

Engagements with Engagement¹

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In a refreshingly candid introduction to a recent volume on university engagement and 'relevance', Alan Scott and Alan Harding (2007: 2) comment that in the new competitive higher education climate, two themes have become an insistent refrain in the rhetoric of institutional self-promotion – 'relevance and 'scale':

'Whether they consider themselves "world class" and in possession of an "international reputation" ... or as essentially "national" or "civic" institutions with fewer international credentials ... most claim to produce eminently useful knowledge that can be utilised by a huge range of "communities" but is especially valuable to those living, metaphorically speaking, on the university's doorstep.'

So it is in South Africa too: our universities would have us believe that they have the answers to the pressing problems of the communities they serve. In this way, they seek to legitimate themselves to an ever wider set of ever more diverse, and unfortunately, sceptical constituencies. 'Communities' are in practice more or less anything that is in the university's external environment, and 'relevance' can be anything from engaging in policy on national priorities, regional engagements with development projects, to local engagement with poor communities, new links with firms, and disseminating results of research. For Martin Hall, this messiness and lack of definition stands in need of some theoretical corrective, which he then sets out to provide. Less ambitiously, I shall argue that 'community engagement' is an irreducibly contextual activity, depending variously on the mission and strengths of the university, the state of regional development of the area in which it is sited, and the ingenuity of the academics concerned, not to mention the diversity of views and interests of the local 'communities'. Above all, I hope to show that highly contextual spaces like 'community engagement' are weakly bounded sites of practice and highly susceptible to rhetorical fashion. By their nature, they will be hard to pin down within a single frame without distorting their historically adaptive character. Whether this conclusion is a debilitating one for national regulating bodies like the NRF and the HEQC, or on the contrary, presents them with an exciting window of opportunity, is a question I will return to in my concluding comments.

There is much in Martin Hall's elegant survey to agree with. I agree that the idea of 'engagement' should be re-visited; I agree that 'engagement' should be integrated with teaching and research and not seen as a separate category; and I also agree that there is nothing in the ideal of engagement inherently contrary to disciplinary business as usual. In passing I should note that he errs in supposing that there is anything in the social realism I espouse that is incompatible with community engagement. Hall notes that my ideas on knowledge and its publics came out of the 'policy cauldron' that generated the White Paper of 1997, which is partly so, but only partly. I find it instructive to go a little further back in time in order better to make sense of where we are now with this complex, under-specified notion of university 'community engagement'. I propose to go back to the mid 1980s and examine a different context of engagement as a starting point, because, as we will see, engagement meant something quite different in the 1980s when I first became engaged; it changed again in the 1990s; and again in the 2000s. In fact, as I will show, there is more than one legitimate kind of engagement, and these kinds change as the context changes. The indissolubly contextual nature of engagement also makes it impossible to nail down prescriptively once and for all what worthwhile engagement can be for all kinds of

higher education institution; it is a dimension of fitness *for* purpose, not *of* purpose, it will depend on the kind of academic institution and its academic mission.

In what follows, I will briefly sketch what I see as the genealogy of ‘community engagement’ in the South African academy. It does not claim to be a history, only a schematic trajectory, and it will be partial. Nevertheless, hopefully it can indicate in what ways ‘engagement’ as a value has been taken up by the academy, and perhaps offer some pointers as to where it might go in future.

A partisan history of the idea of engagement in the SA academy, mid 1980s to the late 2000s

Phase 1: Engaged with the struggle

In the mid 1980s I found myself at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), which was a politically turbulent place to be, to put it mildly. The debate around what we as academics should be doing was fierce, and the debate was conducted at the institutional level (how should the university be more responsive to ‘the community’?) and at the individual level (how to be committed and helpful without becoming unwittingly intrusive). As to the former, a group of ‘concerned’ academics at Wits, of which I was one, conducted a survey of what Wits should be doing (called the Perspectives on Wits, or POW study, 1986), which led in turn to a series of Senate Special Lectures. Events overtook us, and when the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC)² approached Wits to hold its inaugural Conference there, it seemed natural to lend a hand. This led by several steps to the establishment of an Education Policy Unit (EPU) at Wits as a joint university / community venture, to pursue education policy alternatives for a new state after apartheid. I became its first director. In short order, EPUs were established at the then University of Natal and the University of the Western Cape³ as well.

