# Strengthening community engagement through students at Indian Universities post Covid-19: lessons learned from pedagogies adopted during Covid-19

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## ABSTRACT

The research article aims to strengthen community engagement to bridge the gap between universities and rural areas that are technologically nascent. Learning from practices adopted globally this research paper identifies the role of Indian university students during the Covid-19 pandemic. 311 Indian university students have been interviewed through a questionnaire. The purpose of the paper is to institutionalise community university engagement among Indian universities post covid era. The paper's findings reveal that based on specific literature-supported variables, community engagement pre and during covid was weak in India. The institutionalisation of community engagement is required among Indian universities.

Keywords- Community engagement, Higher Education, Institutionalisation, Universities, Covid-1

## I. Introduction

Universities have always been a space for knowledge generation and knowledge dissemination. Knowledge generation is not only a result of in-house university teaching and research but also when universities learn from the local communities and then present it in a more academically acceptable way. The method of generating knowledge through local communities has been shifted from "university-as-problem-solver model to collaborative knowledge generation and joint problem solving" (Ohmer et al., 2022, pp:82) which Saltmarsh (2016) calls 'democratic engagement'. To have a holistic knowledge generation, the universities are required to have a broad campus-community partnership (Sgoutas-Emch and Guerreri, 2020).

During the pandemic-19, human civilization was moving towards the 'new normal'. This 'new normal' was certainly isolating families. This resulted in more use of technology as a common mode of communication. The engagement between communities and universities was missing throughout. This engagement, commonly termed community-university engagement is very essential for knowledge generation (UNESCO, 2020). This is a way through which age-old practices of communities can be academically tested, documented, and formally transferred through generations. When the education sector globally adopted digital modalities for discussions, engagement with local communities, especially the communities that are backward, was rather difficult. Hence, this article discusses the importance of community engagement during the post-pandemic, and the amendments required in community engagement practises of universities in the post-covid era.

## **II. Literature Review**

## A. Community engagement in universities

According to Dostilio (2017a, p. 9), community engagement must be "highly reflective, hybridized, purpose-driven, and ethically principled". The term engagement denotes that universities serve as a learner, supporters, and partners and not leaders (Dostilio, 2017b). The motive shall always be mutual transformation through new knowledge generated and not just mutual benefit (Jameson et al., 2011; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Universities are vested with social responsibilities. Through community engagement, universities are capable of empowering marginalised communities (Ohmer et al., 2022).

During the pandemic, Universities have been instrumental in helping the local communities in adopting and adjusting to the 'new normal'. Researching covid-19, raising awareness about the virus, providing online learning opportunities, and student volunteering have been practised by universities globally (UNESCO, 2020).

## **B.** Students during the Pandemic

The students have been directly affected by the pandemic. They have been active agents while universities were combating the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). Voluntary social engagement initiatives have been taken up by university students globally for vulnerable groups in the local communities. University administrators have supported these engagements. Some universities have provided fast-track graduation to final-year medical students to support the health system (Universities UK, 2020). Universities UK, (2020) reported some common student-led delivery services and childcare offered to elders and health workers by university students (UNESCO, 2020). Universities have been active in promoting research towards advancement in vaccination, safeguarding vulnerable people, and labour market changes (University of Oxford, 2020). They have been active throughout in disseminating this knowledge to local communities and Government (UNESCO, 2020).

Universities have been exploring new tools for student engagement (kandri, 2020). Various online courses have been developed and provided free of charge (Yale University, 2020; Max Planck Institute of Colloids and Interfaces, 2020). This digital expansion has widened access to online learning. Although, this access has been difficult in areas with poor internet connectivity. Many universities in the global north have been able to engage directly with the communities during Covid-19. The University of Glasglow, for example, has developed courses on adult education that are offered online (UNESCO, 2020). Some universities have been providing virtual tours to adult learners (Murchison, 2020). The American University in Cairo (AUC) has developed and distributed the "Keep Calm and Stay Strong' Toolkit for safeguarding mental health during the covid-19. It covered topics like stress prevention, meditation, quarantine, and social distancing (American University in Cairo, 2020). The University of Swansea, UK has partnered with the Wuhan Union Hospital, China for facilitating learning between the local clinicians in Swansea and the medical professionals of Wuhan (Swansea University, 2020).

