includes empowering illiterate women through literacy and providing them with various job skills and ensuring that children complete their education, along with conducting evening classes for them. The college also supports the formation of small self-help groups, who can then help their members earn a sustainable living.

- Departmental Projects

This includes projects such as impact of mass media on rural society and role of panchayats/rural women conducted by the Department of Sociology, and a study on chronicling local myths and folklores conducted by the Department of English.

- Village Extension Programmes

This is primarily done through the NSS unit, wherein various interventions are carried out in an 'adopted village' (for example, in village Kheripara).

3. Extensive agri-researching pursued by the agricultural universities, in association with local communities

Under the Rural Agricultural Work Experience (RAWE) Programme, run by the Uttar Banga Krishi

Vishwavidyalaya, an agricultural university in North Bengal, students volunteer and get an opportunity to work with farmers in their fields, not only to disseminate their classroom knowledge but also help farmers apply it in their activities in order to acquire a sustainable income. The university offers a six month experiential learning programme, conducted in participatory mode, where the community/farmers are provided knowledge regarding extension activities in agriculture. Using this knowledge, the farmers then conduct field trials. The students go to the villages for a period of six months and are involved in an array of agricultural activities. They prepare village maps, i.e., maps depicting the village's resources, which prove to be a major source of knowledge for them as also for the villagers. Such mutually beneficial interventions are one of the more popular and successful efforts initiated by the university.

The university has also embarked on joint research projects in association with local agricultural communities. An example of this was the research project on 'Climate Resilient Integrated Farming System in Eastern Gangetic Plain, Nepal & Bangladesh'. This project, funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), saw extensive field trials being conducted by students and farmers. Several innovative techniques and methodologies were put to use, to test their viability. Such research work immensely benefits the communities, as they are equipped with latest technologies to meet the challenge of climate change.

West Bengal it appears has far more potential to offer higher quality engagement than what is being carried out at present. Ongoing efforts show a lot of promise to be transformed into model practices, which can then be adopted by other universities. What is needed is the resolve of the academia to mainstream community engagement and encouraging initiatives by offering institutional support to both students and teachers. Despite the challenges, an encouraging step forward is that the Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension at NBU continues to remain committed to its responsibility towards society. In light of the dialogue held under this project, it has chalked out a plan for engaging with the community and has sought approval from regulatory bodies and university authorities. This plan involves four components, viz, certificate courses, training of trainers, organisation of self-help groups, and sensitisation/awareness programmes for women and children with respect to health, nutrition, etc.

Assam

In Assam, it is worth mentioning that the term 'community engagement' is not viewed only through the lens of the 'arts/humanities'. Engagement of science students in bettering the lives of the communities came as a welcome change to the old school of thought. It was also observed that the trend of community engagement in HEIs in the state definitely deviates from the NSS framework and goes a step further towards engaging the community in a meaningful way.

1. Student initiated projects for the benefit of rural communities

The Rural Technology Action Group-North East (RUTAG-NE) under the Department of Mechanical Engineering, IIT-Guwahati, is a facilitator group operating since 2006, which aims to upgrade rural systems to most effective levels to boost the rural economy. It provides Research & Development (R&D) solutions to technical problems in rural sectors. Some of the projects undertaken by it are:

(i) To improve 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.

(ii) By engaging artisans and communities, it has successfully set up a pilot project on production of plain Muga silk fabric with power looms at the Export Promotion Industrial Park in Amingaon, Guwahati.

(iii) To solve the problem of high transportation cost for the farmers in Goalpara region which hosts the Darrangiri banana market, the largest banana market in Asia, RUTAG-NE has developed a robust, user-friendly modified bicycle for carting more banana bunches. Using this technology the vendor saves an additional Rs. 150 per day.

(iv) Other projects such as S&T intervention in supari business have optimised the

production of supari and have led to the economic upliftment of rural women in Dhubri, Goalpara and Barpeta districts.

(v) The development of low and affordable pirn winding machines for power loom and handloom requirements has increased productivity and earning potential of weavers at Sualkuchi in Kamrup district. The machine was made with local materials, and demonstrated to the local weavers.

