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### SOUTH AFRICA

## How can institutions play an anchoring role in communities?

Samuel Fongwa and Nazeema Mohamed 11 August 2022

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The evolution of the mission of universities from purely research and teaching institutions, so-called ivory towers of knowledge, to engaged universities, cognisant of and responsive to their local context and national developmental imperatives, has been a strategic objective of South African higher education's transformation agenda for some time.

Higher education White Paper 3 of 1997 highlighted the need for community engagement, and the policy directives in the paper were for universities that were responsive to socio-economic challenges of the country and the needs of their local communities.

Many universities in South Africa, through their teaching, research and community service programmes, have responded to this mandate in different ways, developing various forms of partnerships within local, urban and even business communities.

Developments in university engagement initiatives globally, coupled with increasing global inequality and a socio-economic crisis, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, have raised the bar for universities and pressurised them into interrogating their engagement effectiveness.

Inyathelo, which works with higher education institutions to help ensure their long-term sustainability, has, accordingly, commissioned a working paper in collaboration with the University of Pretoria and Rutgers University, United States.

Ahmed Bawa, the chief executive officer of Universities South Africa, which represents all public universities, writes that universities have lost the trust of communities they serve and there is a need to reimagine the social purpose of higher education for a more equitable and socially just future.

He **proposes** that consideration be given to the nature of the intellectual, physical, social and policy architecture of universities to ensure the emergence of long-term and sustained engagement with communities.

A **paper** published by the Anchor Institutions Task Force, an action-



oriented learning community with nearly 1,000 members in the US and abroad, explains that the emergence of the notion of universities as anchor institutions first emerged in the US higher education system in the 2000s.

It presented an innovative way of thinking about the role that place-based institutions could play in addressing societal problems and in building a more democratic, just and equitable society.

Sources quoted in the working paper argue that the concept has its roots in the structure of the American economy from the 1960s onwards.

In the absence of services in urban and rural settings and across communities, cities, towns and villages, institutions had to emerge as anchors of their communities to provide stability, growth and development.

Today, this **concept** is growing in popularity as a way of considering the **developmental role** of institutions.

### Local stakeholders

The paper shows how, as part of their contribution to economic and social development, universities serving as anchor institutions have developed interventions in collaboration with local stakeholders (government, business, civil society, schools) in transforming their immediate vicinities while enhancing socio-economic livelihoods.

Especially in less economically active areas and those areas experiencing capital outflows or economic decline, anchor institutions are usually among a region's largest property owners.

Their established buildings, as well as new building designs, can be used to support city revival or transformation if the right social structures are in place to convert solid infrastructure into social infrastructure. From an economic perspective, anchor institutions are usually a major employer of labour and skills within the region, high consumers of goods and services and, hence, determinants of the economic activities within a region.

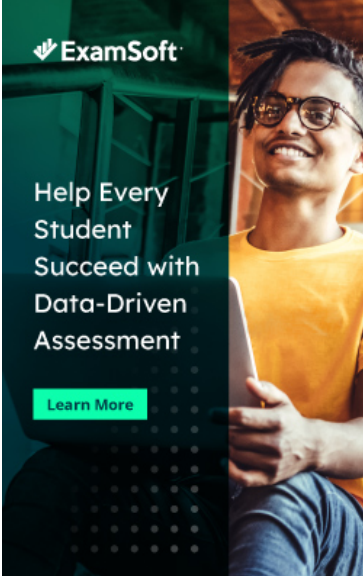
The concept of universities as anchor institutions proposes a more deliberate and purposeful approach to responding to social needs. It is important to emphasise that, while South African universities have at different levels embraced their engagement function as one of the core functions of the university, a university serving an **anchoring role** demands more than an engagement function by one faculty, department or individual academic.

The university serving an anchoring role seeks to balance its global or national competitiveness aspirations and contextual relevance. This balancing act is endorsed by actively engaging within its city or regional, urban or local context through a clearly defined, systematically and sustainably coordinated set of priorities agreed upon through a network of partners and stakeholders within and external to the university.

Such a vision is not only driven from the highest office of university management and the council, but is strategically embedded into the culture and functioning of the university. In so doing, the university leverages its resources relevant to achieving its core functions of research, teaching and engagement, towards the socio-economic transformation of its community.

### SA universities as anchor institutions

South African universities are largely located in communities



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characterised by poverty, inequality, unemployment and social decay.

The absence of a cohesive strategy to these social and economic needs has resulted in the mistrust that Bawa describes in his earlier paper.

There is an increasing demand for universities to recognise that they are integral to their surrounding communities and important economic players in these communities.

They have been challenged by moral and ethical imperatives that require them to be more responsive, conscious and intentional in using their services to **address** the socio-economic needs (Combrinck, C & Nortjé, T (2021) 'Activating the edge: The university campus as anchor institution', Development Southern Africa, 38:3, 353-370.

### **Adopting an anchor institution mandate**

In order to address these challenges, universities can adopt an anchor institution mandate. While the operationalisation of this mandate will remain within the ambit of the institutions, the paper makes four propositions based on the literature.

