

Research Application Summary

**Embedding community engagement in University training curricula:
Experiences from Gulu University in Uganda**

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Abstract

University-community linkages are thought to provide key inputs for new knowledge, innovations and technologies for economic development. Accordingly, Gulu University, from inception took a community oriented approach as its pillar of identity. Academic programs in the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment have emphasized community engagement using the approach of Student Farmer Attachment (SFA). The SFA as a field-based module serves two objectives of student practical training: i) exposure to agricultural practical skills, and ii) experiential learning in the smallholder farming context integrating indigenous knowledge resident in the community. The SFA model has led to a series of lesson learning and experiences that through evolution have contributed to curricula changes and innovation at both undergraduate and graduate level at the university. It is recommended that universities, most especially in SSA, need to strengthen and/or integrate field-based modules in training curricula to: i) produce fit-for purpose graduates exhibiting better employability skills; ii) enhance university connectedness to the community; and iii) improve community livelihoods.

Key words: Community engagement, entrepreneurship, experiential learning, Gulu University, Student Farmer Attachment

Résumé

Les liens université-communauté sont censés fournir des intrants clés pour les nouvelles connaissances, les innovations et les technologies pour le développement économique. En conséquence, l'Université de Gulu, depuis sa création a adopté une approche axée sur la communauté en tant que pilier de l'identité. Les programmes académiques de la Faculté de l'Agriculture et de l'Environnement ont mis l'accent sur l'engagement communautaire en utilisant l'approche de l'Attachement de l'Etudiant Fermier (Student Farmer Attachment) (SFA). La SFA comme module sur le terrain vise deux objectifs de la formation pratique des étudiants: i) l'exposition à des compétences pratiques agricoles, et ii) l'apprentissage expérientiel dans le cadre de petites exploitations agricoles intégrant résident des connaissances autochtones dans la communauté. Le modèle SFA a conduit à une série de leçons d'apprentissage et d'expériences, que, grâce à l'évolution ont contribué à des changements de programmes d'études et de l'innovation, tant au niveau de premier cycle et

d'études supérieures à l'université. Il est recommandé que les universités, surtout en Afrique subsaharienne, ont besoin de renforcer et / ou d'intégrer des modules sur le terrain dans les programmes de formation à: i) produire des diplômés à des fins d'ajustement à des fins présentant de meilleures compétences relatives à favoriser l'obtention d'un travail; ii) améliorer la connectivité de l'université à la communauté; et iii) améliorer les moyens de subsistance de la communauté.

Mots clés: engagement communautaire, l'esprit d'entreprise, apprentissage par l'expérience, l'Université de Gulu, L'Attachement de l'Etudiant au Fermier.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are widely recognized as important sources of knowledge requirements, innovations and technologies for development. In accordance with this thinking, scholarly work on community outreach has tended to suggest that a strong association exists between higher education participation rates in the community and levels of development (Cloete *et al.*, 2011). While the higher education participation rates in many high-income countries are well over 50%, in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), such rates are as low as 5% (Bloom *et al.* 2006). While enhancing practical orientation in these curricula and linking theory to practice in production sectors (Mwamila and Diyamett, 2009; Fergie, 2014; Kraemer-Mbula, 2014), Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are increasingly devising innovative approaches for engaging students in community attachment. Community engagement referring to intentionally functional research or attachments (Ibáñez-Carrasco and Riaño-Alcalá, 2011) that are mutually beneficial to the community and educational institutions. In such engagements, students are able to link theory to practice, the faculty and the overall HEI gaining access to indigenous knowledge resident in the community while the community benefiting from intellectually backed resources/ knowledge.

Community engagement arrangements tend to equip the graduate with soft skills, creativity, innovative thinking, and experience an environment in which such a graduate is expected to serve upon completion of university studies. It enhances employability of the graduate as either employee or starting own businesses and creating jobs for others. For instance, evidence from South Africa has shown that field-based experiential learning to students including engagement in extra-mural activities, service learning, volunteering and other extra-curricular activities is influential in securing successful employment outcomes (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013). In line with the above, the search for innovative community engagement approach is justified to further promote field-based practical training while improving the community connectedness side of HEI. Therefore, this article sought to share experiences of integrating community engagement into university training curricula.

Evolution of community outreach approaches at Gulu University

Community-connectedness and outreach has been a key pillar of identity of Gulu University (GU), right from the time of its establishment in 2003. As a HEI, GU distinguished itself as a community-oriented University and enshrined this unique orientation in its motto: "*For the*

Community Transformation". In same spirit, the faculty of Agriculture and Environment embraced the community connectedness identity in its academic programs. Particularly, the programs emphasize student-farmer attachment (SFA) as an approach of both practical training and community outreach. To provide a benchmark for rationalizing the SFA in student training, the faculty pioneered it in the flagship academic program of the Bachelor of Agriculture and it has since demonstrated positive results at both students and farmers' level (Kalule *et al.*, 2016). In this SFA, students are required to spend a minimum of one year working with smallholder farmers surrounding (within a radius of 10 km from the University campus) Gulu University. The short distance nature of operation was to enable students to commute to and from the farmsteads by riding bicycles and or walking. This SFA has over time served as an alternative practical approach to the "University Farm Model". The SFA seems to serve two student practical objectives: i) exposure to agricultural practical skills, a similar target to that of the University Farm Model (UFM); and ii) unlike the UFM, allowing students opportunity of experiential learning in the smallholder farming context. The experiential learning component is essential for the professional development of the students who upon graduation are expected to serve in an environment of smallholder agriculture.