(vi) RUTAG-NE has other projects such as S&T in value addition of bamboo and multi-nutrient feed for yak which have helped entrepreneurs and farmers in the region.

The activities carried out by this facilitator group almost qualifies under the category of service-learning, where students use their technical knowledge to provide service to the communities and assist them in securing sustainable livelihoods.

2. Design and conduction of novel and innovative courses

This is another area where Assam stands ahead of other states covered under this project. The colleges here are seen to be devising novel courses for the benefit of rural communities and students. These are courses which are specifically designed to respond to the specific needs of communities.

(i) *Programme on Peace and Conflict Studies, Gauhati University*

This two-year postgraduate diploma programme at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University is offered under the Innovative Programme Scheme launched by the UGC. The programme offers opportunities for interaction between students and community leaders (rebel group leaders in particular). Along with regular courses, a lot of field work is carried out, including a number of round table conferences which bring together different stakeholders on a common platform. The initiative aims at mapping the conflict, how people coped with it, their plight in the displaced camps, how they negotiated the conflict situation and the role of the state in the same. Therefore, this programme attempts to merge the interests of students, HEIs and the communities.

(ii) *Course on Literacy and Language Education, Gauhati University*

Offered by the Department of Linguistics, this course targets indigenous communities and prepares an array of language learning materials. It has enhanced fieldwork involving collection, documentation and description of language data in collaboration with several institutes, organisations and research centres. As part of this initiative, master's students have also carried out linguistic fieldwork among the Bodo, Mizo, Tai-Turung, Adi-Galo, Singpho, Ahom and Tangsa Naga communities along with experts.

(iii) *Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University*

The institute offers an opportunity for students who cannot avail conventional academic education because of limited postgraduate seats and livelihood compulsions. With its exam and study centres all over Assam, its outreach capacity is large enough to incorporate aspirants from different communities to pursue professional and academic disciplines at bachelor's, master's and postgraduate diploma levels. It is also the only institute to offer postgraduate courses in five Eighth Schedule languages. IDOL has played a crucial role in increasing access and equity of higher education to senior citizens and has helped in adult education in the region. It uses an e-learning portal to enhance learning opportunities by way of self-assessment tests, online and offline discussions.

3. Innovative mechanisms such as community radio

A nodal initiative of Guwahati University is the community radio service, Radio Luit 90.8 FM, offering programmes on general awareness on health, education, environment, scientific temperament, folk culture, music, and various cultural programmes. Interactive talks with personalities and programmes specifically aimed at women and children also form a significant component of the initiative. Some other key features of this service are:

• The radio service has several programmes which target specific objectives and groups. Target groups constitute university students

and the larger community in the vicinity of a 15 km radius.

- For students, it broadcasts news pertaining to university activities such as seminars, workshops, extracurricular activities, and hence remains apolitical in nature.
- It provides an open forum for discussion between 7 pm and 8 pm, daily, where students can participate through phone calls. This usually takes the form of addressing social and academic issues faced by students. It also gives opportunities to the community to share their experiences and opinions on issues such as health, education, environment, art and culture.
- The radio service also visits the surrounding village communities as well as remote indigenous communities to document their stories, cultural life, folk lore, etc.
- In its outreach programme, awareness campaigns on AIDS, child labour and sanitation have been predominant. In such activities, the participation of the community has been upfront in assigning roles of ownership and responsible stakeholders.

Therefore, one area where the community radio service stands apart from other similar services has been in pursuing 'what the community wants'.

It can be said that Assam emerges as a unique case, offering several innovative ideas and interventions which can gradually be shaped into model engagement practices between the university and the community. Assam, having a socially aware and sensitive academia and student community, offers great opportunities which, if supported, with suitable state and institutional policies can emerge as a strong example of community engagement in HEIs.

Karnataka

Karnataka by and large emerges as a state exhibiting good promise with respect to community engagement initiatives, primarily because of the tremendous support available from higher education policy makers. However, current practices broadly hover around the traditional perspective of 'social service'.

