

# Community engagement challenges and perceptions in private higher education institutions

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the challenges and perceptions related to community engagement in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa. Community engagement is now considered as important as teaching and learning, as well as research and innovation at universities. The Council on Higher Education expects formal engagement from public and private higher education institutions. However, PHEIs face unique challenges such as resource constraints, conflicting priorities, lack of tradition, and differing perceptions of community engagement. The study used qualitative data collection methods, including desktop research and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five academics from different PHEIs. The findings emphasised the need for PHEIs to develop strategies to build sustainable relationships with their communities despite these challenges.

**Keywords:** *engaged scholarship, sustainable projects, student engagement, academic workload, community-engaged research*

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## 1. Introduction

Community engagement (CE) is one of the core pillars of higher education, alongside teaching and research. However, in the context of South African Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), community engagement is often underdeveloped due to various institutional constraints. Unlike public universities, PHEIs are not permitted to be called universities, as stipulated by the Higher Education Act of 2016, and they do not receive government subsidies or financial support (Coughlan, 2012; Tankou epe Nukunah et al., 2019). This lack of funding compels PHEIs to adopt an entrepreneurial model for financial sustainability, which in turn limits their capacity to invest in CE initiatives on a scale comparable to public institutions (Somerville, 2024). Given these financial and regulatory limitations, many PHEIs lack a dedicated history, culture, or personnel structure for fostering CE.

The role of CE in higher education is essential for fostering societal transformation and addressing community needs. In post-apartheid South Africa, higher education policy reforms were introduced to encourage institutions to become more responsive to societal challenges through CE initiatives (Mohale, 2023). However, the implementation of these policies remains uneven across the sector, with PHEIs often struggling to align with national priorities due to resource constraints. While public universities have developed various models for community engagement, there is no unified framework guiding its implementation across the entire sector, leaving PHEIs at a disadvantage in fully realising the potential of CE.

PHEIs in South Africa are currently experiencing a period of significant transition. The Council on Higher Education is increasingly acknowledging the crucial role played by PHEIs in the overall higher education system. This recognition is reflected in the CHE's initiatives to involve PHEIs in institutional audits, working groups, and other processes that have traditionally been reserved for public institutions. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education is actively considering the potential reclassification of PHEIs to grant them university status.

This possible reclassification has sparked important questions about the future role of PHEIs in the South African higher education landscape, especially regarding their responsibilities toward continuing education and their broader impact on the country's overall higher education system. The current progress notwithstanding, there is still a notable research void concerning the understanding and execution of CE within PHEIs (Tilak, 2024). The

existing body of literature predominantly concentrates on state-funded universities, resulting in a lack of exploration into the distinct challenges and opportunities that CE presents within the private educational sector. This research endeavours to fill this void by delving into how PHEIs perceive community engagement, pinpointing the specific obstacles they encounter, and examining how these institutions can adapt to the evolving requirements of CE in the context of the ongoing transformation of South Africa's higher education landscape.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Understanding Contextual Challenges in Community Engagement***

CE is grounded in the understanding that universities are not separate from society but rather integral parts of it. They are, therefore, tasked with playing a role in enhancing the overall well-being of society (Vally, 2021). Community engagement has the potential to improve economic, educational, social, and civic outcomes by facilitating collaborative partnerships between universities and local communities (Hintea et al., 2022; Pizaña et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation of community engagement initiatives within South African higher education, especially in higher education institutions, is confronted with a variety of distinctive challenges.

### ***2.2. Defining Community Engagement and its Complexity***

The lack of a clear and universally accepted definition of CE has resulted in varied interpretations across institutions. Johnson (2020) highlights academic frustration due to these different conceptual understandings, which impede coherent implementation. One perspective on CE views it as a means to promote social change and address community problems through collaborative partnerships between academic institutions, practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Thompson & Hood, 2016). This approach emphasises the role of universities in leveraging their research, knowledge, and resources to contribute to resolving pressing social issues. Proponents of this model argue that by engaging with the local community, universities can foster meaningful change and demonstrate their relevance beyond the confines of the ivory tower.

