

ACADEMICS STEPPING DOWN FROM THEIR IVORY TOWERS...LONG AWAITED FOR!

WORKSHOP REPORT ON EMERGING VOICES2 – “A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG AND THE VAAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY”.

This report serves as a reflection on the proceedings of the workshop that was held on the 18th to the 19th of June 2015. The workshop was held at the Science Park Vaal University of Technology (VUT) Campus. This was a joint initiative between the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Centre for Education Rights and Transformation and the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). Within VUT, the Research Directorate and the Social Transformation Unit played an important role as stakeholders in ensuring that the event becomes a success. As the stakeholders worked together from the conceptualisation, planning process to the actual day of the event.

Most noteworthy to the event is an acknowledgement the words of gratitude to the presence of the Vaal University of Technology's Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and Research) Professor Dzvimbo. The stakeholders expressed their sincerest and gratitude to Professor Dzvimbo's commitment to the struggle of youth and communities regarding the challenges they are faced with today. This is an embodiment of what has been long awaited for, academics stepping down their “ivory towers”, towards the playing a role in working class struggle. In this context, poverty, youth unemployment and skills shortages. At the main, was creating forms of employment that meet the direct needs and priorities of the youth in South Africa today.

In summary, the aims and objectives of the workshop were as follows:

- To share research findings that encompassed experiences, problems, solutions and recommendations,
- To promote a dialogue on how can post schooling promote community development in the Sedibeng area,
- And
- To discuss a way forwards] on how these findings can be translated into practice.

“The goal of the Emerging Voices 2(EV2) is to reimagine post schooling education (PSE) so that it better meets the needs of the poor and working class communities in South Africa. EV2 is of the view that too often PSE focuses on individual successes and supporting the privileged and not enough on building communal values, listening to the historically marginalised populations, working with and in communities to create a better life for all. Given the monumental social and economic challenges facing South Africa, we believe that a PSE which focuses only on narrow technocratic skills relevant to limited formal sector jobs suffers from severely diminished vision of the role of PSE in building a new South Africa. PSE had a lot to learn from community struggles if PSE institutions are to serve as credible partners in local development” (EV2 2015).

The workshop served as a platform for the youth from the Emerging Voices2, which is a youth advocacy to report on their research findings. The research (which was conducted by the youth) harnessed on the skills that have been dormant within the communities due to marginalisation as a result of lack of resources. This is an initiative of its own kind and broke grounds to highlighting the availability of a splendid and useful indigenous knowledge that is needed for crafting developmental strategies and policies geared towards addressing the challenges faced by the youth.

VUT's commitment to the partnership comes strategically as it is in the process of intensifying its commitment towards Community Engagement. Of particular interest to the Research Directorate's and the Social Transformation Unit within VUT, is Community Engaged Scholarship (CES). The Research's Directorate, together with the Social Transformation Unit is of the view that the academics have to step of their ivory towers and strengthen their roles in community development. Community Engagement (CE) Unit within VUT has played a vital role in laying the foundation for stretching a helping hand within it's the universities surrounding communities. It is this commendable role that has served as a catalyst for the Research Directorate and the Social Transformation Unit to entrench the scholarship of community engagement within the institution.

Community Engaged Scholarship (CES) deepens and supports Community Engagement (CE), firstly by building and inculcating a culture of a commitment within "academy's", i.e. the university's management academic layer, towards a new social order. The Research Department and the Social Transformation Unit have begun thinking of innovative and creative ways of engaging the academics at a scholarly level. This would mean embedding Community Engaged Scholarship (CES) in their curriculum by developing approaches contextual and modelled in accordance to their disciplines having mapped and taken into consideration the needs and challenges by the communities broadly. This should serve as a driver for a commitment towards addressing pressing issues that affect society in different ways from different angles and perspectives.

Secondly, Community Engaged Scholarship (CES) will through the curriculum developed by academics facilitate the engagement of student from the university. Students will be equipped with the knowledge and the ability to use what they have learnt in theory and through their research initiatives to improve social change. Reciprocally, as they depart knowledge within communities from their respective disciplines, they will in turn enhance their research outcomes and their theoretical knowledge based on their empirical interaction with the outside world, based on real and current problems that affect the society.

With such a collective collaboration, VUT and UJ hope to build a shared vision, thus a common agenda for social change and impact. It seeks to move beyond just providing services within the communities towards acknowledging and using indigenous knowledge towards creating sustainable solutions that are informed by the needs and priorities of the society itself. It is envisaged that through Community Engaged Scholarship (CE), a cadre of conscious leadership will be built for truly facilitating social change for the benefit of the previously marginalised communities.

The CERT EV2 workshop was important in that, it not only raised issues but it further fostered and generated a dialogue which led to solutions that came from the youth itself. Their issues were then raised and reported by themselves to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). What serves as a success and a positive impact is how the dialogue unfolded between the youth and DHET. As a key highlight to the workshop, that is in the stakeholders' view is the impact that it had. The impact is reflected by the heated discussion between the youth and the Department of Higher Education and Training. In this discussion, the youth demanded the answers concerning on why has the government failed to recognise and develop appropriate intervention to assist the youth in building and promoting education that can address their current challenges. DHET was challenged in how to response such that the representative walked out.

This reflect the impact and the power of Community Engaged Scholarship from institutions of higher learning. This showcase a reflection of a knowledgeable youth, that are able and empowered to raise

issues from a point of view of understanding their socio-political context. This is a one of the real models of Community Engaged Scholarship (CES). At the end, the youth established task team which will further report to and engage DHET and the government broadly. Through this, one witnesses skills such as organisational formation skills from the youth, gained purely from the process of Community Engaged Scholarship (CES).

A commitment from the DVC in support of this initiative anchors a true how Community Engaged Scholarship should unfold, and provides a model through which academic can ***“step down from their ivory towers”*** as captured from the opening remarks by the VUT’s Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Dzvimbo”.

A very captivating and comprehensive research findings’ report documented by Emerging Voices2 has already been published and will through the support from the VUT’s Deputy Vice Chancellor, be translated into local and international languages such as French. The publication is available through the VUT’s Research Directorate and the UJ’s Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT).

Compiled by Modiehi Morakile- 2015