1. Tripartite approach aimed at converging participatory research, citizen engagement and citizen voice – an initiative of the community radio station RadioActive

A student initiative launched in 2010 by Jain group of institutions is a community radio station called Radio Active CR 90.4 MHz, located in Bengaluru. It caters to different groups of interest such as the LGBT community, differently-abled groups, people infected with HIV/AIDS, auto-drivers, senior citizens, environmentalists, etc. RadioActive is a medium for diverse community groups to converge and discuss issues of relevance, find solutions, empower and encourage participation. Some of its initiatives involve projects in which it has partnered with groups such as domestic workers, waste pickers, etc, in an attempt to seek solutions to critical societal issues. It has launched a number of community based projects for the welfare and development of the community, reaching out to Bengaluru's masses on various issues of health, environment, development, scientific awareness, women and children, civic and social issues. Broadly, it provides a kind of activist space, which becomes a platform for the mushrooming of a number of social movements. The tripartite approach of involving participatory research, engagement and citizen voice has helped RadioActive emerge as a promising initiative for community engagement. Ms. Pinky Chandran, Coordinator, RadioActive, at the dialogue on strengthening 'Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions' in Bengaluru specifically outlined the importance of community-campus partnerships. Within this partnership, she categorically stated the need for incorporation of community voice, where citizens get an opportunity to voice their opinion with respect to a range of societal problems and their solutions.

2. Practitioners entering academia as a frequent practice

Academia in Karnataka appears to be more open in allowing the entry of practitioners into the university to share their perspectives and knowledge with students. This opens the avenue for engagement by the students with the people who work in the field, especially civil society practitioners. This practice also allows for field level knowledge to

be disseminated in classrooms, thus combining the worlds of theory and practice. For instance, National College, Bengaluru, has established collaborations with various academic, cultural and social service organisations for students to be exposed to various social work activities. Lectures, seminars, demonstrations, workshops, etc, are organised under these collaborations. Practitioners are invited as teachers and guest lecturers to the institution to provide practical knowledge to the students and share day-to-day challenges and issues. These practitioners are invited from various fields such as advocacy, journalism, government, politics, film and theatre, academics, social work, science and research, etc. Some activists, such as Auto Raja, who conduct social experiments have also been invited as guest lecturers at the college.

Similarly, Mysore University also invites various experts in distinctive fields to guide community development activities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These experts are usually NGO workers, industrialists, environmentalists, legal experts, politicians, folk artistes, scientists, journalists, specialists in dalit literature, etc. Jain University too invites practitioners from NGOs, CSR professionals, industry peers and social workers who have field knowledge regarding community development to guide students in related activities

at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In each of their campuses, there are special lectures conducted every week by experts from outside the university. These lecturers are often associated as adjunct faculty attached to the research centres or departments of the university.

3. Initiatives undertaken in association with local civil society/NGOs

Karnataka has also emerged as one state in this research wherein academia invested in joint initiatives and saw civil society organisations as an equal, important partner. This perspective was mostly missing in the other states. Involvement of civil society in Karnataka brought with it grassroots experiences from the field. For instance, The Centre for Research in Social Sciences and Education (CERSSE) has worked with Bala Janaagraha to develop course material on civic education and train resource persons who carry forward the programme. Additionally, students from the Department of Psychology have worked with Kadam Foundation to take forward projects on literacy involving slum children. The community radio service, RadioActive, has partnered with several local organisations/community groups in an attempt to further citizen engagement by providing the people with a perfect platform to voice their opinion and be engaged.

Emerging trends

As a result of the state based surveys and workshops conducted as part of this research, broad trends emerged from the four states. Some trends are common to all states, while some are specific to a particular state. The following section examines such overarching trends that have emerged.

Common trends

✓ *Ambiguity with respect to the concept of 'community' and 'community engagement'*

In all the states there exists tremendous discrepancy and ambiguity with respect to understanding of the terms 'community' and 'community engagement'. Both the terms were interpreted differently, and in varying contexts. The co-existence of multiple definitions and understandings resulted

in efforts getting diffused, having no concrete impact. In Punjab, the concept of 'community engagement' and 'learning with the community' meant respective departments showcased their outreach initiatives to the communities through conduction of awareness programmes on health, education, block/field placements of students, etc. Likewise, in Bengal, these two terms were interpreted differently, mostly viewed from the lens of social service/extension/outreach. In Assam too the need to redefine the term 'community' and define the degree, nature and extent of community engagement was repeatedly emphasised. Issues of definition with respect to the word 'community' or 'community engagement' did not arise in Karnataka, though clarity on the same is desirable for better, targeted interventions.