In contrast, another conceptualisation of community engagement focuses on the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources between universities and their surrounding communities (Bender, 2008). This framework emphasises the development of

reciprocal partnerships, where both the academic institution and the community work together to share and apply knowledge in a context of mutual respect and shared goals (Huijstee & Ronay, 2019). This approach highlights the potential for community engagement to enhance physical and psychological well-being, self-confidence, and personal relationships.

A third perspective on community engagement emphasises the importance of place-based initiatives, which involve universities deepening their connections with the local neighbourhoods in which they are situated (Bidandi et al., 2021). This approach encourages universities to focus their engagement efforts on the specific communities and geographic areas surrounding their campuses, fostering a sense of shared identity and collective responsibility.

The diversity of these definitions highlights the challenges universities face in consistently implementing and measuring the impact of CE (Olowu, 2012). Without a clear and unified understanding of what CE entails, universities may struggle to align their priorities, governance structures, and financial resources to support effective community partnerships (Hollingsworth, 2019). Similarly, Bhagwan (2017) points out that the definition of "community" is not the same everywhere. Some define it broadly as sustainable networks, partnerships, and activities between higher education institutions and communities at different levels (Jacob et al., 2015). Others restrict it to rural or disadvantaged populations, overlooking other potential stakeholders such as industries or professional communities. Some focus on communities in their geographical area, and some even view international interest groups as their communities (Vanaja et al., 2024). This ambiguity affects how PHEIs approach CE, as they must navigate these multiple definitions while developing their engagement strategies. The absence of a shared understanding of CE creates an additional barrier in PHEIs. These institutions often lack the history, resources, and infrastructure of public universities, leading to fragmented approaches to engagement. Therefore, clarifying the role and scope of CE in PHEIs is critical for their effective involvement with communities.

### ***2.3. Challenges to Community Engagement in PHEIs***

***Power dynamics and institutional reluctance.*** A significant challenge to CE in both public and private universities is the reluctance to treat civic engagement as a core function (Mohale, 2023). Johnson (2020) argues that many universities do not view community partnerships as central to their mission, often focused on teaching and research. Universities'

hierarchical and bureaucratic nature further complicates collaboration with external communities, as these institutions are often perceived as unapproachable or difficult to navigate by non-academic partners. This issue is exacerbated in PHEIs, where institutional owners or shareholders prioritise profitability over engagement initiatives. Community engagement in such environments is often sidelined, as it does not directly contribute to the institution's bottom line (Burger, 2021). This results in limited personnel dedicated to CE and creates further challenges to institutionalising engagement.

***Financial constraints and sustainability.*** Securing funding poses a significant challenge for CE, particularly in the case of PHEIs that do not receive financial support from the government. Unlike public universities, which have the advantage of receiving state funding for their research and community involvement initiatives, PHEIs primarily depend on student tuition fees as their main source of income (Somerville, 2024). Consequently, these institutions have limited financial leeway to allocate resources towards community-based projects, especially when such endeavours are perceived as being less essential compared to teaching and traditional research activities. Despite the challenges, public-private partnerships could offer a potential solution to the funding gap (Burger, 2021; Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). Exploring these avenues, alongside government intervention to subsidise private institutions, could enhance the sustainability of CE initiatives in PHEIs. However, such solutions are rarely implemented, leaving many PHEIs without the necessary resources to engage meaningfully with communities.

***Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in engagement.*** Building trust and fostering long-term relationships with communities is vital for the success of CE, but this can be especially difficult in South Africa's complex socio-political landscape. Movements like "Fees Must Fall" and incidents of violence on university campuses have strained relations between higher education institutions and local communities (Johnson, 2020). There is widespread scepticism regarding universities' ability to address community issues, given their internal governance and security struggles. For PHEIs, the challenge is even more pronounced, as they must balance their business-oriented model with community needs. Engaging with communities requires a nuanced understanding of local cultures and socio-political dynamics. However, PHEIs often

lack the institutional infrastructure to support such sensitivity, which can undermine trust and reduce the effectiveness of engagement efforts.