Ever since, the SFA was embraced in training curricula at Gulu University, many lessons and experiences have emerged which have enabled curricula changes as well as institutional refocus. Prominent changes arising from implementation and learning from SFA include: i) structuring, description and integration of courses on SFA in training curricula; ii) introduction of SFA assessment criteria and grading in curricula; iii) progressive approach of community attachment right from the start up to the final year of the study program; iv) extension of boundaries of community attachment beyond the original design of 10 km radius from University campus; and v) reforming the scope of the SFA to include farmers' organizations, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other agri-enterprises. These changes seem to suggest that field based practical orientation could have yielded learning to the faculty staff who have since been able to review the practical training approaches and subsequently integrating such innovations in both undergraduate and graduate programs' curricula.

At the inception of the SFA, it was organized as a skills-focused training in which students participating in farm visits would be evaluated with a simple criteria of either pass or fail. However, operational reviews led to decisions that SFA needed credit recognition just like any other courses in the study programs. Indeed, it was realized that students were devoting a considerable amount of time on the SFA and one away of motivating students to participate more and appreciate the value of SFA was to attach a credit-based evaluation. Subsequently, detailed course descriptions were developed and integrated into training curricula. Guidelines together with assessment and grading criteria were also put in place to support credit earning to students.

Further evaluation of the SFA revealed that students needed to spend more time learning from the community. This has been accommodated in the B.Sc. in Agri-Entrepreneurship and Communication Management programme. Thus, community attachment/engagement has further been restructured. Rather than undertaking community attachment in the final

year of the study program, in the new reforms, students start working with the community from the first year up to the final year. The design of the courses on community attachment take into account incremental knowledge and skills gained as the students progress from beginning levels to final stages of completion. In the early stages of the study program, the students' involvement in community work is more on exposure and needs assessment while in advanced stages of their study programs, they do more of participatory work planning and execution of work plans. Still, as part of new innovations in the community attachment and following additional insights through interactions with EARTH University, the field-based SFA courses are blending technical skills, soft skills and business experience. The technical skills are in the disciplines of agronomy, animal production and food processing and postharvest management. On the hand, soft skills target communication through sharing amongst the students, the faculty and the farmers and team working. Lastly, business experience targets working with farmers to develop capacity for farm records taking and management, preparing business plans, agri-enterprise budgeting/ costing and financial analysis as well as agricultural marketing.

The entry of graduate programs brought a new dimension to the community-engagement oriented training of agricultural graduates. Principally, graduate programs that have been under implementation since 2014 namely: MSc. Agri-Enterprises Development and MSc. Food Security and Community Nutrition emphasize action-oriented research. The philosophy is that students are attached to the community for a period of 2 – 3 months and work with members of the community to identify their needs or problems requiring research attention. In this case, the community includes farmer organizations, cooperatives, NGOs serving farmers, health and nutrition-based installations/ organizations. Collected community problems are then conceptualized into research designs and accordingly executed using scientific approaches. Upon completion of the research process, students are meant to return to the community to share their findings in a way of contributing to improved community life. To ensure that the results are scaled out to other areas that may have not participated in initial research projects, new students as part of their attachment mandate, take results of preceding students to those new areas. For the case of agri-enterprises development, the research is intended to inform and address constraints existing at various nodes of the agricultural value chains.

Conclusions and recommendations

Field-based practical training sounds useful in improving the connectedness of universities to the community. At Gulu University, the field-based training targets two objectives: 1) experiential learning to undergraduate and graduate students, and 2) supporting the community in the transformation process. Inherently, the approach is also yielding learning to the faculty staff and the institution at large. Out of the lessons gained from embedding community engagement in training curricula, the SFA as an approach of community outreach, has significantly evolved since its experimentation with the Bachelor of Agriculture curriculum 2005. Many curricula changes have emerged with the most prominent one being structuring, description, and integrating courses on community engagement in training curricula. Secondly, the engagement is changing from a one year practical training to one that cuts across all the

years of the study programs. Lastly, the scope of these field-based modules have also been reformed bringing on board technical skills, soft skills and business experience. It is recommended that universities, most especially in SSA, strengthen and/or integrate field-based modules in training curricula to: i) produce fit-for purpose graduates exhibiting better employability skills; ii) enhance university connectedness to the community; and iii) improve community livelihoods.

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