**THE SCHOALRSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT**

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**The traditional role of universities as society`s primary generators and transmitters of knowledge is changing. Academic institutions form an important part of a highly complex learning society where discovery, learning and engagement are integrated activities that involve many sources of knowledge that is generated in diverse settings by a variety of contributors. This has resulted in a shift in the nature of university knowledge production which includes trans- disciplinary and multi-disciplinary modes. Here knowledge is also being produced in the context of application, in addition to the more controlled context of an academic discipline and its paradigms. Technology has made access to knowledge, data, expertise and information widely available so that researchers now can draw upon dynamic, interactive knowledge networks external to the university. The expectations of the state, external stakeholders and broader society demand increased efficiency, as a consequence the application and utility of knowledge produced by universities continue to gain momentum. One of the ways in which universities are responding to these expectations is through the Scholarship of Engagement and specifically through engaged research involving external partners.**

**One of the strategic priorities of the NMMU is to position itself as an engaged institution that will contribute to a sustainable future through critical scholarship. The university therefore ascribes to a holistic and systemic approach to engagement and views engagement as a fundamental idea and strategy infused into its core functions. Teaching and learning and research, are enriched in the context of engagement, and engagement in turn is enriched through the knowledge base of the discipline being taught and researched. Its approach to engagement and scholarship is underpinned by the work of Boyer who postulated a much broader and holistic conceptualisation of scholarship (Boyer 1996). Instead of focusing exclusively on traditional and narrowly defined discipline – based research as the only legitimate avenue to further knowledge, Boyer`s broader conceptualisation of scholarship proposes five interrelated dimensions of scholarship, namely, discovery; integration; application; teaching and engagement. The Scholarship of Engagement therefore consists of research, teaching, integration and application scholarship that incorporates reciprocal practices of engagement into the production of knowledge. It describes a host of practises cutting across disciplinary boundaries and the teaching, research and service and outreach functions of the university, involving academics communicating to and working both for and with their partners in the external community (Boyer,1996). Examples of engaged research activities include applied, project based, action, participatory, collaborative and contract research as they relate to external partners and knowledge networks which often takes place off-campus. Non-engaged research refers to basic research that is mainly campus bound and laboratory based.**

**In addition to emphasis being placed on the development of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the Scholarship of Engagement is advanced as a key element to enable the NMMU to respond and contribute towards the various communities it serves. Furthermore, the university supports the view that the Scholarship of Engagement is boundary spanning scholarship and that it can manifest itself as engaged scholarship in teaching, engaged scholarship in research, or engaged scholarship in outreach and service. It is viewed as scholarship guided by an engagement ethos that results in work connected in a coherent, thematic and scholarly manner. As the needs of external communities exceed the ability of the university to respond, specific priority and focus areas based on institutional expertise have developed, and this allows the university to maintain a balance between responsiveness and institutional autonomy**

**Engagement is regarded as being scholarly when it requires the use, application and/or generation of knowledge that results from the scholarly work of an academic in collaboration with external partners and stakeholders. Scholarship remains at the core of an academic`s activities and their interaction is about extending the knowledge resources of the university. It is core to the academics disciplinary commitment and is not an `add on’ to normal academic work in that it cuts across teaching, research and service in an integrated manner. The engagement activities of staff also often occur along a continuum in integrated `bundles of activity’ forming part of a research-teaching-service and outreach nexus, resulting in teaching, research and service feeding into one another.**

**Through its Engagement Conceptual Framework, the NMMU recognises four, often integrated categories of engagement. These four categories are:**

* **Engagement through community interaction and outreach**
* **Engagement through professional and discipline based service provision**
* **Engagement through teaching and learning**
* **Engagement through research and scholarship**

**The university`s engagement recognition and reward criteria specifically reward engagement activities that have scholarly basis and place emphasis on scholarly outputs linked to the integration of all four categories of engagement. The variety of research based scholarly outputs produced through the Scholarship of Engagement include books, book chapters, monographs, articles, reviews, papers, presentations, artistic and creative endeavours ,policy analysis, technical reports, artefacts, and impact studies.**