*Measuring impact and evaluating success.* One persistent challenge in CE is the difficulty in measuring its impact. The lack of a national framework guiding CE in South Africa has led to inconsistent interpretations and poor implementation of community-oriented initiatives (Mohale, 2023). Johnson (2022) highlights the scepticism among university leaders regarding CE, with some believing that existing research engagements already fulfil the institution's societal responsibilities. This perspective underscores the need for clearer metrics evaluation mechanisms and regular feedback (Pentang, 2021) to assess the true impact of CE initiatives. The situation is more challenging in PHEIs due to limited resources and the lack of established research cultures. Most academics in PHEIs see themselves as emerging researchers and often do not have the capacity to balance teaching, research, and community engagement effectively (Deacon et al., 2014). Without a framework for evaluating success, CE initiatives may remain superficial and fail to produce tangible outcomes for either the institution or the community.

#### ***2.4. Addressing the Gaps: A Focus on PHEIs***

While much has been written about CE in public universities, there is a notable gap in research focusing on PHEIs. These institutions face unique challenges, including financial constraints, the lack of a CE culture, and limited academic capacity. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how PHEIs perceive CE and the challenges they face in implementing it. By addressing these issues, PHEIs can better align with national transformation agendas and contribute to the socio-economic development of the communities they serve.

### **3. Methodology**

The research project employed a carefully crafted qualitative design, utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews to delve into the intricacies of community engagement within private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The selection of five key stakeholders, each responsible for driving community initiatives at different institutions, ensured a broad representation of perspectives and experiences. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the various strategies and practices employed in community engagement. The

decision to utilise semi-structured interviews was motivated by their ability to accommodate follow-up questions and navigate complex or sensitive topics, as discussed by DeJonckheere & Vaughn (2019).

The data collection process adhered to rigorous standards, incorporating two primary methods. Firstly, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for nuanced exploration and in-depth understanding of the participants' viewpoints. Furthermore, the researcher utilised desktop research to supplement the primary data, drawing from secondary sources, as highlighted by Denvir (2016). This multi-faceted approach, enriched by the analysis, contributed to the overall robustness of the research findings and provided a deeper contextual understanding of community engagement practices within PHEIs.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, the interviews were conducted using the online platform Microsoft Teams, which facilitated the recording and transcription of each session. This meticulous approach aimed to capture and preserve the richness of the data. Subsequently, thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed data to identify recurrent patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. This analytical process reinforced the validity and reliability of the findings and provided a comprehensive insight into the complexities of community engagement within the context of private higher education institutions.

STADIO Higher Education has granted ethical clearance permission for the study. All the participants signed a consent form agreeing to share their opinions during the interviews voluntarily. The participants are kept anonymous, and the researcher uses a code to identify them. No names appear on the transcripts. After being coded, the interview transcriptions were saved on the researcher's password-protected laptop.

## **4. Findings**

After reading the findings from the interviews a few times to ensure that all nuances were understood and all relevant themes were identified, the challenges and perceptions of the anonymous participants were summarised and presented in tabular form. The challenges are presented in table 1, and the perceptions are presented in table 2.

**Table 1***Challenges experienced by PHEIs*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
1	We, as private institutions, do not have the luxury of government funding. We do not even have money to pay page fees for publications or to attend conferences. With what money must we engage with communities in upliftment programmes and activities? If you distribute blankets and food, it is not community engagement. It is charity. For any bigger projects, there are just not time or funds available.
2	A lot has been said and discussed regarding Community Engagement, and public universities might have been doing this for years already, but it is still only a concept and not a reality in private institutions. We took note of it but haven't started yet.
3	Privates do not have the capacity or funds to uplift communities with sustainable programmes.
4	We have mostly distance learning programmes. It is thus impossible to engage students in these projects. Because we do not have a face-to-face campus, office space is limited. So, most academics work from home, all over the country... The minimum academic staff lives within the boundaries of the community where the campus is. It is thus also impossible to get them involved and engage them in the community with projects.
5	We present classes online to students worldwide, and our academics are also from worldwide because we teach online. The challenge is thus to find and define a community and to get online students and staff involved in a community project. As PHEIs, we do not have the luxury of state funding, money, or capacity in the form of tutors, assistants, or secretaries. We do everything ourselves. We lecture and do all the admin for our programmes, and we have to produce research outputs. Although we understand the need for engagement, we do not have the capacity... because we also supervise M and D students apart from our lecturing obligations.

