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From Rhetoric to Praxis: Towards a University-Community Collaboration Model

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ABSTRACT

University and tertiary institutions in general are meant to meet the socio-economic challenges of the local and global societies. Unless these institutions do something to transform their curriculum practices, the objective to address the 21st century challenges will remain a dream. This paper explores the engagement practices between universities and the communities in two selected provinces of Zimbabwe. Two universities, a state-owned and a church-owned one, were purposively selected to take part in this qualitative study. The participants were two deans of faculties, four lecturers drawn from the respective universities and four community members, two from each of the local communities of the universities under study. These responded to semi-structured interviews on the extent of their engagements and how they would improve on their collaboration. Findings revealed a loose and fragile collaboration between the university and the community. The study proffers a model for university and community engagement. The study concluded that power differentials between the universities and the local communities result in no meaningful engagements to transform the livelihood of the people. It is recommended that universities and communities use the proposed model for effective engagement.

Key Words: Community engagement, effectiveness, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions the world over are expected to serve and save the communities they exist in, both local and beyond communities. Thus, they are expected to proffer solutions to the challenges encountered by these communities. What it basically means is that both the institution and the community should foster a symbiotic relationship of which would benefit both. The engagement, when effectively done, bridges the gap between academic knowledge and the civil life of the communities. In this case, the educational institutions become an extension of the community. The communities see the

institutions as a panacea to their challenges, be they economic, social, technological or political. Giroux (2017) posits that universities are under unprecedented assault for their vision of producing 'workers' and not 'citizens' as economic insecurities reshape federal, state and local priorities. Universities as institutions of the highest learning are basically established to carry out three major key areas that are research, teaching and learning, and community service (Schuetze, 2010). However, in Zimbabwe, two more tasks, *viz* innovation and industrialisation have been added to make what is called Education 5.0. This implies that the thrust is now on the five key result areas. If universities are seen to accomplish these key areas, they bring in new life and new hope to the communities, both local and beyond. Wang (2017:23) aptly says that, "…the local is where the work is", implying that universities should be seen to transform the communities they serve. Viewed in this way, they cease to be ivory towers. Universities draw their students from the community, hence they are expected to teach students and equip them with knowledge, skills and values so that they become integrated members of the community. Researches that universities carry out should actually revolve around and emanate from the community and these should transform the lives of the people, socially, economically and industrially. Thus, a strong meaningful relationship between universities and communities should be fostered - a relationship where both parties engage with each other for their benefit.

The Carnegie Foundation (2015:3) defines community engagement as, "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity."

The area of community engagement is key in the university business and if not addressed and perhaps problematised, the effort of the nations to meet the 21st century challenges will remain futile. Benneworth (2014) argues that the demand for 'useful knowledge' should see universities respond to societal pressures to create knowledge which can drive economic competitiveness. The knowledge should assist communities, in particular excluded ones, augment their capacities to react to external influences, and help them acquire social capital. Thus, Webber (2005) castigates a comensulistic engagement which promotes university

gentrification, whereby universities establish campuses to support their own competitiveness. Carnegie Foundation (2018) asserts that partnerships are intended to: enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. Over and above, community partnerships in a democratic-centred framework of engagement have an explicit and intentional democratic dimension framed as "inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented work" (Saltmarsh et al., 2009:9).

Benneworth (2014) contends that although universities have been under pressure to increase their community engagement, in practice external incentives have prioritised commercialisation over wider societal valourisation. This has caused universities to evolve away from community engagement. How Zimbabwean universities engage with the communities and the benefits thereof needs interrogation. Mann (2021) argues that universities should not just concentrate on the two core missions of research and student teaching but also community engagement. Olson and Brennan (2017) bemoan the alarming lack of systematic assessment of university community engagement, hence this study sought to fill up that gap. The major question to be addressed by this paper is: How meaningful are the engagements between universities and communities?

The following sub-questions were derived from the above question:

1. How do universities engage with communities?
2. What benefits (if any) are accrued from such engagements?
3. How can the engagements be made more meaningful and effective?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jones and Wells (2007: 407**)** define community engagement as:

> the process of working collaboratively with relevant partners who share common goals and interests or working collaboratively with and for groups of people affiliated by geographical proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.

