

Integrating Community Engagement Practices in Curriculum: Insights from Mountains of the Moon University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the integration of community engagement practices in the curriculum at Mountains of the Moon University (MMU). The central research question which guided the study was: How are community engagement practices integrated into the curriculum at Mountains of the Moon University? The study was conducted using an inductive approach. Data was gathered using unstructured interviews with faculty deans, academic staff, community engagement coordinators, top management, document check and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students' coordinators for community engagement as the unit of analysis. NVivo 14 aided data analysis by integrating emergent codes with a priori categories from Thornton and Ocasio's (2008) institutional logics framework. The findings revealed that MMU integrated community engagement through experiential learning, participatory research, and structured field placements aligned with students' specialisations. These initiatives bridged both theory and practice to strengthen university-community reciprocity. Challenges included inadequate formal structures, workload allocation, and limited faculty leadership. Hard applied disciplines showed stronger alignment of community engagement in their curriculum than soft applied disciplines. The study concluded that while MMU's policies provide a strong foundation for integrating community engagement in the curriculum, enhanced leadership commitment and structural adjustments are needed. It was recommended that universities should formalise partnerships, conduct faculty trainings, and strengthen policies for better community engagement integration into university curriculum.

Keywords: *Community engagement practices; Curriculum; Experiential learning.*

Introduction

Universities play a pivotal role in addressing societal challenges and fostering socio-economic development through community engagement (CE) curricula. As higher education institutions (HEIs) respond to growing calls to integrate CE into their core functions, the “third mission” beyond teaching and research has gained renewed significance, emphasising local and regional development (Gratton, 2020; Luchuo et al., 2022; Secundo et al., 2017; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021). A key aspect of this mission involves how individual staff members adapt to and invest in CE. Research (O’Brien et al., 2019; Rubens et al., 2017) shows that effective CE initiatives are typically led by academic staff with the necessary skills and a strong orientation towards external collaboration. Institutions must, therefore, support these “faculty champions”, whose teaching and community ties foster experiential learning (Holton et al., 2015; Kingma, 2014; Quillinan et al., 2018). However, the sustainability of CE efforts also relies on institutional support through adequate resources, recognition, and structural backing (Coleman-Chan, 2024; Rubens et al., 2017).

From an African perspective, scholars like Mkandawire (2020) and Rubens et al. (2016) underlined the university’s public role in promoting equity, justice, and local development. Munsamy (2013) and Johnson (2020) highlight CE’s potential in cultivating critical thinking, civic responsibility, and experiential learning.

Mountains of the Moon University (MMU), established in 2005 as a private community university, became a public institution in 2022. Despite this transition, MMU has remained committed to its founding mission of excellence in teaching, research, and community engagement (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2018, 2022). MMU’s draft Community Engagement and Partnership Policy (2020) defines community engagement as university-initiated activities that benefit communities, linked to a form of recognition, such as academic credit. The policy calls for academic programmes to adopt community-led teaching, research, and outreach. MMU has implemented this through diverse initiatives such as tree-planting campaigns via the Laudato Si Club, ICT training for women farmers, the B-SaFFeR disaster resilience project, and anti-corruption advocacy with the Rwenzori Anti-Corruption Coalition. Despite this progress, challenges persist, including limited curriculum integration, faculty workload constraints, and inconsistent institutional support. The Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences leads in curriculum-based community engagement, followed by that of Health Sciences and Business. In contrast, Education and Humanities show limited and inconsistent implementation of the same. Hence, there exists a gap between policy intent and curricular practice that requires deliberate institutional action.

This study explored how community engagement practices were integrated into the university curriculum at MMU. Thus, the research question was:

- (i) How have community engagement practices been integrated into the university curriculum at MMU?