After a thematic analysis, the following themes were identified:

***Lack of Funding and Resources.*** Participants consistently emphasised the challenge of insufficient funding and resources, particularly in comparison to public universities. Without government funding, PHEIs struggle to allocate resources for CE activities, which require financial backing and dedicated personnel. This lack of funding impacts the ability to execute meaningful and sustainable community projects.



***Conceptual Understanding of Community Engagement.*** For many PHEIs, community engagement is still an abstract concept rather than an active practice. While public universities have incorporated CE into their operations for years, some PHEIs have not initiated such activities. There is an understanding of the need for CE, but the actual implementation remains limited.

***Challenges with Distance and Online Learning Models.*** Institutions offering distance and online learning face unique challenges in fostering CE. Participants highlighted that the geographic dispersion of students and faculty makes it difficult to identify a single community and engage in localised activities. Additionally, without physical campuses or face-to-face interactions, opportunities for faculty and students to participate in CE are severely constrained.

***Lack of Time and Capacity.*** PHEI faculty members are often overburdened with multiple roles, including teaching, administrative work, research, and student supervision. This multitasking leaves little time or energy for additional responsibilities like CE. Participants described how the absence of support staff, such as tutors or administrative assistants, exacerbates this issue, further limiting their capacity to participate in or develop community initiatives.

The analysis reveals that PHEIs face substantial structural and operational challenges regarding CE. The most significant barrier is the lack of funding, as PHEIs do not receive government support, making it challenging to allocate resources for CE activities. This lack of financial support not only hampers engagement efforts but also forces institutions to prioritise other operational needs, such as paying publication fees and maintaining research outputs. Another key challenge is the conceptual gap regarding CE. While public institutions have long integrated CE into their core functions, PHEIs are still grappling with how to meaningfully engage with communities, particularly when most of their operations are virtual or spread across vast geographical regions. This is further complicated by the predominance of online education models, which make it challenging to define a "community" or establish direct connections between students, faculty, and the public. Finally, the overextension of academic staff, who are responsible for a multitude of roles, significantly limits the capacity for CE. Faculty at PHEIs often juggle teaching, research, supervision, and administrative duties without the support of additional staff, leaving little room for engagement initiatives. Despite understanding the importance of community involvement, the lack of time and personnel to

organise and participate in these activities creates a persistent barrier. The findings suggest that the challenges PHEIs experience with CE are multifaceted, rooted in both financial constraints and the structural limitations of their operational models.

**Table 2**

*Perceptions of Community Engagement by PHEIs*

Participant	Perceptions
1	All university research aims at practical problems in society or at improving life, health, or business for those involved. Research from our postgraduate studies aims to solve problems in the workplace, other organisations, or communities. So, through research, we are engaged in the community. Distributing food or collecting blankets during winter is charity, not community engagement.
2	We must focus on giving bursaries, bringing in people from communities, and educating them. Charity is not sustainable, and it creates short-term solutions. Education and a degree can create jobs, bring prosperity into households and communities, and create long-term solutions. This is the purpose of Higher Education. Leave us to do what we do well. The nucleus of being a higher education institution and teaching students is to be involved in, busy with, and doing it for the community.
3	If CE is the university's version of social responsibility, it will not work. Corporates, in their nature, are there to make a profit. They can thus give a small bit of their profit back to communities by fulfilling their social responsibilities. Universities, in their nature, are there to educate the nation so that they can find employment and alleviate poverty. Universities are there to research problems in communities and find solutions. In their nature, they are responsible for society and engaged in the community. To expect corporate social responsibility from higher education institutions in the disguised form of Community Engagement is to ask them to do the same thing twice... and that is unreasonable. We incorporate the community's voice into research by getting their input as participants or respondents in research endeavours. By being respondents and participants, they already co-create all the knowledge.
4	Community is a broad term. It is not only the location or place of the institution. It can be a bigger virtual or interest community.
5	The world is thus our community, and we are engaged through the topics our students research wherever they are. All topics focus on finding a solution to an organisation or community problem.