✓ *Community engagement as 'extra-curricular activity'*

The lack of an institutionalised framework for two-way engagement between academia and the community resulted in a uni-directional flow of information from the universities to the community, which was primarily viewed as extension/outreach services. The clubs and societies under different departments in the universities contributed to aspects of community engagement programmes through extra-curricular activities. Some departments remained proactive while others are not able to device ways to incorporate exposure to community learning. It has also emerged that students who devoted their time and energy in carrying out community development work were entitled to no credits, and teachers are denied any professional incentivisation for the same.

✓ *Institutional impediments*

Since the colleges were bound by the procedures laid down at the university level, some NSS programme officers shared that such policies and directives needed to be broad-based. This was necessary for expansion of various schemes/ programmes. Other factors, such as rigidity of the curriculum and absence of interdisciplinary approach, lead to further divergence between the college and the community. Paucity of time amidst the tight academic schedule also prevented academia from engaging with the community in a meaningful way. Further, the rigorous evaluation system of the university with regular semester tests constrained the students from taking part in community service activities. The structure of the university curriculum compelled the students to concentrate more on grades. On the other hand, activities they repetitively undertake mechanically under compulsion of the curricula often exasperates the community, and it becomes counter-productive.

✓ *Resource constraints*

The limited provision of funds greatly constrained the exercise of community engagement. As a result, the faculty in-charge had to resort to finding resources where available to fulfill the criteria as outlined by the university authorities. Although they wanted to do more, such constraints limit the ways and means at their disposal. Some colleges in also complained of lack of manpower for execution of engagement activities. For instance, the Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya has seen no new recruitment of faculty members for the last five years.

✓ *Lack of co-ordination between agencies/ allied departments*

In cases where a couple of agencies were involved in carrying out a particular task, e.g., the state department of agriculture, NGOs and universities, there was lack of co-ordination and planning between them. Such procedural difficulties greatly limit the desired result of the work being carried out.

✓ *Illiteracy and unemployment restricts participation of the community in engagement efforts*

Non-participation by the community emerged as one of the major challenges in community engagement efforts. Illiteracy and unemployment of the community aggravates the problem. Poverty and unemployment in the communities in North Bengal not only limited the scope of their participation, but also limited their interest in any such engagement with the college. Therefore, as shared by some of the principals from a few colleges, the primary need of the hour was to educate the community and make them aware of the things that could benefit them in the long run. Moreover, most joint research projects at universities conducted in partnership with nearby communities do not involve full participation of the community, who remain mere subjects in such projects.

✓ *Absence of synergy between academia and community*

There existed a lack of synergy between academia and the community for long-term partnerships. A prime reason for this can be attributed to the lack of institutional policies and proper orientation of university officials. This is evident from courses which have high value for community engagement, but suffer constraints with major courses being theoretical and practical courses limited to short-term implications.

Trends specific to each state

Punjab

Punjab emerged as a weak state with respect to community engagement practices amongst other states covered under this project. Although some activities were being undertaken in pockets, broader orientation with respect to engagement seemed to be missing. There are many misconceptions prevalent in academic circles with respect to community engagement. From the survey findings, it has emerged that with respect to 'learning with the community', the surveyed departments showcased their outreach initiatives to the communities, such as conduction of awareness programmes on health, education, block/field placements of students, etc. The question on 'researching with the community' drew answers such as research scholars working on local problems faced by the communities. Even in case of specially designed, practice-oriented vocational courses, the main intent is far from what the term 'community engagement' entails. Dr Ronki Ram, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Punjab University agreed that this survey does show a 'one-way flow of information from academics to the community as the general practice' in most departments and colleges of the university.

Despite the absence of orientation, the survey did throw light on certain encouraging initiatives. The need of the hour in Punjab is the institutionalisation of favourable policies and structures for mainstreaming community engagement in academia. With the leadership of academicians such as Dr Ronki Ram, who nurtures a clear vision on community engagement, Punjab University holds out the potential to transform into a more engaged and socially responsible institution.