Literature Review

Theoretical review

This study was guided by Alford and Friedland's (1985) theory of institutional logics, which posits that historical, social, and cultural factor within an organisation's value system shape decisions and actions (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Institutional logics are defined as socially constructed, historically embedded patterns of values, beliefs, and rules that influence behaviour of both individuals and organisations (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). The framework was selected because of its propositions on how to cater for varied contexts in which universities operate (Cai & Mehari, 2015; Edelstein & Douglass, 2012), offering insight into the multiple logics shaping the integration of community engagement in university curricula (Kelsey, 2023; Shields & Watermeyer, 2020). The study explored how MMU integrated community engagement into its curriculum, offering perspectives on sustaining engagement during MMU's transition to public status.

Integration of community engagement practices into university curriculum

Scholars emphasise that community engagement (CE) should be one of the core functions of higher education institutions (HEIs), and not a peripheral activity (Cho, 2017; Hall & Tandon, 2017) hence, a call for embedding it into curriculum, and research. Central to this are collaborative, participatory research methodologies in which universities and communities should engage as equal partners. Ejiogu (2018) advocated for participatory curriculum development involving joint problem identification, content co-creation, and shared assessment of relevance and societal impact aligned with problem-driven initiatives. Such approaches foster mutual learning and accountability. However, disciplinary socialisation shapes faculty attitudes towards CE. As Borlaug and Langfeldt (2019) noted, disciplinary norms can either support or constrain faculty-led engagement. Kelsey (2023) and Thornton and Ocasio (2008) argued that effective CE integration requires sensitivity to disciplinary logics, promoting context-specific, faculty-driven strategies.

Scholars (Cebolla-Boado & Uribe-Tirado, 2020; Rausch & Scheyvens, 2021) highlight the importance of flexible curricula that address community needs and promote experiential learning. Such approaches contribute to local development and enhance real-world skills. Studies (OECD, 2019; Perkmann et al., 2021) further show that CE, when integrated with academic research, generates socio-economic benefits beyond those of commercialisation (Benneworth et al., 2024), underscoring the value of problem-driven initiatives and applied inquiry. Robson and Hudson (2013) argued that without the formal recognition and inclusion of CE in staff evaluations and promotion criteria, it remains undervalued. Similarly, Coleman-Chan (2024) found that many faculty engage in CE voluntarily, often without institutional incentives or support. Mutero and Govender (2019) further emphasised the need for curricula that reflect community diversity, enabling inclusive and participatory approaches aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While there is strong scholarly consensus on the centrality of community engagement to the mission of higher education, its effective integration into curricula and research remains uneven, particularly in contexts undergoing institutional transitions. Without addressing the integration of CE in university curriculum, CE risks remaining a marginal endeavour rather than a transformative force within higher education. This

study addressed that gap by examining strategies adopted at Mountains of the Moon University (MMU), including experiential learning, participatory research, and structured faculty-led field placements to integrate community engagement into its curriculum. The findings of this study offer insights into the practical integration of CE, contributing to reforms in institutional policy and academic practice.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to explore the integration of community engagement practices in university curriculum at MMU, focusing on the participants' sense-making processes and experiences. The study adopted the case study research design. This case study design explored the integration of community engagement practices in the university curriculum, providing an in-depth analysis of the community engagement practices, motivations, and challenges within institutional and societal contexts. Purposive sampling was employed to select key participants with relevant experience and roles in implementing curriculum practices of community engagement (Johnson & Lee, 2019). These included four faculty deans, four academic staff, one member of top university management, four community engagement coordinators, and four students' coordinators for community engagement, all totaling seventeen participants.

The sample was drawn using Biglan's (1973) framework of disciplinary diversity, categorising participants by discipline type (Biglan, 1973; Swarat et al., 2017). From the hard applied academic disciplines, one faculty dean (DoF1), one member of academic staff (ACS1), and one CE coordinator (CEC1) were selected as participants. In the hard pure academic disciplines, one faculty dean (DoF2), one member of academic staff (ACS2), and one CE coordinator (CEC2) were selected as participants in the study. From the soft applied, one dean (DoF3), one member of academic staff (ACS3), and one CE coordinator (CEC3) participated. From the soft pure academic disciplines, one faculty dean (DoF4), one member of academic staff (ACS4), and one CE coordinator (CEC4) were selected and participated in this study. Three student CE coordinators were selected from the faculties of Business (SFBMS), Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (SFAES), and Health Sciences (SFHS). This disciplinary categorisation helped capture variations in CE logics (Johnson, 2016; Polit & Beck, 2017). The study applied the concept of information power, emphasising data depth, richness, and relevance to the research objectives. Data was collected through unstructured interviews, document check and focus group discussions (FGDs). Institutional policies were checked for contextual grounding (Brown, 2019).