Community engagement is also defined as a reciprocal process of sharing knowledge,

information, skills and expertise between the university and the broader community, both internal and external (De Lange, 2012).

The common features found in these definitions are that engagement is a reciprocal process, which entails partnering with the community, involving research with community participants, sharing of information and skills, learning from each other, development of social responsibility, and building trust between community and university groups of people working together. Networking, collaboration between different stakeholders and community mobilisation are also some common features.

Schuetze (2010) suggests that the idea of engagement between universities and society complements the other two missions of the universities, which are teaching and research. It is important to note that in community engagement, universities are committed to community partnership to address critical issues as part of their outreach missions. Community engagement is intended to benefit communities through partnership activities such as development of effective community leadership, and reduction of poverty by engaging in activities that would develop self-reliant and self-sufficient communities.

Some of the benefits of community engagement, according to Muwanguzi (2023), are the strengthening of public trust between communities and agencies, improving transparency, enhancing civic capacity, and creating more sustainable development policies.

Mann (2021) states that the other benefit of community engagement is that it helps solve many interconnecting issues at community level. An example is networking, which promotes teamwork and acquisition of more information, resulting in better solutions to problems. Nelson (2020) suggests that when universities involve community members and encourage more participation at grassroots level, this has a positive influence on community ownership of the project. In other words, this ensures openness on the part of the participants, resulting in more participation, ownership and empowerment. The community feels accepted, valued and motivated in relation to development needs.

Muwanguzi (2023) states that conducive working relationships such as respect, openness, two-way communication, and commitment encourage communities to be self-reliant and creative. Relationship-building with communities provides good

communication approaches that can be used in different contexts. Nelson (2020) suggests that collaboration between universities and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) can help NGOs and universities to assess, track and judge their own programmes.

Creation of Knowledge

Knowledge is created differently in communities. Gibbons (2010) states that there are two modes of knowledge production. These are Mode 1 and Mode 2. Mode 1 refers to knowledge production that is data-oriented, scientific and research-oriented. This type of knowledge production uses a lot of data tools which rural areas do not have for various reasons, such as a lack of electricity and laboratories.

Mode 2 is locally-acquired knowledge or 'socially robust' knowledge because it has emerged through experience (Jakubik, 2011). The older the person is, the more that person has knowledge, which can be shared through effective teamwork in the community. This is how knowledge has been traditionally produced in the different sites by one of the state universities studied. Hierarchy plays a major role in the production of this knowledge, as it is alleged that the older one is, the more wisdom one has and the more effective one is in communication. Mode 2 is said to produce its knowledge socially through gatherings and meetings. Both the young and the old learn through socialisation. The current study, thus, sought to establish whether there was knowledge sharing at the project sites of the universities studied or whether there was any knowledge production passed on socially as elders met to make the project more productive and to chart the way forward.

Theoretical Framework

The study was framed around three community development theories, namely: the asset-based community development (Swanepoel and De Beer, 2011), adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994) and ujamaa/self-reliance (Nyerere, 1988). These theories enabled the researchers to examine the university-community engagement relationships. The theories together provide a lens through which to explore asset-based participation, adaptive leadership, and ujamaa/self-reliance in this study.

The theories inform each other in that they share common characteristics but also offer different insights, which together make a useful lens to understand the university-community relationship. For instance, Stephenson's (2011) and Preece's (2013)

reference to adaptive leadership in university engagement demonstrates recognition of the unique and unequal power relationship between the university and its surrounding communities in a context which needs to understand the need to facilitate community ownership over decision-making. In adaptive leadership, the focus is on the co-creation of knowledge, clarifying competing values, social change, helping communities to become active in addressing their issues or concerns, and to share responsibilities. Thus, from Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership approach, the university's role is to help the community clarify its competing values, purpose, and work towards a shared agenda for change. Leaders are no longer the ones who are solving problems. There is an element of sharing of information and management of conflicting views and values. Adaptive leadership involves participation by communities, which aims to improve responsiveness, creativity and innovation by organisations.