**There is a growing acceptance by researchers of a problem- driven approach to epistemology and methodology that is characteristic of contemporary scholarship and specifically of engaged scholarship. The language of engagement suggests an element of reciprocal and collaborative knowledge production that is unique to these forms of scholarship. Engagement requires not only communication to public audiences, but also collaboration with partners in the community in the production of knowledge. Researchers are moving away from acting upon a community or community based problem to answer a research question. The researcher is now rather working side by side with various communities, practitioners and external knowledge networks to define the questions and methods, implement the research and to disseminate the findings. This requires of academics to create collaborative partnerships and organisations. If successful this may lead to regional and national solutions and innovations that are sustainable and that will build the capacity of partners to address challenges and to find solutions and to build on opportunities.**

**Gibbons postulates the notion of the `agora` which comprises a ‘problem-generating and problem–solving environment’ populated by academics and other ‘publics’ including practitioners, designed to generate ‘socially robust knowledge’, that is knowledge that will be demonstrably reliable in a broader range of contexts and not just in laboratory conditions( Gibbons 2006).This process usually involves a process of ‘interaction between experts and others, each of whom may inhabit different worlds to interact effectively in transforming a problem into a set of research activities. Gibbons (2006) describes the problem around which they engage as a ‘boundary object’ and the space where engagement happens as a ‘transactional space ’involving two-way interaction.Internally engaged scholarship brings together academic staff and students in networks and structures called research and engagement entities designed to coordinate, inform, support and link staff to engagement opportunities. These structures provide a platform to academic staff to connect with partners, to facilitate quick responses to funding opportunities and to promote collaborative and multidisciplinary partnerships across the institution as well as to opportunities for participation in multidisciplinary campus-community partnerships.**

**As a Comprehensive University, the combination of traditional university disciplinary knowledge with the technologies of the previous technikon, the NMMU is able to respond to the demand for knowledge that transcends original disciplines and is able to provide multiple and interdisciplinary knowledge and technology that is required to solve particular problems in society. Institutional engagement enabling structures in the form of research and engagement entities (Units, Centres and Institutes) promote closer working relations and partnerships between the university and the various communities it serves. The faculty based and centralised entities are not only changing interactions between the university and its external communities, but also in terms of institutional spheres of government, industry and the university with specific reference to knowledge and technology transfer and the changing nature and role of the university in innovation and development.**

**A growing sign of the trend towards the Scholarship of Engagement is the number of research based engagement projects registered in 2013 on the NMMU Engagement Management Information System, the number of entities that were established over the past three years, as well as the increase in engagement related research outputs of entities. By focussing on the alignment of their academic strengths with business and industry and critical community issues on a local , regional and in some cases a national level, some of the faculty based entities are developing specific teaching and research agenda`s resulting in increased funding support and research productivity. Externally driven state incentive schemes such as the Technology and Human Resources Industry Programme (THRIP), the programmes run by the Technology Innovation Agency and externally funded faculty-based structures such Technology Stations and Industry funded and SARCHI funded Chairs have further contributed towards increased interaction and the formation of partnerships between the university and the various communities it serves.**

**The faculties and entities most active in producing scholarly outputs through engagement and collaboration with external partners and knowledge networks include:**

* **Faculty of Education( Science Mathematics and Technology Education Unit, the Action Research unit, the HIV and Aids in Education Chair),**
* **Faculty of Engineering, the Built Environment and Information Technology(eNtsa, Volkswagen International Chair of Automotive Engineering, General Motors Chair of Mechatronics, Advanced Mechatronics Training Centre, Centre for Community Technologies)**
* **Faculty of Science( InnoVenton,Centre for African Conservation Ecology, Institute for Coastal and Marine Research, Sustainability Research Unit, Centre for Expertise in Forecasting)**
* **Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences(Unit for Economic Development and Tourism) and**
* **Centralised entities(HIV&Aids Research Unit, Earth Stewardship Research Institute, Centre for Post School Education and Training)**

**Within the context of the integrated approach to engagement it is understood that engaged and non-engaged activities overlap, influence and contribute to each other and that a balance between the extent of engaged a non- engaged research should exist. Excellence in basic disciplinary research however underpins and remains an important prerequisite for the development of the scholarship of engagement. The appropriate balance between these research activity types is set through a dynamic process of discussion and negotiations at institutional, faculty and departmental level. This dynamic interaction enables the university to adjust to changing circumstances and external pressures without losing its equilibrium. Meaningful engagement and engaged scholarship therefore requires an internal and external process of setting priorities through formal communication and the development of sustainable and long term partnerships that are of mutual benefit and reciprocal in nature.**