No-one knew which way things should go: the university pulled towards criteria like publishing and peer review (although in truth not too hard); the NECC sought, naturally enough in the circumstances, ammunition for the education struggle: the former pulled to the long term, the latter to the short term. We tried to work around this, but all too frequently felt ‘on the edge’, as the title of one of our papers at the time had it (Muller, 1991).

We weren’t the only ones feeling the tension. In 1988 a workshop was held at Wits University examining how other cognate bodies dealt with the tensions. Nearly 30 engaged organisations attended (Hofmeyr & Muller, 1988)⁴, and we discovered a relatively large number of others in a similar boat.

2 To newcomers to the recent history of South African higher education this capsule summary may be too brief to be helpful. I refer the interested reader to Muller (1987).

3 Incidentally, the general secretary of the NECC, Ihron Rensburg is today rector of the University of Johannesburg; the second director of the EPU at the University of Western Cape, Saleem Badat, is today rector of Rhodes University; the second director of the EPU at Natal University, Blade Nzimande, is today Secretary General of the South African Communist Party and Minister of Higher Education and Training: which helps to underline the blurred line between higher education and the political domain.

4 These ranged from ones that have endured to today, like the Sociology of Work Programme started by Eddie Webster, and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, both at Wits; the Urban Foundation and the South African Institute of Race Relations; bodies prominent at the time but no longer active, like the Detainees Parents’ Support Committee and the International Labour Research and Information Group.

The upside was that we were all clear what the socio-political project was: the trick was how to contribute optimally in a context that was savagely opposed to it. It was clear to me that what the NECC needed and would need was ‘powerful knowledge’ – conceptually and empirically robust knowledge. But there were several impediments to its satisfactory production:

- Short-termism and instrumentalism: there was a short-term, insistent and on-going need for ammunition for the day to day negotiations with the state, which, together with its implied instrumentalism, militated against longer term projects where the use was not immediately apparent or demonstrable;
- There was a severe shortage of people qualified to produce powerful educational knowledge. The universities had turned out activists skilled in critique, but not in advanced statistics or economics of education. This shortcoming, together with short-termism and instrumentalism, had the consequence that when the NECC and the ANC came to power, they were simply not supported by an existing indigenous body of powerful knowledge that made it possible to govern from a strong informed knowledge base;
- Engaged organisations in their nature tended to produce specialised knowledge which, because it required a relatively long apprenticeship to master, meant that very few community interlocutors had what Collins and Evans (2007) call ‘interactional expertise’, that is, enough background knowledge to converse with complete confidence about its implications. This is the heart of what Hall refers to as the ‘boundary problem’, a much discussed problem in the social studies of science. Hall, following Gibbons, recommends as a solution the establishment of ‘agora’ - public spaces where matters of common concern could be discussed by diverse constituencies. But Gibbons’ agora are mainly spaces for the commerce of expert peers (see below), and while we engaged academics and the educational communities we worked with were in a sense peers ‘in the struggle’, we weren’t all peers when it came to the intricacies of specialised knowledge. The upshot was that we found it extremely difficult to construct transaction zones to produce mutual intelligibility, and in the tug between specialised knowledge and politics, it was politics which invariably won. It must be said though that common ground could be and was found in certain special cases: the case of the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI, 2003) being one. But this was not an everyday occurrence, nor one easily achieved.
- Just because engagement was for impeccably good reasons doesn’t mean it can’t produce misleading knowledge, or that it is somehow spared the essential rigors of powerful knowledge validation because it is ‘relevant’ and its heart is in the right place. The danger here is that commitment can bleed into accedance to political imperatives – another dimension of the triumph of the short term in periods of intense social and political turmoil.