Universities have traditionally been known as 'Ivory Towers' in Africa but have always played a leadership role during fights for independence. They often excelled in fundamental and applied research as well as practical work of social relevance (Otim, 1992). Their leadership in community projects is often respected ,which explains their involvement in community projects (Preece, 2013). The adaptive leadership theory provides a potential framework for guiding how universities should do this. Bates (2005) supports this view when he states that adaptive leadership theory focuses on eliciting full participation from community members to devise previously-unknowable responses to difficult and complex questions. Complex and difficult questions can often be solved through participatory research – hence the involvement of universities in community engagement. Universities, it is argued, have the expertise to develop such skills in communities.

On the other hand, the asset-based community development is premised on the assumption that all communities have assets - whether these are natural environmental resources, or human skills and knowledge (Preece, 2013). The goal of community development is to work with, and build on, existing assets in order to construct a resource-based foundation for development which is controlled by the community rather than externals. This theory upholds a symbiotic relationship where two institutions are in a collaboration or relationship benefit. Adaptive leadership and asset-based

community development do have contradictions.

In adaptive leadership there is tension. Its focus reflects a top-down approach. It may appear too direct for communities; it is still an intervention approach even though there is an element of collaboration. On the other hand, asset-based community development is a grassroots method. It is designed to encourage a bottom-up perspective. Communities are encouraged to create their own power. The focus is on communities understanding issues from the community's perspective. The process focuses on interaction, dialogue, feedback, modifying and reviewing plans in the same way that is encouraged by adaptive leadership, but the community has a more direct participation resulting in community ownership of the problem and its identification. This, therefore, means that the combination of these two theories provides an additional lens to explore precisely what is happening in the two studied universities. The differences add value to the theoretical approach in that they provide complementary features that reflect the particular nature of a university-community relationship. Community asset-based development focuses specifically on the participatory learning process. It is characterised by partnership and building on existing assets so that the community members are able to co-construct knowledge rather than have new knowledge imposed on them. However, the power dynamics of universities engaging with their communities also means that universities draw on the resources of knowledge and understanding within the communities, whilst at the same time providing leadership that encourages community ownership over decision-making.

Finally, Nyerere's theory of ujamaa/self-reliance was chosen as a third lens because this is an embedded Afrocentric development philosophy that aims to build communities through use of local resources, a process of dialogue and interaction between universities and communities, and practical application of knowledge. Furthermore, it is embedded in adult education principles of building on people's experience and starting where they are (Knowles, 1980). Although Meredith (2002) argues that Ujamaa failed in Tanzania, this was because there was an apparent lack of consultation amongst the parties involved, leading to imposition of ideas in spite of the ideological principles behind Ujamaa. People's diverse opinions were not respected and there was insufficient dialogue in the development process. The asset-based community development and

adaptive leadership theoretical concepts serve as an analytical framework that encompasses the Ujamaa principles whilst addressing its original failure to nurture community ownership. Preece, Ntseane, Modise and Osborne (2012) posit that the Ujamaa strategy made it a requirement for all university students to work in rural communities during their vacations as part of their assessment.

In a nutshell, the theories explained above are compatible with the adult education philosophy of starting where people are, promotion of dialogue, need for consultation, promoting self-concept, self-identity, respect and drawing on existing experience to create new knowledge and understanding. All these provided a fertile ground to explore how universities engage with communities and the utility of their engagements.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative approach with a view to getting a better understanding of the phenomenon of community engagement. The researchers were used as data collecting instruments to grasp and evaluate the meaning of interaction between universities and communities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We adopted the phenomenology research design. Literally, phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2023). In other words, we wanted to establish the kind of relationship(s) universities and communities have, the meaning of their relationship, whether it is beneficial, symbiotic or one-sided, and how those in the relationship or collaboration feel or experience about it. Two universities, a state-owned and a church-owned one, were targeted. The choice provided a comparison base for analysis. To establish these, we held semi-structured interviews with one dean, two lecturers and two community members from each university. This gave a total of ten participants. All the participants were purposefully selected. This provided the researchers with the opportunity to get to rich information.

