

A STUDY ON CURRENT LEVELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS – STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the current levels of community engagement practices, factors that influence the current levels of community engagement and social responsibility activities, the present best practices and limitations in HEIs from the perspectives of students. Primary data has been collected from 711 students by purposive and cross-sectional sampling method. The data collected has been analyzed by using descriptive statistics, factor analysis and Word clouds in R. Results reveal that Institutional System and Support, Teaching and Learning, Avenues and Contribution and Support factors are identified as factors influencing the current levels of community engagement and social responsibility practices.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Social Responsibility, Students, Best Practices and Limitations

INTRODUCTION

Higher Educational Institutions are the hubs of talents, knowledge and research. Their ways of existence and their functions have a direct bearing on the society. They are the centres of research and places where future workforce gets nurtured. Apart from teaching and research, with the changing requirements and expectations they are now being expected to showcase their societal contribution and relevance through these functions.

In pursuit of understanding the potential of the higher educational institutions and where they are currently it was thought that the current levels of community engagement practices, best practices, limitations and the factors influencing the current levels of community engagement practices need to be understood from the perspective of students. Youth today can be responsive towards real societal issues and develop entrepreneurial, civilian and research capabilities if community engagement becomes reality in higher educational institutions.

(Tandon 2014) emphasizes that NSS activities though started with the intention of enhancing community engagement at higher educational institutions, they ended up being perceived as assorted activities without any clear links to the higher education itself. Apart from this, higher educational institutions have many limitations in the way of enhancing community engagement and social responsibility activities. (Kavatekar and Vijaya, 2017), have listed the constraints which are in the way of greater contribution by HEIs towards regional development. The opportunities that community and social responsibility throws at various stakeholders are immense. (Karnataka Youth Policy 2012) states that, ‘multiple capacities of youth often do not find an avenue for expression. Most young people in the state often say that they would like to be involved in serving the community but have very limited opportunities for the same have strongly endorsed on ‘volunteerism’. Karnataka knowledge commission sponsored Study on the perceptions, Aspirations, expectations and Attitudes of youth in Karnataka Report (2011) indicates that ‘being socially responsible was an aspiration of majority of the youth. They also feel that society must give the younger generation more responsibility’. (Community Engagement with Higher Educational Institutions and Social Responsibility in Higher Education in Karnataka, Draft Report 2015) documents that the young minds get grounded in the socio-economic realities of life through this long lasting experiential learning and how it influences in multiple ways to contribute back to the communities/societies once they enter their professional world.

*This is a part of the Ph.D work of the first author, under the guidance of the second author.

The review of the literature of the past studies indicates that Social Responsibility is not integrated powerfully into the curriculum through instruction and research. There have been many institutional factors which influence the community engagement and social responsibility activities which have their own benefits for the institution, communities, faculty and students.

Objectives:

- To explore the factors that influence the current levels of community engagement and social responsibility activities in HEIs from students' perspective.
- To assess the present best practices of community engagement and social responsibility activities in HEIs from students' perspective.
- To find out limitations that HEIs face to express community engagement and social responsibility activities from students' perspective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study was carried out with the help of primary data and secondary data. The required data were collected through structured questionnaire. Students who have been contributing in one or the other way towards community engagement and social responsibility were considered for the study. The purposive and cross sectional sampling method has been adopted. Totally responses collected from 711 respondents were considered fit for further analysis. SPSS 20 was used and Descriptive statistics, percentage analysis, Factor Analysis and Word Clouds in R were used for analysis and interpretation.

Students across HEIs like State University Affiliated Colleges, Autonomous Colleges, Deemed-to-be-Universities, Private Universities, in the city of Bangalore, across different disciplines were approached with the questionnaire. The data is categorized for the purpose of analyzing the data into Arts/Humanities/Languages, Commerce/Management, Science/Engineering/Medicine. Higher education includes all under-graduate and post-graduate studies.

PROPOSED WORK: Data Analysis

Table No 1: Description of Student Data Set (n = 711)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	276	38.8%
Female	435	61.2%
Qualification		
Under Graduation Studies(UG)	332	46.7%
Post-Graduation Studies(PG)	379	53.3%
Discipline		
Arts/Humanities/Lang	187	26.3%
Sci/Eng/Med	226	31.8%
Commerce/Management	298	41.9%
Type of Institution		
Govt/State University Affiliated	99	13.9%
Deemed university	464	65.3%
Autonomous	140	19.7%
Pvt university	8	1.1%
Involvement Levels		
Rarely involved	255	35.9%
Sometimes involved	283	39.8%
Very often involved	108	15.2%
Highly involved	65	9.1%
Presence of Community Engagement Practices		

Yes	699	98.3
No	12	1.7
Sufficient Avenues		
Strongly Disagree	16	2.3%
Disagree	73	10.3%
Neutral	218	30.7%
Agree	286	40.2%
Strongly Agree	118	16.6%
Satisfaction		
Strongly Disagree	22	3.1%
Disagree	100	14.1%
Neutral	240	33.8%
Agree	258	36.3%
Strongly Agree	91	12.8%

Table 1 indicates the demographic profile, involvement levels, their agreement for sufficient avenues being there and their satisfaction levels with present levels of community engagement and social responsibility activities. On average students spent a little more than 3 hours per week on community engagement activities.