These problems notwithstanding, it is worth concluding this section by underlining the positive features of this mode of engagement, difficult as it was to maintain. At its best it attempted to connect an intellectual project to a socio-political project, and it attempted to bridge these by helping to bring powerful knowledge to bear on political policy and strategy. As we will see, not all models of engagement identify a clear socio-political project, and the intellectual project driving them is also frequently not clear. In hindsight,

this phase represented a heroic, if sometimes quixotic, effort under particularly difficult circumstances, which started off on the right foot, even if it did not follow through as strongly as it started. Sad to say, this was all too often because the high level expertise was simply not there amongst those who were most keen to serve.

Phase 2: In service to the community

‘Community engagement’ as a constitutive idea, in the form enthusiastically promoted by the American foundations Kellogg and Ford in particular (see for example The Kellogg Commission, 1999), has an elective affinity with the nineteenth century land-grant ideal of ‘service to the community’ (Lohmann, 2004), but also with American volunteerism, as exemplified by the Peace Corps. Much of the discourse of ‘service learning’ was thus brought to South Africa by well-meaning grant making officers of these American foundations, though without much conspicuous success, at least by their own assessment. As Dick Fehnel, Ford Foundation’s point man in South Africa at the time commented:

One strand of grant money sought to bring higher education and the labour market closer together by introducing practices initiated by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) elsewhere in the world and to address the education and training needs of South Africa’s working adults. Working with the Joint Education Trust (JET), Ford supported a variety of CAEL-type activities (including Community Higher Education Service Partnerships, CHESP, JM) but to date, none has really caught on ...’(Fehnel, 2007: 160).

The reasons for this are not really hard to find. Since at least the Peace Corps, it has been clear that the real beneficiaries of this service ideal all too often end up being the benefit-bringers. As the Mouton and Wildschut (2007) evaluation of CHESP says, in South Africa’s ‘service decade’, roughly up to the mid 2000s, it became clear that it was the students and their tutors who were getting most out of the CHESP initiative. What ‘the community’ was getting was far less clear. In a couple of cases, the service – learning was discontinued for this very reason, and Hall’s own university at the time, the University of Cape Town, dropped out of the project. A subsidiary reason for the less than optimal outcome was possibly also that the benefit-bringers, at least in the case of the universities, were mostly students with a less than firm grip on the knowledge they sought to ‘serve’ the community with: one might say that the ‘dosage’ of service provided by students could not match that which could be provided by dedicated professionals.

I do not minimise the benefits to students, and to staff: these benefits are well known in good programmes of most of the professions, like law, medicine, teacher education and social work. But it will always be harder to envisage how students in the more academic courses of study like history and chemistry might serve the same function, except in a teaching capacity, as Mouton and Wildschut point out in their evaluation. The point here is that it is not easy to imagine a general requirement for ‘service’ to be of the same applicability across the range of the disciplines.

The CHESP students thus all too often ended up having a *weak benefit* to the community because the ‘knowledge dosage’ they could deliver was weak. This does not mean that the knowledge areas weren’t strong, especially in the medical and ecology fields, but that

- the purveyors, as 2nd and 3rd year students, were not in control of their knowledge base; and
- they had a weak grip on who the community was they were supposed to be serving.

In other words, 'service learning' as a form of community engagement always has to struggle with the fact that students are neophytes, not adepts, and with the fact that all too often exactly who the community recipients are or should be is hazy to them.

Phase 3: Engaged with mode 2 society

The discourse was, by the middle years of the first decade of the new millennium, already shifting. 'Service learning' as a left-leaning ideal of service was slowly but surely being nudged aside by the glitzier language of 'new knowledge production' emanating from the latest intellectual fashion, 'globalisation' and its discursive twin, the 'knowledge society'. This is strikingly illustrated for me by the title and substance of the keynote given by Michael Gibbons at the CHE/JET conference held to showcase the CHESP work in 2006. Gibbons was then head of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and at the time vigorously advocating the virtues of 'mode 2' as the panacea for Africa's universities (Gibbons, 1998).