West Bengal

West Bengal emerged as a state where the practices of community-university engagement (although to a limited degree) incorporated participation by external stakeholders. While there was governmental support for some colleges (e.g., Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Cooch Behar and Ghoom Jorebungalow College, Darjeeling), others did collaborate with local NGOs to undertake work such as irrigation projects and climate resilient agriculture/climate smart technologies (FOCEP, funded by Japan, collaborated with Ghoom Jorebungalow College, Darjeeling; ANWESHA, SATMILE SATISH CLUB and CDHI collaborated with Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Cooch Behar and Ghoom Jorebungalow College).

Some of the colleges faced constraints such as lack of manpower. For instance, in Uttar Banga Krshi Vishwavidyalaya, no new teachers had been recruited for five years. This limited the capacities of the colleges. The farming community in Bengal was perceived to be non-receptive. The farmers in North Bengal depend greatly on subsidies. Therefore, they adhered to technological changes made available to them only as long as they enjoy such subsidies. When subsidies are withdrawn, they give up the changed practices. Another problem faced by the college authorities was that the community was only interested in the economic returns, over other benefits, from any programme organised for them due to the harsh poverty they live in.

Although the concept of engaging with the community is, at present, not being completely realised in West Bengal, there is certainly scope for better and more organised initiatives. Notwithstanding the limitations of the community, the colleges can make a start by first providing basic education and information to the people, and then resorting to fulfilling their academic programmes/interventions. Although there is no dearth of social/community development work being carried out, if it enhances participation from the community, the corresponding results could be better. Two-way dialogue, once started, must look to incorporate all aspects of engagement – from local knowledge systematisation and integration, to initiation of joint research projects, and seasoned local practitioners disseminating their practitioner knowledge to students. This is undoubtedly going to be a difficult process, but a start needs to be made, at all levels.

Assam

Assam is characterised by a socially aware community of students and teachers. More heartening is the fact that this social awareness is not limited only to students from the social sciences/humanities stream, but also extends to students from the natural sciences. This was very evident

from the workshop conducted at IIT-Gauhati under this project which gave the students an opportunity to voice their opinion on the issue of community engagement and what they felt about the relevance of the issue in today's times. While students questioned the traditional pedagogy being followed in premier institutions like the IIT, they remained keen to stay connected with the communities they belonged to and expressed their desire to work with and for them. Along with the students, the teaching fraternity in Assam too is aware of the socio-political situation in their surroundings and is undertaking numerous efforts at engagement.

It can be said that the ground in Assam is fertile for pursuing 'actual and relevant community engagement' in letter and spirit. However, there is no denying that much effort is needed in this direction to bring all the scattered activities on a common platform and under a common framework. There is need to streamline institutional policies, practices and activities in the engagement with communities. To bring fruitful results, community engagement activities need to be attached to the regular evaluation of students, so that the exact purpose of community engagement is achieved and the university is able to fulfill its social responsibility.

Karnataka

With the mushrooming of higher education providers in the state, Karnataka offers much potential for expansion of engagement efforts. It has emerged as a front-runner as far as support from the higher education/policy framework for community engagement is concerned. Support by academia and the state government is crucial, and special mention in this regard must be made of the recent *Karnataka Youth Policy* (2012) and the Karnataka Knowledge Commission-sponsored *Study on the Perceptions, Aspirations, Expectations and Attitudes of Youth in Karnataka*. The Karnataka Youth Policy (2012) states that, '*Multiple capacities of youth often do not find an avenue for expression. Most young people in the state often say that they would like to be involved in serving the community but have very limited opportunities for the same and*

have strongly endorsed the need for an appropriate and variable platform. This policy places a premium on "volunteerism". It would facilitate the process of every youth dedicating 7 days in a year for voluntary work. Youth federations, voluntary organizations and various government agencies or departments can form partnerships at various levels in carrying out numerous society-oriented activities on "voluntary basis".'[6] (emphasis added)

