

Aligning the Purpose, Function & Mission of a Historically Disadvantaged Public South African University: The Case of the University of Venda

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are under pressure to internationalize their campuses through increasing study abroad offerings and international student recruitment. The internationalization of higher education (HE) however, has mostly been theorized from a Euro-American perspective, often not taking into account actors in periphery contexts. This paper highlights the role of an emergent voice within the field that relies on its third mission to balance transnational pressures to internationalize and local demands for equity. Drawing on insights from a mixed-methodology case study at a historically disadvantaged public South African university, it is argued this institution's reliance on non-academic stakeholders within their internationalization decision-making processes, holds together these imperatives.

Keywords: international higher education, South African internationalization, third mission

INTRODUCTION

De Wit, Hunter, and Egron-Polak (2015) define internationalization as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (p. 29). Their inclusion of internationalization’s importance in making a meaningful contribution to society opens a conversation around the changing purpose of HE. Historically, the central functions of HEIs have been teaching and learning (first mission) and research (second mission). Recently, however, many HEIs have begun to rely on their third mission (TM) to engage with local communities (Bhagwan, 2020; Teixeira & Klemenčič, 2021). Bhagwan, Teixeira, and Klemenčič speak to divergent understandings of community and civic engagement, noting the contribution of HE to society extends beyond labor market returns. In doing so, they speak to the TM of HEIs as an extension of democratic citizenship and the co-production of knowledge.

De Wit et al.’s (2015) definition also highlights common tensions within the wider field of education between economic and socio-cultural approaches to internationalization. South African universities exemplify this multiplicity of coexisting objectives, including the need to produce high-caliber research, prepare the next generation labor force, and address societal inequities. This research focuses on the understudied experiences of internationalization administrators, faculty and staff and how they may be in tension with national initiatives to democratize education access. Drawing on a previous study (Lee et al., 2020), I use global rankings as a proxy for institutional status (Stensaker et al., 2019) to provide an analysis of how hierarchical positions within the field of HE influence the strategic choices of a South African university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Klemenčič (2017) argues that “due to geographical location and perceived deficiencies, it is important for universities in the periphery to build the

institutional capacity to attract talented international students, academic staff, researchers and other higher education professionals” (p. 105). Her analysis allows us to understand how universities considered to be on the margins approach internationalization. Maringe (2010) characterizes globalization as a multidimensional concept whereby sociocultural, technological, political, and ideological aspects become presumably more homogeneous. While several scholars (Anderson-Levitt, 2007; Garnett Russell, 2016, 2018) contend that globalization is localized once on-the-ground, globalization has given rise to new forms of interconnectedness. This increase in connectivity led to the emergence of the knowledge economy, and a growing reliance on digital technologies (Altbach and Knight, 2007).

Little research however, has aimed to understand internationalization efforts in the context of the historical particularities of the periphery condition. With some exceptions (Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2019; Kwasi-Agyeman, 2020; Majee & Ress, 2020), scholars have rarely examined the challenges that university leaders face as policymakers, given demands for educational equity vis-a-vis pressures to internationalize. The South African case study featured in this paper highlights the overlap between equity-oriented processes in international higher education (IHE) and the embodiment of their TM.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

My case emerged from an interest in newer actors in the field of IHE. South Africa is increasingly regarded as a leader in Africa, and has a relatively well-established (albeit highly unequal) HE system. My focus on the University of Venda (Univen) turns our focus to a rural, historically disadvantaged university that localizes internationalization efforts to better serve their students and surrounding communities. Located near the Zimbabwe border and serving a majority of students who are of limited financial means, Univen exists in a policy ecosystem where relationships between students, the institution and the community are negotiated.

The rationales institutions use to engage in IHE are frequently communicated to participants via strategic plans and institutional websites. To understand how Univen frames international education my research answers the following: What orientations (rationales) are deployed when Univen conveys its internationalization initiatives? To what extent have these orientations (rationales)

changed due to COVID-19? How closely are these aligned to the institution's third mission?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study looked at information in Univen's mission, vision, goals and outcomes statements, strategic plans, and international education and world languages websites. Data was analyzed through the lens of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1999). A survey was distributed to university leaders to ascertain their understanding of institutional policy. Lastly, semi-structured interviews provided insights into how leaders understand the purpose of public education.