Gibbons' keynote, first written as an ACU document in 2001, carried the title 'Engagement as a core value in mode 2 society'. It is immediately apparent that both 'engagement' and 'community' have undergone a radical transformation. In a globalisation register such as this, not only the local but also the national disappears. All Gibbons' examples of 'engaged communities' are transnational single-issue networks, networks moreover populated mainly by techno scientists – deep vein thrombosis (DVT) medical researchers; muscular dystrophy medical geneticists; the transdisciplinary web of scientists that is the Human Genome Mapping Project (HGMP); and the sub-tribes of physicists working on cutting edge nuclear physics. It is true that DVT and muscular dystrophy patients participated in the early stages of the respective investigations, but one gathers from the descriptions given that big science soon took over. Any sense here of 'community' as local, deserving, or socially excluded, is gone. We can admit that the two medical examples incorporate the interests of sufferers and thus evince a commendable contextual awareness, but as Gibbons and his co-authors will now concede, a lot of good research was ever thus (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2003).

What the experiential service learning advocates at the conference made of this is hard to fathom. Probably, like respondent George Subotsky (2006), they were torn between admiration for the global theory pyrotechnics and feelings of dismay at the loss of a sense of 'community'. Some of them certainly lost no time in following this trend, not because of any intellectual vacillation amongst its proponents, although Mouton and Wildschut do comment in their evaluation that the research work coming from these quarters was not strong⁵, but rather because the extremely contextual nature of 'engagement' will always render it peculiarly vulnerable to just such passing fashions. For the most adroit, the new language offered conceptual resources to add to the usual ones of Vygotskian, social

⁵ 'The scholarship tends to be a-theoretical, very descriptive and sometimes bordering on the anecdotal and impressionistic'. They go on to cite the view of three external commentators to the effect that the work is largely 'practice – driven' and often 'weak and thin' (Mouton & Wildschut, 2007: 29).

practice, activity and the like (see for example, McMillan, 2009). But such free borrowing raises the issue of appropriacy. Take for example the term ‘trading zone’, translated by historian of microphysics Peter Galison from anthropology to account for the way that theorists, experimentalists and instrument makers evolved a form of common pidgin or creole in which to communicate in the development of radar and particle detectors (Galison, 1997). The co-development of nanotechnology would be another example. In extending this usage, Gibbons wished to apply it more broadly to ‘transaction spaces’ ‘across both disciplinary and institutional boundaries’ (Gibbons, 2006). Key to the concept, however, is that ‘all partners bring something that can be exchanged or negotiated and, second, that they also have the resources (scientific as well as material) to be able to take something from other participants’ (ibid). Is this condition satisfied in the service learning transaction? It is hard to be sure, since that space is quite some distance from the highly specialised spaces of the technoscientists. I will return to this in the final phase.

In a paradox worth pondering, Gibbons was first imported into South African policy-speak for reasons quite different to those of the service learners and engagement advocates. It is instructive briefly to examine this different line of descent from phase 1, one that became influential in policy circles, and that was taken up, albeit far more cautiously, in the White Paper in 1997.

The policy activists of the 1980s that Nico Cloete and I had called ‘the white hands’ after Polish anarchist Jan Makhaisky, (Muller & Cloete, 1987), were particularly hard hit in the 1990s, in ways still not fully assimilated, by the loss of a coordinating and unifying social project to which to align their intellectual projects. In the policy vacuum that followed the NEPI exercise, a Task Team convened under the auspices of the Centre for Education Policy Development, made up from the rump of The Policy Forum of the University Democratic Union of South Africa (UDUSA), a prime mover in NEPI, drafted a proposal for a national commission into higher education. This was eventually accepted by the new administration, and the National Commission of Higher Education (NCHE) was launched in 1995. It was natural that a solid rump of the Policy Forum members should become involved in the Commission. The Ford Foundation, which had funded the Policy Forum and in the person of Dick Fehnel sat on the Task Team, lent some support to the NCHE along with the Kellogg and Mellon Foundations.