Data quality control

Data quality was ensured through several rigorous strategies that included transferability, credibility, consistency and confirmability. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings, allowing readers to assess relevance to their own settings. Credibility was enhanced by purposively selecting participants with direct experience with MMU's community engagement practices. Consistent field notes were kept and used as supplementary data, in line with Miller's (2016) recommendation. Member checking was conducted by sharing findings with participants to confirm accuracy and alignment with their experiences (Jones, 2020). This strengthened the trustworthiness of the study, ensuring that the findings authentically

reflect participants' perspectives and the realities of integrating community engagement into the curriculum at MMU.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data in this study using NVivo version 14. This was done to ensure a detailed and contextually rich analysis of community engagement overarching themes and sub-themes at MMU across various data sources, as guided by Braun and Clarke (2019). The process was an ongoing, cyclical process that involved reflecting on the interview transcripts and policy documents of MMU, examining, interpreting, reexamining, and then reinterpreting the emerging themes from those sources of data.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards by informing participants of its purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through secure handling of data and the use of pseudonyms or de-identification techniques. No personally identifiable information was disclosed, with participants coded by role (e.g., DoF1–4 for faculty deans, CEC1–4 for coordinators, ACS1–4 for academic staff) to protect their identities. Informed consent was obtained for audio recording, which all participants accepted, facilitating comprehensive verbatim transcription.

Results

How community engagement practices are integrated into the curriculum at Mountains of the Moon University

This section presents the findings on how community engagement practices are integrated into the curriculum at MMU. The analysis is organised around six key themes: curriculum integration; problem-driven initiatives; faculty-led engagements; experiential learning; participatory research; and institutional challenges, including time and workload constraints. These are discussed below:

Curriculum integration

MMU's approach to integrating community engagement into the curriculum reflected both structural commitment and practical limitations. According to the Field Placement Guidelines (2020), "All students are expected at their field attachment stations during the long recess (usually between June and August). The field placement exercise lasts 8 weeks... Students are expected to be placed in Organisations/Institutions that are relevant to their respective areas of study and specialisation" (Sections 5, 6 and 8). This policy offers a formal mechanism for bridging classroom learning with real-world practice. Structured field placements align with experiential learning models and are viewed by staff as a means to strengthen academic-community relations. One participant noted: "Students act as conduits of knowledge transfer, providing fresh ideas to the organisations while gaining professional skills" (ACS1). Similarly, CEC1 highlighted the importance of competence-based teaching: "Identifying the expertise that people have is key... especially the competence-based teaching where students are taught through field attachment."

Despite this structural intent, implementation was found to be uneven and ad hoc. Some respondents observed inconsistencies in curriculum-based community engagement. As one participant explained, “What we are doing as of now does not cover everything, for example we are implementing community-based activities that are in the curriculum” (ACS1). Furthermore, a lack of strategic direction and mechanisms for monitoring was emphasised. CEC3 remarked, “We have... visited eleven districts... we have not put our feet on a particular strategy... Are you tracking learning progress? The answer is NO.” These findings indicated that while MMU’s curriculum includes structured community engagement components, execution remained fragmented due to inconsistent implementation, limited coordination, and the absence of a unified institutional strategy or monitoring framework.

Problem-driven initiatives

The findings revealed a strong emphasis on community engagement that is grounded in locally defined challenges. Participants advocated for participatory approaches that involve communities throughout the research and solution-development processes. CEC1 stated, “We must engage with the community by identifying the challenges the community is facing with them and not for them... recommend solutions together with them.” This participatory ethic was evident in initiatives such as the “geo-observers” team, formed during research on natural hazards and disasters. There was also consensus that meaningful engagement must yield tangible benefits. DoF4 emphasised: “The university should solve problems of the community... If we do not solve community’s problems, I would not consider it as community engagement.” From applied disciplines, a shift towards co-creation was noted, with DoF1 stating: “We are looking at advanced models of engagement such as co-creation... work with community members to come up with solutions.” Overall, the findings reflect a normative and practical shift towards engagement that is participatory, context-specific, and outcome-oriented.