Table 2: Extent of involvement of Institutions

Sl. No.	Community Engagement Activities	NI	RI	SI	VI	AI	Mean Score	SD	Rank
a.	Not for credit	81	133	272	149	76	3.01	1.132	2
b.	Credit based	140	126	209	154	82	2.88	1.277	4
c.	Community-based research	244	175	187	72	33	2.26	1.167	10
d.	Community based internships	247	128	157	114	65	2.47	1.347	9
e.	Student Initiatives/Innovations	93	139	253	148	78	2.97	1.169	3
f.	Faculty consultation services to community	134	140	228	143	66	2.81	1.221	5
g.	Active teaching methods in the existing subjects	98	135	215	173	90	3.03	1.221	1
h.	Knowledge sharing with Community	142	168	196	141	64	2.74	1.237	6
i.	Practitioners from the field to co-teach the subjects	152	184	204	114	57	2.63	1.210	8
j.	Faculty initiatives/Innovations	144	181	204	118	64	2.69	1.222	7

(NI – Never Involved, RI – Rarely Involved, SI – Sometimes Involved, VI – Very Often Involved, AI – Always Involved)

According to the table, students view that their institution engaged in the way existing subjects are taught through active teaching methods like experiential learning, service learning, field work etc with a highest mean score of 3.03. Students also perceive that their institution is mostly engaged with not for credit engagement activities, through student forums like NSS, NCC, Rotaract, Enactus etc with a mean score of 3.01. This is followed by student initiatives and innovations for social activities being encouraged with highest mean score of 2.97. This indicates that institutions are presently mostly involved in not for credit, student volunteerism which does not fetch them any credits in terms of assessment and evaluation. These are the top three engagement practices as per the views of the students.

Objective: To study the factors that influences the current levels of Community engagement in HEIs.

Test: Factor Analysis

Table No 3: Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix ^a				
	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Q15a	.785			
Q15b	.772			
Q15h	.673			
Q15c	.644			
Q15d	.527			
Q15j	.527			
Q15l	.514			
Q15g	.454			
Q15p		.800		
Q15o		.774		
Q15e		.527		
Q15f		.518		
Q15s		.492		
Q15n		.472		
Q15m		.433		
Q15k		.431		
Q15q		.404		
Q15t			.752	
Q15v			.691	
Q15u			.656	
Q15i				.825
Q15r				.805

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Findings:

A principal components analysis (PCA) was run on a 22-question questionnaire that measured current levels of Community engagement. Inspection of the correlation matrix showed that all the variables have at least one correlation coefficient greater than 0.3. The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.945 with individual KMO measures all greater than 0.5, classifications of 'Marvelous' according to Kaiser (1974). Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .0005$), indicating that the data was likely factorizable. PCA revealed four components that had eigenvalues greater than one and which explained 39.404%, 6.687%, 4.818% and 4.287% of the total variance, respectively. The Four-component solution explained 55.196% of the total variance. The interpretation of the data was consistent with the current levels of community engagement activities with strong loadings of Stakeholders items on Component 1, Organisational System and Support items on Component 2, Instruction and Research items on Component 3 and Other Support Factors items on Component 4. The principal factors identified that help us in understanding the factors influencing the current levels of community engagement in HEIs.

Component 1 Institutional system and support items indicate aspects of there being sufficient funding, leadership supporting the community engagement activities and community engagement being part of the mission. Communities being interested to partnering with the institution, top admin supporting and there being structure and governing mechanism to support community engagement activities.

Component 2 Teaching and learning items indicate aspects related with faculty and students. Faculty are motivated to engage themselves and take initiatives related community engagement activities. Research carried out by faculty members and students is socially relevant and that faculty members apply active teaching methods like experiential learning, service learning in teaching the existing subjects. Students and teachers are involved with knowledge sharing with the communities for socio-economic development. Teaching learning process also involves institution having regular interactions with practitioners from the field and that the programs/Courses/Curriculum is specific to the needs of the community.

Component 3 Avenues and Contribution items relate to aspects related with there being sufficient avenues to express social responsibility through community engagement activities at HEIs. HEIs' contribution to solving local problems and capacity building of the community.

Component 4 Support Factors items indicate students are motivated to take up community engagement activities and that HEIs are actively engaged in solving local problems and in capacity building of the community.

Word Cloud No 1: Best Practices in the current engagement levels



As can be seen in the above word cloud most of the students have listed NSS, NCC, Rotaract, Redcross, etc are conducted in HEIs. Apart from that, celebrating various important days, local community projects for empowerment of women and children, awareness creation, it being part of the exams and assessment, encouragement to various initiatives, funding, tie ups with NGOs and local communities are some of the best practices mentioned. Students also have mentioned that their institution organising workshops and seminars, creating learning through field work has been another way of engaging students in social activities and community engagement. Most popular best practice mentioned by students when it comes to social responsibility and community engagement activities is that of blood donation camps which is generally organised by NSS in HEIs.