The Commission thus brought into alignment one line of post 1980s policy activism: there were many others, like the policy activists who went into government, private consultancy or returned to academia. This NCHE group was still troubled by the dream of knowledge democratisation from the 1980s. This troubling thought was developed in two ways in the NCHE. The first established the discourse of ‘engagement’ in the NCHE, which had ramifications for the ‘service learning’ community and for the HEQC audit criterion 18 on the one hand, and for the Ford – funded CHESP Initiative discussed above on the other. The second, more rooted in European rather than American notions of engagement and democracy, and therefore more congenial to the neo-Marxist roots of the UDUSA core, latched onto the Gibbons mode 2 account, believing it had found the next step towards advancing the project of democratising knowledge.⁶

⁶ I must admit I played a certain part in introducing the notion to the Commission (Muller, 1995), which in retrospect I regret and have tried to correct (Muller, 2000). Alas, the ground proved too receptive to its redemptive promise, though I do believe the following description, found on a Canadian website, rather overstates the case: ‘His (Michael Gibbons’) work has been vigorously taken up by the South African authorities who have adopted the notion of Mode 2 research as a guiding

These two lines of descent became amalgamated in the NCHE deliberations and in their subsequent hybrid notion of engagement. The notion of engagement in both the lines, the US-derived 'service' line and the European 'mode 2' line, was rather depoliticised, leaving those more politically inclined feeling either dissatisfied - the hard core development activists who sought clients in government - or deeply suspicious of the motives of the UDUSA core in the NCHE, at least partly because of their Ford links (Sehoolo, 2002). For this latter view, 'empowerment' as a political project had been dumped for a deracinated 'engagement' and we were back where we started with the apartheid ivory towers of 1980s.

In the end, the mode 2 progenitors did too little too late to distance themselves from epistemological populism and from being used by marginal academic constituencies in their battles for status and standing⁷. Small wonder that the idea caught on, as Nowotny and her co-authors say, everywhere but amongst the mainstream scientific community it was directed at. Nevertheless, its over-statements and under-substantiations notwithstanding, what the mode 2 account did have going for it was a focus on the knowledge project, and an incipient if not explicit social or explanatory theory. This was not apparent in the high flown rhetoric of its progenitors but rather in other versions of the 'knowledge' focus that brought it back to the political and economic realms, and began to suggest a way of re-connecting the knowledge project with the social project.

Phase 4: Engagement with development

'Development' is a tricky concept, fraught with debate and disagreement. For some it means narrowly 'economic development', for others, the term has a wider national and political provenance. Both of these are important and will be examined below, but before that, I wish to deal with a longstanding prejudice regarding academia, namely that academics do something called academic work which has, by its very nature, nothing to do with how society develops or wishes to develop. This pervasive misconception identifies science, or expert knowledge, with what academics alone do. Indeed, Martin Hall in his paper attributes this view to me, and sets out to debunk it, falling in the process into the opposite error – namely, that because academics are not necessarily the only purveyors of expert knowledge, there is, ipso facto, no real difference between expert knowledge and everyday commonsense ('the ineluctable connection between localised informal and tacit ways of knowing, and generalised, structured and codified knowledge structures'). To go this way is to veer back towards the populism Nowotny and her co-authors are now distancing themselves from, and to deflect attention from the prior misconception, where a far more interesting development merits out attention.

In his enlightening recent book, Steven Shapin (2008) shows how the vocation of doing science in the USA has shifted. Universities are no longer necessarily the preferred place to live the Scientific Good Life, and scientists increasingly know, even if their Humanities colleagues do not, that opportunities to do the really innovative cutting edge research are

concept during the current, and ongoing, transformation of the South African higher education system'. (www.ouofaweb.ualberta.ca/kusp/pdfs. Retrieved 23 June 2009).