The Karnataka Knowledge Commission Youth Study indicated two critical facts. '*Being socially responsible was an aspiration of a significant chunk of the youth. This was either a reflection of their active involvement in social work already or a reflection of a desired future course of action. This was a clear priority with rural youth*' (Summary 8.2.10) and '*Youth also stressed on the fact that society must give the younger generation more responsibility. This represents both the aspiration of a new generation as also their frustration of not being provided with the opportunities that they believe that they deserve*' (Summary 8.2.11).[7]

Both academicians and the government actively participated in the drafting of the policy/report. This brings to light a new synergy between policy makers and academicians in making higher education more meaningful, engaged and relevant. With such support from the two main pillars framing the perspective of higher education, Karnataka undoubtedly emerges as the most promising state covered under the project. Although the opportunities and current practices with respect to engagement seem to be limited at the moment, the potential for its expansion into something meaningful is immense and beyond contestation. With such a favourable environment, it will not be an exaggeration to state that '*Karnataka, today, is looking to transform itself into a knowledge society*', as shared by Prof. Shireen Nedungadi, Principal, National College, Bengaluru. HEIs being the most important link in a knowledge society have a crucial role to play in this context. However, considering the heterogeneous nature of institutions, it is essential that policies and regulation when framed account for this heterogeneity.

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6 *Karnataka Youth Policy* 2012, Government of Karnataka
7 *Study on Perceptions, Aspiration, Expectations and Attitudes of Youth in Karnataka*, Karnataka Knowledge Commission, Government of Karnataka, August 2011, p. 114

Ways forward

This project on strengthening 'Community Engagement in HEIs' has proved to be an important intervention by way of throwing light on the existing scenario with respect to community engagement, giving it a suitable orientation, and providing crisp action points for the future (emerging from the state based workshops). Meanwhile, an important policy level development which has taken place is the rolling out by the UGC in October 2014 of the new scheme on fostering community engagement in HEIs, which provides for the establishment of a Centre for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement, an umbrella unit to oversee all the community engagement efforts at a university. This scheme has been announced at the most opportune moment when the UNESCO Chair was engaged in the initiative of generating awareness on the issue and was involved in efforts to streamline it into mainstream academia. It has greatly augmented the efforts under this project, by way of providing a policy prescription for the same. Encouragingly, many universities partnering in this initiative (Punjab University, North Bengal University, Gauhati University, North Eastern Hill University, Mysore University, Bangalore University) qualified under this new UGC scheme, and the Chair is looking forward to supporting them in building quality proposals under the scheme. Recently, the UNESCO Chair also convened a consultation of the interested universities and has pledged all support in this regard.

Brainstorming at the state based workshops resulted in many crucial and important recommendations which will help in streamlining community-university engagement. Some of them are:

✓ *Importance of defining the term 'community' and chalking out a clear vision on community engagement.*

Given contextual differences between societies, it was important to define the word 'community', and state clearly who constituted it. This is essential as an initial step towards ensuring the larger objective of community engagement. Along with this, and in order to have the university and community engaging with each other, the university needs to define the terms and principles of this engagement.

This envisioning will help universities engage more fruitfully with the community.

✓ *Designing of curricula facilitative towards community engagement*

The curriculum designed for university courses needs to be a little more facilitative towards incorporation of community engagement. Efforts are needed in order to explore the integration opportunities of community engagement within the academic curriculum of HEIs. This will not only help promote the agenda, but also benefit the students by giving them an opportunity to earn academic credits. As evident from the ongoing interest by both students and teachers, there is an urgent need to include such activities in the credit based curriculum. The viewpoint of seeing community engagement as an appendage to teaching and research should stop. For this, it needs to be ensured that when a particular curriculum is being designed, a part of it must be solely dedicated towards community engagement. The curriculum should be such that it helps the students move out into society. Therefore, there is need to make curricula less restrictive, more liberating, and open to innovation and experimentation.

In line with universities who have a component of community based research methodology integrated into the module on Participatory Research (PR), community based engagement too can promote local indigenous knowledge. Integration of elitist knowledge systems with indigenous knowledge systems will help achieve the desired engagement in a meaningful way. Additionally, there is a need to align the institutional policy and practices in HEIs in favour of community engagement, before debating the nature of individual/institutional activities. Institutions like Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) can take the initiative to organise community based research projects for young faculty members, in the form of a separate module. Such efforts can play a big role in promoting the integration of local knowledge into academic expertise.