First, serving an anchoring role demands foregrounding the core mandate of teaching, research and engagement.

Second, it is critical that an economic role (as a strong employer and supporter of economic growth and activities), be communicated through the universities' policies of procurement, business collaboration and more.

Third is the physical role the university can play (as developer of local infrastructure and the real estate landscape). The university can leverage its infrastructure and influence how new infrastructure, including real estate development, enhances the local environment.

Fourth is a public role, by promoting social, cultural and democratic values towards a social-transformation and redress agenda.

While South African universities have adopted a broad, engaged scholarship approach, becoming an anchor institution seeks deeper, conscious and strategic endeavours towards more **tangible local outcomes**, without compromising national and international competitiveness.

### **Economic, social potential for urban development**

While the concept of anchor institutions would be considered new within the South African context, there are already initiatives which suggest some universities are already serving anchoring roles in diverse areas.

Examples of such engagement include the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits) Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct initiative in Braamfontein. This is a collaboration between Wits, government, the City of Johannesburg, business and industry. Revitalising the fringe areas around the university has created cheaper and safer accommodation for students, and reimagined new spaces for retail, restaurants, music clubs and bookshops.

Another example is Rhodes University's Reviving Grahamstown Schools, part of the university's campaign to be responsive to the needs of its immediate and extended community, according to the vice-chancellor's 2021 plan. Rhodes University is located in South Africa's Eastern Cape province.

At Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley, in South Africa's Northern



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Aftab Dean

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### **SDG progress report launches university into new territory**

Cape province, the university, through its new infrastructural development and buildings, has the capacity to consciously contribute to transforming the real estate of a main section of the city. Its Talent Pipeline Project also demonstrates how a conscious institutional policy initiative can support social and human development in its immediate region.

However, serving an anchoring role remains elusive, loosely conceptualised and sometimes even contested. This fluidity in understanding the anchor concept is even more critical considering the internal and external transformation imperatives facing South African universities.

This imperative demands that they transform, not only their internal cultures, postures and identities, but more so that they contribute towards the transformation of our society towards one which is socio-economically inclusive, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic.

Each university that aspires to serving an anchoring role will need a clear mission statement and strategic plan, followed by administrative structures built into the policy and strategy.

The anchoring vision should be embedded into various aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy through an institutionalised policy to which specific funding, budgeting and resources are allocated.

Finally, the university will need to develop collaboration and partnership structures to enable it to constantly track and evaluate its **anchoring strategy success**, and address unintended consequences within its constituencies.

The concept paper further proposes some governance principles that each university would consider within its anchoring policy, practice and institutional values:

- An anchor mission and vision;
- Institutionalisation through structures;
- Policies and implementation plans;
- Establishing a pact with local stakeholders; and
- Leveraging institutional resources towards local development.

It is important to note that such an explicit policy drive towards social responsiveness by the university is only one side of the equation.

Getting similar commitment from **external stakeholders**, such as local government, business and other players within the community is critical for establishing an anchoring role.

The level of buy-in from all its constituencies such as academics and stakeholders within the city or local political governance structures remains a constantly negotiated process aimed at ensuring win-win for all.

#### **Proposed framework for universities as anchor institutions**

University of Pretoria staff

In the publication of its first progress report on its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, the University of Pretoria is navigating new territory at the same time as it is acknowledging its clear stewardship role in protecting the environment and biodiversity.

*Promoted by the University of Pretoria.*

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UAE University staff

The International Emergency Medicine Education Project began in 2015 at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences of the United Arab Emirates University or UAEU with a vision to promote emergency medicine and provide free, reusable educational resources for the world's medical students.

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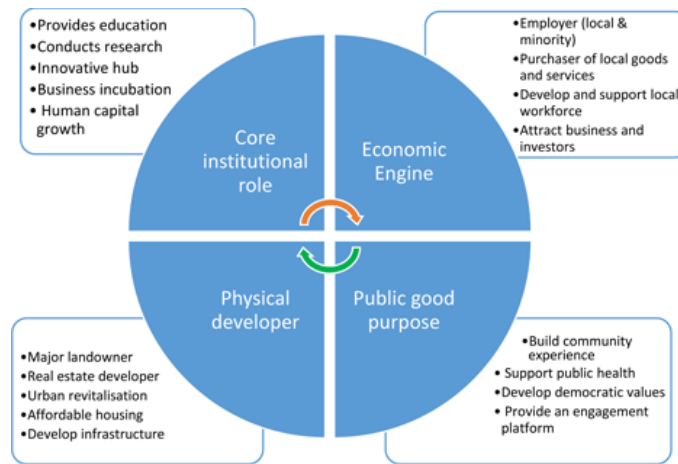
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Source: Dr Samuel Fongwa

*Dr Samuel Fongwa, is a senior research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council, or HSRC, South Africa, and Nazeema Mohamed is the executive director of Inyathelo. Fongwa authored the working paper on which this commentary is based. Inyathelo held a webinar on 'Universities as Anchor Institutions' on 5 July 2022. The **webinar** is available for viewing.*



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