Word Cloud No 1: Best Practices

Table No 4: Limitations

Limitations	n	Percent	Rank
Funding	135	14%	4
Curriculum/policy	57	6%	6
Management support	229	25%	1
Academic schedule	214	23%	2
Attitude	170	18%	3
Co-curricular / extra curricular activities	53	6%	6
Collaborations /partnerships/communi ty	79	8%	5
Total	937	100	



Word cloud 2: Limitations

As can be seen above when asked about the top most limitations in the way of enhancing community engagement in HEIs students listed lack of management support, academic schedule being hectic, followed by attitude/awareness of the students. These top three limitations are followed by other limitations like lack of funding, lack of collaborations/partnerships with business houses, NGOs, Governmental bodies and with local communities, lack of community engagement being part of the curriculum or Policy and lack of encouragement for Co-Curricular and Extra Curricular activities.

Major Findings:

- **Involvement in Social Responsibility and Community Engagement Activities in HEIs:**

Around 98% of the students acknowledged that their institution has presence of community engagement activities. Table No 3 indicates that students view that their institution engaged in the way existing subjects are taught through active teaching methods like experiential learning, service learning, field work etc with a highest mean score of 3.03. Students also perceive that their institution is mostly engaged with not for credit engagement activities, through student forums like NSS, NCC, Rotaract, Enactus etc with a mean score of 3.01. This is followed by student initiatives and innovations for social activities being encouraged with highest mean score of 2.97. 57% of the students agreed that there are sufficient avenues to express social responsibility through community engagement activities in their institution.

24% of the students were very often/highly involved. Around 40% of the students were sometimes involved community engagement activities. On average students spent a little more than 3 hours on community engagement activities.

- **Factors influencing the present levels of Community Engagement and Social Responsibility**

Student responses generated factors of *institutional system and support, teaching and learning, avenues and contribution* and *support factors*, as factors influencing current levels of community engagement in HEIs.

- **Noteworthy things about engagement of institution for the empowerment of the local community:**

Word clouds on student responses indicate the notably good things about the engagement of institution for the empowerment of the local community are mostly related with NSS, NCC, Rotaract, Red Corss, workshops, awareness camps, field trips, skill development activities in rural areas, social service activities by students. Blood donation is recognized as the most popular best practice in HEIs by students. Students also recognize tie-ups with NGOs as notably best practice of their institution.

- **Constraints/Limitations in the way of engagement of the HEIs for empowerment of the local community:**

Students have listed topmost challenges in the order of lack of management support, hectic academic schedule, lack of appropriate attitude, lack of funding, lack of collaborations/partnerships, lack of encouragement for co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and lack of appropriate and socially relevant curriculum. Review of literature also recognizes many of the above challenges as constraints in the way of community engagement by HEIs.

The study indicates that social responsibility through community engagement activities is possible through inculcating application of active pedagogical methods in teaching the existing subjects. It contributes towards holistic development of the students, builds competencies required for the future and also benefits all the stakeholders.

Implications for Practice:

Institutional system and support is one of the important factors emerging which is influencing the current levels of community engagement in HEIs. Many of the limitations listed by both faculty and students indicate, hectic academic schedule, lack of time, it not being part of the assessment, lack of funding, lack of motivation and encouragement etc indicate that most of the challenges are at institutional level. This clearly indicates that institutions of higher education should actively inculcate institutional factors.

Involvement in community engagement has an influence on application of active pedagogical methods in classroom and vice-versa. Though students agreed that faculty in their institution apply active teaching methods, it should be more rigorously employed in the existing subjects. Active teaching methods employ application of experiential learning which results in making the learning last longer. Many of the respondents have suggested that the existing subjects could be more practical oriented with greater emphasis on field work, activities etc. their involvement in community work should reflect in their assessment and evaluation. Higher level of involvement in community engagement is leading to greater application of active teaching methods in the classroom teaching.

CONCLUSION

Assessing the current levels of community engagement, best practices and limitations in the way gives us a clear understanding about the current levels of community engagement practices in HEIs. Also the current levels of community engagement can be best understood by looking at various factors influencing community engagement at higher educational institutions. This further helps us to streamline and improvise community engagement and social responsibility in higher educational institutions. It is far more beneficial to enhance current levels of community engagement and social responsibility in HEIs for that will greatly impact teaching-learning and research functions of HEIs. A great amount of social value can be imbibed by HEIs which will further percolate down to faculty and students, by enhancing the current levels of community engagement and social responsibility activities in HEIs. **(Kavatekar and Vijaya, 2019)** Educational institutions have to be more socially relevant to explore deeper dimensions of their prime functions of teaching and research. These explorations not only will benefit all the stakeholders but will also throw open various opportunities to build competencies required for the future among the student community. All this will enhance teaching-learning and research process at higher educational institutions.

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