Faculty-led engagements

Faculty members emerged as central actors in advancing community engagement, often leveraging their professional expertise and personal initiative. Outreach and knowledge dissemination activities were cited across departments. DoF4 observed that “[a]cademic staff for Mass Communication have gone out to market our programmes... Rukungiri, Bundibugyo”, while CEC3 noted, “Our expertise can be relevant to the community... for instance, a nurse from Faculty of Health Sciences.” A perception of faculty responsibility to serve the community was echoed by DoF2: “When you are a university lecturer... this knowledge will be put to use at the service of the community.” However, concerns were raised about superficial forms of engagement, as DoF3 cautioned: “I don’t think it is good to fake community engagement through things like burials, weddings and the like.” Faculty also initiated gender-responsive projects. CEC1 described the formation of “Women River Ambassadors (WORIAS)”, noting that “[w]omen are contributing to the economic, resource development of the region and protecting the environment.” These examples underscore faculty commitment, yet also revealed a lack of formal coordination across departments.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning was identified as a core modality at MMU, primarily operationalised through field attachments. The model of “learning by doing” was affirmed by ACS3: “Identifying the expertise... especially through field attachment.” FGDs revealed the impact of such learning on graduate employability. Students across various disciplines engaged in applied projects tied to government and community priorities. Business students contributed to the Parish Development Model (PDM), enhancing their skills in policy analysis, community mobilisation, and data handling. Agriculture and Environmental Sciences students addressed challenges such as soil degradation and water pollution, while Health Sciences students participated in maternal health outreach. These experiences provided hands-on training in technical skills and built students’ confidence. As SFBMS remarked: “During my placement under the Parish Development Model, I learnt how to collect and analyse community data... something I couldn’t have gotten from the classroom alone.” Similar sentiments were shared by students in Agriculture and Health Sciences. However, disparities were noted in the scope and quality of experiential components across faculties, suggesting a need for stronger institutional oversight to ensure consistency and relevance in student engagement.

Participatory research

Participatory research emerged as a valued model for community engagement, particularly for its capacity to democratise knowledge production. ACS2 emphasised the importance of community involvement in all research stages: “We do research with them and not for them and recommend solutions together.” This aligns with best practices in community-based participatory research and highlights the role of faculty leadership in advancing innovative models such as co-creation, as stated by DoF1. Institutional commitment was documented in policy: “The University shall: Create platforms for staff and students to disseminate research” (Research and Publication Policy, 2020, Section 3.3.2). Nevertheless, operationalisation of these commitments remained unclear, underscoring a gap between policy and practice.

Institutional challenges

The findings highlighted significant institutional barriers that limited the effectiveness of community engagement at MMU. Time constraints were frequently cited, with CEC4 stating: “Because of no time, we have all the staff who may not have gotten chance to go for community engagement.” Similarly, heavy teaching workloads were said to hinder participation: “Too much load is assigned to teaching... we almost operate like the elitist” (ACS4). Structural challenges also included governance gaps. CEC2 questioned the functionality of existing structures: “We have the DVC AA Outreach, but how does this cascade downwards?” The issue of workload recognition was debated. While one respondent claimed that workload calculations included community engagement (TUM), others contested this, reflecting institutional ambiguity. Concerns over strategic direction were recurring. As CEC3 emphasised, “We have... visited eleven districts... and we have not put our feet on a particular strategy.” This was echoed by CEC2, who recommended that MMU align community engagement with its institutional niche.