The interviews were undergone a thematic analysis, and the following were the emerging themes:

***Research as Community Engagement.*** A prominent theme is the perception that CE is already inherent in the research activities conducted by PHEIs. Participants emphasised that through research, especially at the postgraduate level, PHEIs address practical societal problems, thereby fulfilling their responsibility to engage with the community. They argue that research aimed at improving the workplace, organisations, or broader societal issues is a form of CE in itself.

***Distinction Between Charity and Community Engagement.*** Participants consistently distinguished between charity and meaningful community engagement. Charity, such as distributing food or blankets, is seen as a short-term, unsustainable solution that does not address the root causes of societal challenges. In contrast, education and research are viewed as long-term solutions that can empower individuals and communities by creating sustainable economic and social advancement opportunities.

***Education as a Form of Community Engagement.*** Several participants highlighted the role of education as a key form of CE. By providing education and granting degrees, PHEIs contribute to alleviating poverty, creating jobs, and fostering prosperity within communities. They perceive the act of educating students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds through bursaries, as a meaningful and impactful way of engaging with and improving society.

***Broad and Global Understanding of Community.*** The definition of "community" is seen as broader than just the local geographical area around an institution. For PHEIs, especially those operating in online and distance learning environments, the concept of community extends to virtual or interest-based groups. Participants noted that their community is not confined to a specific location but rather includes any group or organisation their students and faculty interact with through research.

***Critique of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Model.*** Participants expressed a critique of treating CE as a form of CSR for higher education institutions. They argue that

universities, by their nature, are already fulfilling a societal responsibility through education and research. Expecting them to engage in community projects in the same way as corporations do through CSR is seen as redundant and misaligned with the core mission of higher education.

The analysis suggests that PHEIs perceive community engagement primarily through the lens of research and education rather than direct, tangible actions like charity. Participants strongly believe that their institutions contribute to societal betterment through research that addresses practical problems and through the education they provide to students, which equips them to become agents of change in their own communities. This view aligns with the notion that higher education institutions serve the community by producing knowledge and skilled individuals rather than through direct philanthropic efforts.

A notable distinction is made between short-term charitable acts and sustainable, impactful engagement. Participants are critical of charity as a form of community engagement, viewing it as insufficient and unsustainable. Instead, they champion education and research as long-term, systemic solutions that can lead to more meaningful societal improvements, such as job creation and poverty alleviation. Additionally, the concept of community is not confined to a local geographic space for these institutions. Given the global nature of many PHEIs, especially those offering online and distance education, their CE is understood as having a broader, even global, reach. This perception is particularly relevant for institutions where faculty and students are dispersed across different regions, making localised engagement more challenging.

Participants reject the idea of CE as a form of corporate social responsibility. They argue that higher education institutions have a unique role to play in society, one that is distinct from the profit-driven model of corporations. By integrating community voices into research and focusing on societal improvement through education, PHEIs believe they are already fulfilling their social obligations. The findings reveal that PHEIs view community engagement as an intrinsic part of their core functions—research and education—rather than through direct, hands-on interventions like societal upliftment. They see themselves responsible for long-term societal improvement by equipping students with knowledge and solutions addressing broader societal issues.