✓ *HEIs to function as custodians of local knowledge and heritage*

There are distinctive cultural traditions, peculiar and characteristic of different types of society, but today,

they are threatened by the social change taking place due to increasing urbanisation. As a result, these distinctive differences are gradually being lost and transformed. It is here that universities can step in, in an attempt to preserve such culture and knowledge skills of the community. Universities need to include this function as part of their vision and mission. Also, if India's higher education system can draw out experienced practitioners present within the community, create a curriculum accordingly and provide certification to their knowledge, then existing resources can be tapped and indigenous knowledge utilised in the most efficient way.

✓ *Liasioning to be ensured between different agencies, structures and institutions, and advocacy at various platforms*

There is need for liasioning between different agencies and structures, spanning policy makers, target groups and intermediary institutions, in order to promote community engagement practices. The importance of NGOs in this field cannot be underestimated. Universities should work in alliance to further the agenda of community engagement and tap and utilise the experience of working with marginalised communities which voluntary organisations have. There is a need to try and reinforce the importance of this, wherever feasible. Therefore, we all need to play an advocacy role, across different sectors, to bring community engagement as a central focus in all policies and schemes for HEIs.

✓ *Reports and initiatives taken on engagement practices must be de-mystified and widely circulated*

If we desire to involve marginalised communities, it is essential to demystify literary information and circulate it widely. There is need to ensure that reporting of good initiatives must not be limited to the elite sections of society. Documents need to be converted to the local vernacular languages, (such as Kannada, Hindi, Bengali, and Nepali, considering the large population of migrants working in the tea gardens in North Bengal) and widely used.

✓ *Culture change to be brought about; need to evolve an empathetic attitude*

Historically, it has been observed that universities have segregated themselves from the community, and have remained incentivised to do so. However,

today, opposite trends are in action, as such integration is being promoted. This will involve a cultural/mind set shift in the people running a HEI. The university culture so far has been to promote the importance of its own research questions in exclusion to the needs of the community and the ideas of students. It needs to be realised that the community is not only an object from where data can be mined and reports produced, but that it has its own value systems and ideas which can be borrowed and built on while researching a particular problem. Unfortunately, students too are prejudiced.

✓ *Boundary of alienation between NGOs and universities needs to be overcome*

Capacity enhancement of NGOs/community based organisations/panchayats/municipalities/line departments/small business associations needs to be ensured, as they are important channels of facilitation of community engagement interventions/ activities and have enormous experience of working with the community. Along with this, the boundaries of alienation between NGOs and universities need to be overcome. As shared by Dr Tandon, President, PRIA at one of the state based workshops, '*Once PRIA facilitated the interface between university professors and young dalit women in Haryana, for whom places like universities was a distant dream, it proved to be life changing event for those young girls and today, as a result, there are many young people coming to the university and seeking advice for a better future.*'

✓ *Policy making to be contextualised as per the requirements/experiences of the region*

The adaptation and implementation of policies needs to be contextually determined. It is unfortunate that in India policies are often framed rigidly and the intended guidelines presume the role of permanent subscription. They need to be more generic and less prescriptive. By providing some guiding points regarding the communities in their regions, universities can place a demand on policy makers to come up with actions that will work for the agenda of community engagement.

✓ *Need to come up with 'community engagement scholarships'*

There is a need to come up with 'community engagement scholarships' for students hailing from

marginalised sections of society, considering they too need some kind of incentive/motivation to work in this area. India can take a cue from European countries, some of which have been offering similar kinds of scholarships (e.g., Trinity College, UK).

✓ *Sensitivity with respect to the community's needs and aspirations needs to be built, along with building a rapport with them*

Sensitivity to a community's needs is essential for effectively engaging with them and if we want to construe any social relevance from such activities. This is true for the poverty struck communities in Bengal, or strife torn regions of Assam, or the communities in Punjab and Karnataka. There is a need to build the capacities, management and communication skills of the communities in order to ensure successful engagement. The communities also need to be sensitised to trust the engagement process as being equally beneficial to them.