Deans, being heads of their faculties or schools, have a better understanding of what the university in general and the school in particular does. Lecturers are key implementers of university areas of teaching, research and community engagement. In all

cases, lecturers have to account for the activities they will have undertaken in each of the three areas as part of their key result areas. As such, they are better positioned to know the nature and extent of engagement between the university and the community. If ever the engagement is meaningful, the community should know. A university ceases to be what it is if those near it do not feel its existence. Thus, the voice of the community members justifies the existence of an active and vibrant institution, that is, if it is vibrant. We sought for information-rich sources. Thus, the design permitted us to bring to the fore experiences of individuals from their own perspectives, and, therefore, challenge structural and normative ways as we seek to understand the rhetorical or practical aspect of the university-community engagement (Cohen, 2010). Observations of different activities in community engagement were done. The researchers also looked into documents such as policies, minutes and budgets.

To collect data, we made appointments with the participants, who suggested the most convenient dates and venues. We explained to them the purpose of the study and assured them that all information would be treated with the strictest confidence it deserved as names of participants and their institutions would not be divulged. For the two universities, the pseudonyms, Kereke University (KU) for the church owned and Mamvura University (MU) for the state university were used. DKU was used for Dean, Kereke University, LKU1 for Lecturer 1 from Kereke University, LKU2 for Lecturer 2 from Kereke University and CKU1, Community Member 1 from KU, DMU for Dean Mamvura University, LMU1 Lecturer 1 MU, MU2 Lecturer 2 from MU, CMU1 Community Member 1 MU, and CMU2 Community Member from MU. Data were thematically presented and analysed and where names would be required, pseudonyms would be used. Data obtained from interviews were coded and analysed thematically.

FINDINGS

Data from the interviews revealed interesting views on how the universities studied engaged with their communities. Data were presented in themes drawn from the interviews and where names appeared in the presentation pseudonyms were used for purposes of anonymity. Three themes were drawn, namely: Participants' perceptions of community engagement, nature of community engagement, and how university

community engagement could be improved. The details of the themes and data are as follows.

Participants' Perceptions of Community Engagement

Participants had varied views with regard to what they call university community engagement. University lecturers and deans had their own perceptions different from the community members'. Deans viewed university community engagement as what the university does to assist both the local and external communities.

> *Community involvement includes projects we may carry out in the community for their common good or upliftment. It also involves the services you render* (DKU).

LMU 2 also indicated that it is not clear where university service starts and noted,

> *Whether it involves what you do at the university, the committees you serve or what you do in the community. This is tricky especially when it comes to promotion.*

The general perception of community engagement was that it involves activities including projects the university does with the community or in the community. There was also mention of university service of which they indicated that it included even issues to do with participation in external examinations, supervision of students' research project. These views were drawn from lecturers from both universities. Community members, however, felt that universities should actually be seen to assist communities with ideas on how to do start income generating projects. CKU1 had this to say:

> "*…we should not be seen to struggle when universities do exist. They have the brains and we have the manpower. Loitering of the children up and down the streets should be minimised if universities play their roles!*

The sentiments from the community support Hodger and Hubb (2010), who asset that university should play a convener role in anchoring community based development.

The Nature of Community Engagement

The study also asked participants to express the nature of activities and engagements they would expect universities and communities to engage in. One participant, DKU indicated that there were no

clear-cut ways of engaging with the local communities:

> *Being a newly established university and church institution we don't have any policy with regard to university – community engagement. We rely on the community on their financial support particularly members of the church but the entire community, Uhm, here and there we provide expert advice on special needs to local schools.*

Whilst these were the views from the dean, the same sentiments were echoed by the lecturers. One of the community members indicated that the university was not doing anything to assist the community.

> *To tell the truth there is nothing the university is doing. Perhaps this other university has employed a number of our children but that one has nothing* (CKU1).

The findings were a little different from the state university. The dean indicated that there was a committee and structure formed by the university to coordinate the university community engagement programmes. Affirming this, one of the deans, DMU had this to say:

> *A committee was formed by the university, which was then named Community Engagement through the Scientific Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CESIK). All the faculties were represented in this committee. We were appointed by the faculty-planning meeting to represent the faculty in the CESIK committee. The aim of the committee was to transfer knowledge and technologies to the community. We also do have a committee in the university that discusses and plans about the university community engagement and I am the coordinator*.

Whilst the dean claimed to have a formal structure responsible for engagement programmes, lecturers had a different opinion. One of the lecturers, LMU 1, for instance, felt that the formal structure was not known to all university staff members. The contradicting views could mean that policy designed by senior academic staff members might not have been effectively implemented by lecturers who assume the role of policy implementers.