These findings indicate that despite foundational structures and policies, MMU struggles to fully embed community engagement into its academic culture. Fragmented coordination, lack of clear governance frameworks, and inadequate time and workload allocation were seen as key impediments. While promising practices such as field placements, participatory research, and faculty-led initiatives exist, their impact is constrained by insufficient institutional support. To enhance its community-oriented mission, MMU must formalise engagement through clear frameworks for governance, workload distribution, and strategic alignment. Leveraging faculty expertise and fostering reciprocal partnerships with communities will not only enrich student learning but also advance sustainable development in the Rwenzori Region.

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence that supports the integration of community engagement (CE) as a core university mandate (Cho, 2017; Hall & Tandon, 2017). Through key themes – problem-driven initiatives and participatory research, experiential learning and faculty-led engagements, curriculum integration and institutional challenges – it highlights both the progress and gaps in advancing CE at MMU, as discussed thematically below.

Problem-driven initiatives and participatory research

Findings from MMU revealed a normative shift towards problem-driven, collaborative engagement strategies that emphasised contextual responsiveness and local ownership. Through the formation of grassroots teams like “geo-observers” and the application of co-creation methodologies, MMU reflected a tangible move away from traditional top-down outreach models towards co-produced, situated problem-solving. This aligns with Ejiogu’s (2018) call for universities to act as co-creators of knowledge rather than mere transmitters. It also supports Perkmann et al.’s (2021) and Mutero and Govender’s (2019) arguments that locally embedded approaches enhance the legitimacy and impact of academic interventions. Participatory research practices were also gradually taking root, with faculty and community members jointly identifying challenges and co-designing solutions, a hallmark of community-based participatory research (CBPR) as advocated by Hall and Tandon (2017) and Mkandawire (2020). However, despite the MMU Research and Publication Policy (2020) endorsing these collaborative models, a persistent policy-practice gap remained, limiting broader institutionalisation of co-research. This echoed Coleman-Chan’s (2024) caution about the superficial adoption of participatory rhetoric without robust structural supports, indicating a need for mechanisms that translate policy intent into routine academic practice.

Experiential learning and faculty-led engagements

MMU’s integration of experiential learning, particularly through field placements and service-learning, reflected a commitment to praxis-based pedagogy that develops both civic consciousness and professional competencies among students. Student involvement in initiatives like the Parish Development Model and maternal health outreach served as a conduit for practical learning, embodying Munsamy’s (2013) and Johnson’s (2020) emphasis on linking academic learning to societal needs. These efforts also resonate with Rausch

and Scheyvens' (2021) advocacy for development-oriented and context-sensitive curricula. Yet, uneven implementation across faculties underscored the absence of a standardised framework to ensure consistent and equitable access to high-quality experiential learning. Faculty-led engagement further emerged as a critical driver of community outreach, with staff from Health Sciences, Agriculture, and Mass Communication leveraging disciplinary expertise to spearhead initiatives. This aligns with Borlaug and Langfeldt's (2019) perspective on how disciplinary training shapes outreach priorities and with Kelsey's (2023) and Thornton and Ocasio's (2008) insights into the role of disciplinary logics in guiding faculty behaviour. However, the lack of inter-faculty coordination and institutional scaffolding limited the scalability and sustainability of these efforts, suggesting the need for a coherent, university-wide strategy to transform sporadic faculty-led projects into integrated institutional practices.

Curriculum integration and institutional challenges

MMU's attempt to embed community engagement (CE) within teaching and the curriculum exemplified by its eight-week field placements is in line with global trends that advocate for participatory and applied learning, which is consistent with the arguments by Ejiogu (2018) and Rausch and Scheyvens (2021). These placements, grounded in students' academic disciplines, provided structured opportunities to bridge theory and practice, contributing to meaningful and sustainable community outreach (Mkandawire, 2020). However, the study highlighted that implementation remained fragmented, with no comprehensive monitoring or evaluation systems in place, thereby limiting the effectiveness and equity of CE integration. This reflected Robson and Hudson's (2013) concern that, in the absence of institutional accountability and support mechanisms, CE risks being marginalised. Further, systemic challenges such as limited faculty time, heavy teaching loads, and ambiguous governance structures posed significant barriers to deeper integration of CE into the university curriculum. These findings support Coleman-Chan's (2024) and Robson and Hudson's (2013) assertions that CE requires formal recognition in workload calculations and clearer institutional mandates. Ongoing debates around CE's status in academic reward structures exemplify the broader organisational ambiguity that continues to hinder faculty commitment and institutional coherence in engagement practices.