✓ *Creation of an interface between the university and society, and inculcation of respect for multiple knowledge systems*

Creation of an interface between the university and society and inculcation of respect for multiple knowledge systems is an essential part of the whole process. This forms the basis of community engagement. In the absence of such an approach, the process of engagement is reduced to mere outreach activity. Round table conferences can be resorted to as a method of knowledge production, an example of which is the interventions undertaken by the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), Gauhati University. Along with this, to help in problem mapping, forums for interaction and grievance rederessal need to be established so that communities may provide the necessary information.

✓ *Need to evolve a Community of Practice*

Considering the scattered and isolated efforts being carried out under the broad framework of community engagement, the need for convergence of such initiatives was emphasised. This may be achieved in the form of a web portal where academics and practitioners can come forward and share their ideas. This Community of Practice (CoP) may be in the form of an alliance of concerned stakeholders (including universities, NGOs, bureaucrats, etc) who are interested in taking the movement forward. The Centre for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement (CFSRCE) under the newly launched UGC scheme may also play a crucial role in achieving such convergence of ideas and efforts.

✓ *Overcoming the 'We-They' framework*

Most importantly, there is a need to come out of the 'we-they' framework, and look at universities and communities as inclusive, not exclusive, units. It needs to be realised that community engagement calls for a bi-directional interaction, where the benefits accrued, learnings imbibed and impacts felt are mutual and of equal relevance for both stakeholders. Therefore, appropriate emphasis needs to be placed on 'integration and inclusion'.

✓ *Social audit of community engagement initiatives*

Consensus was also achieved on the point that there is a need to develop suitable policies, initiate effective programmes and evaluate performance through an instrument such as social audit. This viewpoint arose amidst the consideration that there needs to be a system which can check the community engagement programmes practiced and reported by HEIs. Such an audit would not only help in monitoring and evaluation, but would also offer opportunities for feedback and improvement for the future. Additionally, credit for such initiatives should be strictly based on established track record and accounting of concrete impact on the community and university alike.

✓ *Developing global citizens, knowledge society*

Engagement with society is primarily aimed at the development of global citizens and transforming society into a knowledge society. For this, we must adopt a broader perspective, and allow students to step out of their classrooms and the rigidities of their curricula by supporting them in experimentation and innovation. A bit of dynamism in the evolution of an enabling ecosystem can go a long way in furthering the cause of community engagement.

UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education

The UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education grows out of and supports the UNESCO global lead to play "a key role in assisting countries to build knowledge societies".

The Chair uniquely has its home in two complementary but distinct institutions. It is co-located at the Community Development Programme in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria (UVic) in Canada and at Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) located in New Delhi, India. Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founding President of PRIA and Dr. Budd L. Hall, Professor of Community Development at UVic serve as the first Co-Chairs.

The UNESCO Chair supports North-South-South and South-South partnerships that build on and enhance the emerging consensus in knowledge democracy. It strengthens recent collaboration between the Higher Education section in UNESCO, the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) and the Global Alliance on Community University Engagement (GACER). It co-creates new knowledge through partnerships among universities (academics), communities (civil society) and government (policy-makers) leading to new capacities; new solutions to pressing problems related to sustainability, social and economic disparities, cultural exclusion, mistrust and conflict; awareness among policy makers; enhanced scholarship of engagement; and modified pedagogy of community based research.

It is expected that the work of the UNESCO Chair will contribute to:

- *Supportive policies*: through government support and research funding
- *Trained professionals*: researchers, scholars, students, practitioners
- *Enhanced partnerships*: between civil society, universities, North-South-South networks
- *Supportive leadership*: from academic councils, university administrations, vice chancellors and civil society leaders.

Over the next four years, the co-chairs intend to work to mainstream the practice of community-based research in the teaching and research functions of higher education world-wide. We want to strengthen the engagements between communities, civil society and the academia in ways that contribute to improved well-being of all our peoples, as well as the transformation of institutions of higher education themselves. And, we want to promote the discourse on social responsibility of higher education in the perspective of 'knowledge democracy'.

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UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education

PRIA is a global participatory research and training centre