Further probing revealed that the university had set up a committee to run and coordinate a community project launched

almost a decade ago. There was a budget for the project and a member of staff was appointed to coordinate the programme from the site. The project drew members across the university faculties, resulting in little or non-participation of other lecturers. There was also confirmation of the existence of the project from the community members who indicated that a committee inclusive of all ethnic groups in the community also existed from their side. One community member had this to say:

> *Different committees made up of representatives from each village head are in place. These then communicate the different issues to the community. For example, the indigenous knowledge committee, which reported that they had marula fruit, trees, bees all over which just needed to be taped. They also had manure to use in the plot instead of inorganic fertilizers. They also had access to indigenous poultry breeds. All these local resources were identified by the community for use in the partnership between the centre and university* (CMU 1).

However, there were concerns from the community that there was lack of representation from the community, especially at the planning level, to ensure representation of different community voices and views. This suggests power differentials between community and university. Another community member, CMU2 echoed this by saying:

> *… State University should always include the community in their planning meetings in order to cascade to the community correct information. However, we accept all things the university brings or tells us."*

We also sought to establish the extent to which the engagement programmes or projects were beneficial to either of the parties, or both. The dean, DMU indicated that through the project, the community had been empowered through acquisition of different skills as indicated by one community member who highlighted that:

> *This partnership was to be a training centre where different activities would be taught, for example bee-keeping and poultry management.*

The community member further reiterated that:

> *Skills which would be acquired from the centre such as gardening, cattle management, poultry and mushroom were meant to help us by replicating them at our homes.*

On the other hand, the community members also indicated that there was not much benefit derived from the engagement. Only those who will have been selected tend to benefit from the projects. One community member, CMU 1 intimated that:

> *We have been waiting to be trained in mushroom growing for a long time.It seems like the resources are limited for this project to take off.*

How Universities' Community Engagements Could Be Improved

Deans from both universities studied indicated that there should be clear policies on engagement. One dean had this to say:

> *A clear policy and a clear structure should be established. This will ensure that a budget is availed and a coordinator should be appointed for this programme. Projects should not just depend on donor funding. Universities should initiate projects relevant to the community. The existing structure needs to be strengthened and a department solely for that be established. There should be budgets for the community programmes* (DMU).

Similar sentiments were also raised by the other dean from Kereke University who had this to say:

> *…with a clear policy, church funded institutions such as ours can also engage with ease. That is one way the community can appreciate the services of the university.*

Kuttner et al. (2018) argue that university-community partnership should address poverty, poor health and political marginalisation, amongst other aspects. One community member, CKU1, also weighed in to suggest that:

> *…universities should sensitize the community on their roles. Many people just perceive the university as institutions which do their things independent of the community*.

Lecturers were also in support of a clear-cut policy. However, they bemoaned the inadequate time to do community projects, against a lot of work they have.

> *If they can reduce the number of modules we teach this project can work. Therefore, there is need for support from the university. Support in form of funding cannot be overemphasised. Again we need to know what we also get from the engagement* (LMU2).

What the lecturers suggested is that as much as the programme can work there is need for a symbiotic relationship in which they also benefit.

DISCUSSION

Interesting views about engagement were drawn from participants about what constitutes university community engagement. The common thread was, however, that the engagement programme should be meaningful and beneficial to both parties. The nature of engagement projects or activities differed from the two institutions studied, with one indicating that the university had started working with a special school to assist teachers with knowledge and skills on how to handle learners with special needs. This was the only programme they regarded as notable. On the other hand, the other university had initiated a project with an identified community to spearhead income-generating projects such as bee-keeping, poultry, nutritional gardening, and functional literacy as well as assisting local teachers on teaching some Ordinary Level subjects. It was learnt, from the interviews, that the projects contributed to the livelihoods of the communities involved, although the community felt that the university should involve them right from the initial planning level up to the end of the project cycle. This scenario made us to rethink about the power differentials experienced in the university and the community studied, in terms of who decides what to be done and how.