⁷ Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons (2003: 180) ruefully note: 'If nurse researchers pounced on "Mode 2" to reduce their subordination to medical research, or if global accountancy companies placed "Mode 2" at the heart of newly-established "Centres of Business Knowledge" - both of which are actual examples - who were we, the authors, to complain? We had fallen into our own postmodern trap'.

increasingly to be found in industrial labs, especially those connected to biotech, hi-tech and technoscientific endeavours, where researchers find the intellectual space and freedom to do the work that is increasingly being crowded out by the chores of writing endless grant proposals, and looking after increasing cohorts of graduate students. Those that stay in academia also increasingly work with their colleagues in the NGO and commercial world. They do this, not because of some kind of 'boundary weakening', but because it is in these arenas that the true vocation of knowledge work can be better pursued. In the best, though of course not all, of these environments, says Shapin, immediate utility is not the first requirement, as Humanities apprehensions might expect. Scientific entrepreneurship like all good science is more often than not about having fun, and if money becomes part of the equation, then it should be seen as that which makes affordable the hedonism, rather than the asceticism, that is nowadays associated with scientific innovation.

Put like this, and with all the qualifications admitted about South Africa's developmental status, it should be clear that what is happening here is not that the 'sacred' has become 'profane', or has even become hybridised; rather, the 'sacred' has spread from its privileged site in the university in modernity, and has established itself also in previously unlikely places. Or to put that another way, research active universities, by this account, need no urging to venture out of the private groves of academe into the public domain. Nor, for that matter, do research active academics need prompting to engage with the public domain. In a large statistical study of French academics, Pablo Jensen and his collaborators (2008) show that it is the most prolific researchers who engage most actively with the public domain: engagement and academic success go together. It seems the 'ivory tower' has these days little more substance than the unicorn.

But has the nature of the 'sacred' not been affected in this shift? Is the vocation of science not changing with its expanding location? About this there is still much debate. Not everyone is as upbeat as Shapin is about the prospects for science traditionally conceived. In a recent UNESCO publication edited by Meek, Teichler and Kearney (2009: 20), Marie-Louise Kearney worries about a potential exclusive 'focus on application-driven project funding or on problem-oriented research cooperation to the exclusion of basic, "blue skies" research' and goes on to warn that 'The familiar catch words of relevance and utility need to be treated with caution. Relevance is vital, but truly useful knowledge can be discovered in various ways'. In other words, will 'relevance' crowd out basic research? Close watchers of contemporary knowledge production like Gibbons and Shapin are not nearly as concerned as others are who worry from afar. Nevertheless, the debate tends to get stuck in the either-or dichotomy of basic or applied. An interesting alternative is provided by the longitudinal empirical and analytical work of David Cooper (2009), which draws together a number of strands that herald the emergence of the 'development' discourse of engagement.

Cooper first introduces the idea that if we think in very long wave cycles, we can discern, also in South Africa, that the world entered a 'third capitalist industrial revolution' in the 1970s, led by ICT, biotechnology, fibre optic technology, material science, nanotechnology and the like. Symbiotically coupled to this he notes, along with Etzkowitz and Leydsdorff, the emergence in the 1980s of what they call a 'third university mission' (the first two being teaching and research), namely, a mission to contribute to the socio-economic development of society. What this has meant in practical terms is a huge growth in

industry and government funding for university based research. What kind of research Cooper set out to discover.

He chose eleven university based research groups, collecting data from them three times in a seven year period. Although he chose all but one of the groups on the basis of their applied orientation, he was surprised to find that not only were they doing applied research, but that a good proportion of their work could far better be regarded as ‘use-inspired basic research’, after Donald Stokes. Moreover, he also came to see that what industry and government bodies sought from university based research centres was either use-inspired basic, or even just basic, research; from universities of technology, orthodox applied research. Cooper concludes that the emerging national system of innovation requires, and will increasingly demand from research-based universities, the fundamental good ideas which in-house R & D operations cannot supply. This applies equally to government and industry, and probably to community groups too.