Conclusions

This study concludes that while MMU formally recognises community engagement (CE) as a core institutional mandate, its implementation remains fragmented due to weak inter-faculty coordination, limited structural support, and a persistent gap between policy and practice. Systemic constraints, including time limitations, heavy teaching workloads, ambiguous governance, and the exclusion of CE from workload models, further hinder its institutionalisation and sustainability.

Experiential learning initiatives, particularly curriculum-linked field placements and service-learning programmes, have contributed positively to student development by enhancing practical skills, civic awareness, and employability. However, the lack of standardised implementation and the absence of a unified monitoring and evaluation

framework reduce their overall impact and create inequities in student access to high-quality experiential opportunities across faculties.

MMU has made encouraging progress towards participatory, problem-driven engagement, evidenced by the adoption of co-creation methodologies and joint research activities with communities. These practices reflect a meaningful shift towards inclusive and contextually grounded approaches. Nonetheless, they remain in nascent stages and require stronger institutional backing to move beyond isolated initiatives and become embedded within the university's research culture.

Faculty members have shown commendable individual initiative and disciplinary leadership in advancing CE, particularly in domains like Health Sciences, Agriculture, and Mass Communication. However, the absence of formal institutional incentives, workload recognition, and coordinated support structures renders these efforts overly reliant on personal motivation and limits their scalability and sustainability.

In summary, while MMU possesses foundational practices and promising models of community engagement, their full potential remains constrained by systemic and structural barriers. Addressing these through targeted reforms, strategic coordination, and institutional commitment is essential for embedding CE as a transformative and integral component of the university's mission.

Recommendations

MMU should formulate a university-wide community engagement (CE) strategy that embeds CE into its core functions teaching, research, and outreach. This strategy should outline clear objectives, implementation plans, and accountability mechanisms aligned with institutional and national development goals. It should also establish a dedicated CE office or enhance existing structures to coordinate, support, and monitor CE across faculties. This unit should drive policy implementation, foster cross-disciplinary collaboration, and ensure consistent application of CE principles throughout the institution.

Transitioning universities should formally recognise CE as part of staff responsibilities by integrating it into workload models, performance evaluations, and promotion criteria. This will incentivise faculty participation and reduce reliance on voluntary efforts. Such universities should develop and apply standardised frameworks for curriculum-linked placements and experiential learning to ensure consistency, quality, and equity across faculties. These should include defined learning outcomes, community roles, and assessment tools.

MMU should provide ongoing training for staff and students in participatory research, co-creation, and community facilitation. It should also promote interdisciplinary approaches that address real-world challenges and foster shared knowledge production between the university and its communities.

Transitioning universities should establish systems to track CE activities, evaluate their impact on students, faculty, and communities, and inform improvements. MMU should also document and share successful practices and lessons to foster institutional learning and external visibility.

MMU should allocate dedicated institutional resources for CE and actively pursue partnerships with the government, NGOs, and the private sector. Such collaborations can enhance funding, relevance, and the scalability of CE initiatives.

To achieve sustainable and transformative community engagement, MMU must adopt a coherent, university-wide strategy that aligns CE with teaching, research, and outreach functions. This includes integrating CE into institutional governance frameworks, performance evaluation systems, and academic workload models, ensuring both accountability and long-term impact.

Limitations

While this study makes a significant contribution in showing how to integrate CE into the university curriculum, there are some limitations. Its single case design at MMU limits the generalisability of the findings. The small, purposively selected sample (n=17) may have constrained the diversity of perspectives, especially from students and community members. Responses from participants in formal CE roles may reflect social desirability bias. Although Biglan's framework addressed disciplinary variation, limited representation within each category restricted intra-disciplinary insights. The reliance on self-reported data through unstructured interviews introduced potential recall and response biases, and the scope and quality of institutional documents may have affected the depth of the document analysis.

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