If the engagement is to be relevant and sustainable, there should be total involvement by all stakeholders at all levels. Non-participation of the community at planning level led to some community projects not being prioritised by universities, yet they were considered important by the communities. A case in point was the mushroom project which was imposed by the university on the community and resulted in the failure due to the poor uptake by the community. Data indicated that there was a limited follow-up consultation by the university. These results concur with Stephenson Jr's (2011) study in the USA, which established that the universities had a tendency of marginalising the communities

by identifying them as poor, with nothing to offer, so they become passive recipients of technical university expertise.

It was also revealed that whilst communities were perceived to be benefiting from the engagement, the findings suggest that establishing community assets was not the primary goal of the universities. Eleberi (2012) and Beaulieu (2002), for instance, highlight that the communities do have assets that may be used to solve their problems. Hence, the implications of the findings suggest that the community could have been encouraged to take more responsibility for their own actions at the outset of the engagement relationship, such as the community mapping their local resources and abilities before engaging on projects. With proper planning, the universities could unlock the potential of communities and that of students, as students would learn how they can integrate within the world of work. This supports the Zimbabwean Heritage based philosophy guiding Education 5.0. and also Nyerere's Ujamaa theory. Thus, a new model needs to be established to guide how universities and communities could engage effectively.

CONCLUSION

University community engagement is a phenomenon and a narrative, which has been in use from time immemorial in developed countries, but in Zimbabwe, it requires a critical analysis and further interrogation. Whilst universities, by and large, are mandated to engage effectively with the communities the nature of engagements, how they engage and the benefits derived there from need scrutiny. The conclusion drawn from our study is that universities are far from walking the talk of this community engagement narrative. The universities are mainly using the top-down approach in university community engagement (CE) initiatives. There is need for continuous dialogue and feedback by both the universities and the communities. The dialogue will enable all participants to open up on challenges which directly affect their communities and identify solutions which universities can assist them with to improve on the livelihoods of the community. There are many key stakeholders whose involvement in CE could help contribute to community transformation. Their continuous involvement is key to poverty reduction in these areas. Active involvement and participation of the community members provide enough space for growth, problem

solving and ownership of projects. This is the pinnacle for sustainable development.

Thus, we recommend that universities should put in place clear-cut policies to ensure proper coordination and funding of the projects. The policies will also cover the communication channels as well as the number of modules lecturers should teach to pave way for community engagement activities. Communities seem not to be aware of their roles as well as the roles of the universities, hence advocacy activities are pertinent to empower them, particularly the most marginalised. We also recommend a model which other institutions can adopt. The basic tenets of the model are transparency, teamwork, Ubuntu (You are because I am; and I am because you are) and hardwork. Community projects should emanate from a needs assessment/analysis. After the analysis the University and Community (U&C) should prioritise the needs. It will be from the priorities that related projects are selected. After that, teams with relevant skills, interests, and knowledge are selected to implement the project. The implemented projects are regularly monitored by peers and externals. These could be formative that is right from the project onset or summative, which can recommend for the termination, continuation or replication of the project. Involvement brings ownership which increases participation.

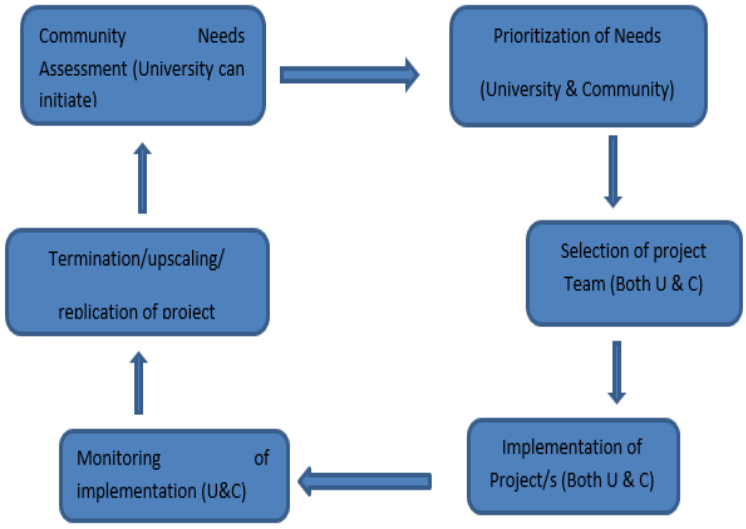

Figure 1: University-Community Implementation Model

Source: Author (2024).

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