## 5. Discussion

PHEIs face a range of challenges in effectively engaging with communities, with resource constraints being one of the most significant hurdles. Balancing academic excellence, research commitments, and community engagement is difficult, particularly given the absence of a strong tradition of community engagement within PHEIs. Additionally, the pressure to compete for students and funding in a market-driven environment often diverts attention from community-focused initiatives, further exacerbating these challenges.

Participants in the study provided valuable insights into these obstacles. Participant One emphasised financial constraints, highlighting the distinction between genuine community engagement and charitable acts. This participant underscored the need for sustainable and meaningful engagement beyond one-off contributions. Participant Two, on the other hand, positioned education as a sustainable solution, advocating for PHEIs to play a vital role in expanding access to education and creating opportunities, especially for underserved communities. This aligns with the broader mission of higher education to foster social mobility and contribute to societal well-being.

Participant Three raised concerns regarding the expectation for PHEIs to operate like corporate entities, emphasising profit over public good. This participant stressed the importance of incorporating community input into research, suggesting that genuine engagement requires a collaborative approach where the community is an active partner in the knowledge production process. This highlights the need for PHEIs to rethink their engagement strategies and ensure community voices are integral to their research initiatives.

Participant Four pointed out the logistical challenges associated with distance learning programs. These challenges complicate efforts to foster a sense of community on campus and make it more difficult to implement traditional models of community engagement. This participant also broadened the definition of “community,” indicating that distance learners themselves could be considered a community requiring engagement.

Participant Five highlighted the global reach of many PHEIs and the need for institutions to rely on their own resources due to the lack of government funding. This participant’s insights reflect the broader reality of PHEIs needing to be resourceful and innovative in their engagement efforts, often leveraging non-monetary contributions such as student labour, expertise, and partnerships to make an impact.

These perspectives reveal a complex landscape for CE in PHEIs, where financial and institutional constraints shape their ability to contribute meaningfully to their surrounding communities. A significant misconception that emerged from the discussion is the belief that financial resources are always necessary for engagement. However, as participants suggested, PHEIs can explore alternative forms of engagement that involve non-monetary contributions, such as student skills, volunteer work, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. This could help broaden the scope of CE for PHEIs.

Furthermore, the study highlights a gap in understanding CE. Many PHEIs seem to lack a comprehensive understanding of what true engagement entails, which goes beyond conducting research on a community or offering short-term charity. Engagement requires sustained dialogue with communities, bringing their narratives into the classroom and using these experiences to enrich teaching, learning, and the curriculum.

Finally, financial constraints also limit PHEIs' participation in broader academic citizenship activities, such as attending conferences, publishing research, and undertaking community or institutional research projects. This further hampers their ability to engage with academic and local communities, reducing opportunities for collaboration and impact.

## **6. Conclusion**

While PHEIs face tangible challenges in implementing traditional forms of community engagement, they perceive their primary contribution to society through education and research as a valid and impactful form of CE. Their engagement is less about direct, hands-on interventions and more about long-term societal change through knowledge creation and the empowerment of individuals. The dual focus on the structural challenges and conceptual perceptions highlights that PHEIs experience community engagement differently from public institutions, suggesting a need for a broader understanding of what constitutes effective engagement in the context of private higher education.

PHEIs should seek partnerships with private organisations, alumni, and philanthropic grants to secure funding for CE initiatives. Institutions should create strategic plans prioritising community engagement alongside academic goals by reallocating resources and establishing a dedicated CE department. PHEIs should also promote a culture of engagement through training programs, incentives, and recognition of successful community partnerships. Private institutions should collaborate with public universities, non-profits, and government agencies

to share resources and amplify their community impact. Institutions should involve communities in their research and decision-making through participatory methods and regular feedback. PHEIs with distance learning models should explore virtual volunteering, online forums, and digital platforms for meaningful community interaction. Given their global reach, PHEIs should integrate international perspectives into their curriculum and support global service-learning initiatives. Policymakers should reconsider the definition of CE to include teaching and research functions, recognizing that education is a significant form of community engagement.

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