The coding process for my content and document analysis consisted of an initial reading of all content to gain an understanding of the information and presentation format. The content was then read a second time and open-coded with the unit of analysis at the sentence level and separated from the broader sample. This sample was read a third time for a second round of coding using words or phrases as the unit of analysis. Content was lastly coded using an inductive method. The findings presented below represent only a portion of my research to date.

Participants

I created an online survey utilizing Qualtrics. Composed of likert-scale, open and closed-ended questions, it focused on five sections: Governance, internationalization efforts, community/societal engagement, teaching and learning, and collaboration and research. Through snowball sampling, it was distributed to Univen administrators, faculty, and staff. Currently, my sample consists of 5 participants, of which 80% (4) are male, 20% (1) are female. 40% (2) are full-time faculty, 40% (2) administrators and 20% (1) staff members. 40% (2) have worked in the field of internationalization for 20+ years and the remaining 60% percent (3) have been working in the field 0-3, 5-10 and 10-20 years respectively (see Table 1). Given the limited number of responses, I expect to find greater variability in my participants as data collection continues. Listed below are the interviewees who support Univen's 16,000+ students.

Table 1*Univen Interviewees' Biographical Information*

Gender	Position	Years in the Field
Female	Administrator	20+
Male	Administrator	10-20
Male	Faculty	20+
Female	Faculty	0-3
Female	Faculty	5-10
Male	Staff	20+

RESULTS

The following themes emerged from my document analysis:

- **Organization Mission & Role:** Univen endeavors to provide its students with a high-level of professional and occupational skills, both of which they deem as required for economic growth. Community engagement and references to local relevance and global competitiveness exist side-by-side in Univen's strategic plans (2012-2016; 2016-2020)
- **Social & Cultural Third Mission:** Univen's TM was enacted mostly through community engagement, which it viewed as necessary for increased democratic participation. Reciprocal interaction, collaboration and partnerships between the university and rural communities, were emphasized.

I open-coded my interviews and two themes emerged: The pandemic as a portal and the centrality of Univen's rural location. As I conduct more interviews, I anticipate additional themes surrounding internationalization stakeholders and organizational values to emerge.

- **The Pandemic as a Portal:** Arundhati Roy (2020) called on us to view the pandemic as a portal. Representatives from Univen encouraged their students to stay connected through meetings and webinars. They emphasized that students would now be able to engage regardless of location.
- **The Centrality of Univen's Rural Location:** The challenges relating to the pandemic were exacerbated by the limited resources of students and the wider institution. Nonetheless, Univen also capitalizes on its location,

serving as a biosphere reserve, and meeting place for university and Indigenous knowledge creation.

DISCUSSION

The field of IHE serves many purposes in South Africa, including providing students with the requisite skills for development, producing new knowledge, and addressing societal challenges. These desires speak to how an African university repositions itself vis-à-vis diverse stakeholders. The University of Venda mentions student innovation and entrepreneurship as potential solutions to increasing student success and the long-term financial sustainability of their institution. This is in alignment with Bekele and Ofoyuru (2021), who assert that some African universities may prioritize economic interests amidst dwindling funding and global competition. Thus, given the limited mobility of students and fiscal constraints of working in low-resource contexts, the financial and cultural imperatives driving internationalization must be balanced.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In contexts including South Africa, where education is viewed as a pathway towards higher socioeconomic status, and an avenue for remedying historical inequalities, university leaders will have to respond to the growing mandates placed on their institutions. Doing so requires an eye to both the financial sustainability of one's institution, as well as improved academic outcomes, leading to a reconceptualization of an institution's third mission. Going forward, researchers may want to do more robust research surrounding international partnerships between higher education institutions located in the periphery and the outcomes for students and community members alike of these partnerships.

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