Cooper’s account helps explain why ‘development’, both national and regional, has increasingly entered the vocabulary of politicians and higher education policy makers. A recent World Bank report (Yusuf et al, 2008) makes the case for African higher education to help ‘accelerate’ growth, and a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is pursuing university – firm linkages in sub-Saharan Africa (*HSRC Review*, 2009). We should not imagine that this form of engagement with the world outside the university will always be smooth, or produce virtuous effects. In addition to the ever-present fears about the smothering effects on fundamental research, the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA), investigating higher education – development linkages in eight African countries, is finding a worrying trend. In universities where what they call the ‘academic core’ is relative small, and with consequently only a small number of research active staff, donor project funding tends to draw the African scholars out of the university instead of providing means for strengthening the academic core inside the institution. The result seems to be a persistent de-institutionalisation in the very places where the institution is in need of shoring up. This should act as a general warning: external networks are good, but only if they do not prosper at the expense of the nurturing institution.

Cooper worries that while university links to government and industry (the so-called ‘triple helix’) are intensifying, the civic domain of civil society appears to be the poor cousin, a node that has not received the attention it perhaps deserves since the struggle engagements of phase one. He notes too, as does Hall, that ‘engagement’ with ‘communities’ is beginning to receive attention worldwide, on the back of the new development discourse, and voices the hope that ‘regional development’ will provide the space for a broader set of constituencies to be included in the new networks.

The development discourse and the diverse and appropriate roles universities might play in it has yet to be fully articulated. Nevertheless we can see in it the promise of the elaboration of a social project (‘development’) being linked to an intellectual project (academic research). Time will tell whether the presently hard-nosed tenor of development can fruitfully accommodate the social conscience and the greater concern for the ‘public good’ that the advocates of community engagement are urging.

Some concluding comments

I think we can accept that ‘engagement’ with the world outside academe is no longer something that requires extended debate. In different forms at different times, it is something that has always happened. With the advent of the ‘second academic revolution’, especially in institutions that are strong in the disciplines that underpin what Cooper calls the new ‘regime of technology’, engagement is a *fait accompli* and virtually normalised. Avoiding perverse effects should be the concern. Yet the idea of ‘engagement’ remains under-specified, and by default an economic rationale (‘engagement for innovation’) dominates. I agree with Hall that the notion stands in need of conceptual elaboration as well as of empirical investigation that sets out to establish when, and in what terms, we can establish successful instances of it over and above the obvious ones of technological breakthrough and the like. Above all, I think it unhelpful to chastise academics with the moral imperative to ‘engage’. Where it is not happening, there is probably a good reason for it – ranging from the appropriacy of the discipline in question, to whether or not the academic expertise exists to ‘engage’ meaningfully. I agree too with the HSRC conclusion that strategies of engagement for a differentiated system should be developed. A typology of forms of engagement appropriate for different types of institution would be illuminating.

The idea of ‘community’ likewise remains unspecific and unhelpful. I agree with Cooper that elaborations around the idea of ‘regional development’ may well provide the conceptual and financial space for a broader notion of engagement with communities beyond the existing ‘triple helix’. But which? Cooper suggests ‘civil society’, Hall suggests the ‘third sector’, and a conference held in Newcastle, UK in June 2009 was titled ‘university engagement with socially excluded communities’. There are problems of under-specification with all of them.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the review above suggests the following:

- Universities trade in powerful knowledge. Successful engagements are likely to be those which are based on knowledge that can make a difference to technological development, to regional or national policy development, and to solving problems of local communities.
- Helpful powerful knowledge is not necessarily applied knowledge; use-inspired basic knowledge as well as fundamental knowledge is also what the outside publics, and development priorities, require from the specialised institution that is the university.
- The most active researchers are likely to be the ones that are engaged in the public domain in one or other way. If academics are not engaged it may well be that they are not research active either. In which case, university transformation should start here, not with intensified calls for engagement.
- Engagement is ineluctably contextual, and historically specific: appropriate engagement cannot be prescribed in a template. This does not absolve us from the requirement to find ways of identifying it, providing funding for more rather than less promising efforts, and finding robust ways to measure it. But it does mean that theory will only help us so far, and that though an inductive process of identifying successful engagement practice will be time consuming, it is probably

the only sensible way to begin constructing a typology of engagement best practices that might suit the diversity of institutional and development contexts to be found in contemporary South Africa.

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