Students at the Washington University School of Medicine volunteered in the contact tracing system of the city (Sauerwein, 2020). In Assam, India, students led a campaign called 'Mask is Must' to aware remote communities of personal protection. This initiative was coordinated by Digboi College through the National Service Scheme (NSS). Under these initiatives, the students shared information, conducted a door-to-door campaign and distributed masks (Ojha, 2020). The students at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies launched a website that made information on covid-19 available in 13 languages. This website was specially designed for foreign students living in Japan (Kyodo News, 2020).

#### C. What is required?

The above examples prove the potential of the students as social welfare agents during the pandemic. Not all but a few practices can be initiated by Indian universities to improve the post-pandemic situation, especially in rural India. Although 60.56% of colleges are in rural areas in India (AISHE report, 2020), the rural population in India is still highly deprived of higher education. Hence, we require norms that make universities more accessible to rural populations. This is possible through community university engagement (CUE). CUE is widely practised globally but is still not fully realised in India. The major reason behind it is the lack of its institutionalisation. There is a lack of research in the field of institutionalisation of CUE (Facer et al., 2012; Bivens, 2011). The lack of a comprehensive index in the measurement is the main cause (Marhl & Pausits, 2013). "The lack of standardised measurement instruments for evaluation of civic engagement is widely noted (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Granner and Sharpe, 2004)".

Although, the Indian education system is constantly improving its community engagement norms. Like the ministry of Human resource development is establishing world-class institutions wherein outreach is regarded as one of its major features, termed a "Tangible and Intangible contribution to the society". Universities that are achieving "social impact by engaging in applied research and innovation in issues of concern to developing societies" are also being laid importance. The faculty members are additionally being constantly instigated to include social issues consistently in their research and teaching (Policy on Establishment of World Class Institutions, 2017).

HEIs, understand community engagement in several different ways. In some cases, it considers the evolution of curriculum in such a way that it deals with solving societal issues. On the other hand, it is meant to be a partnership between universities and communities where programs are geared towards engaging students with communities. Perhaps, be it in any form, universities must adhere to their social responsibility to become world-class institutions. UNESCO, although lately, understood the importance. "Higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues...and our ability to respond to them" (UNESCO, 2009). Additionally, SDGs also referred to education as an integral tool for achieving sustainable development. The 12th five-year plan in India initiated an innovative way of furthering the quality applications and quality of higher education for strengthening community engagement and furthering the social responsibility of higher education (Singh and Tandon, 2015, p. 117).

The five-year plan in India has also been vital in planning quality education for Indians. In fact, as per Singh & Tandon (2015, p. 117), the XII Five-Year Plan explicitly mentioned the importance of quality education and initiated a novel way of strengthening community engagement. "In the face of growing isolation of HEIs from society, there is a need for a renewed effort for HEIs to genuinely engage with the community, conduct socially relevant research and education and foster social responsibility amongst students as part of their core mission. For this purpose, a National Initiative to Foster Social Responsibility in Higher Education would be launched. An alliance for community engagement, an independent association of practitioners, academics and community leaders would be created to support its implementation". (XII FIVE YEAR PLAN). UGC has started incorporating outreach elements in its National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in the form of "Outreach and extension". Among its five-ranking parameter, Outreach has been given the weightage of 0.10 (less as compared to the other parameters). Additionally, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)- one of the highly acclaimed accreditation councils of India includes community engagement as an essential criterion under the heading "Governance, Leadership & Management". NAAC is, in fact, in charge of documenting the best practices of community engagement in Indian Universities (NAAC, 2016).

Table I: National Institutional Ranking Framework, 2018

	"NIRF ranking parameters termed for extension Activities			
	A. Percentage of Students from Other States/Countries (Region Diversity RD)			
B. Percentage of Women (Women Diversity WD)				
	C. Economically and Socially Challenged Students (ESCS)			
	D. Facilities for Physically Challenged Students (PCS)"			

 Table I list down the factors that National Institutional Ranking Framework, 2018 considers to be extension or outreach among Indian universities.

Table II: National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2018.

"NAAC ranking parameters for Extension Activities				
A. sensitising students to social issues				
B. Number of awards and recognition received for extension activities from Government/recognised				
bodies during the last five years				
C. Number of extension and outreach Programmes conducted in collaboration with industry,				
community, and Non- Government Organisations				
D. Average percentage of students participating in extension activities with Government Organisations,				
Non-Government Organisations and Programmes such as Swachh Bharat, Aids Awareness, Gender				
Issue, etc. during the last five years"				

Table II shows the parameters adopted by National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2018 to measure the extension or community connect activities of Indian universities.

Some of the parameters used by major Indian ranking agencies to assess the community connect efforts of Indian Universities are shown below in Tables I and II: The XII plan guidelines of UGC on the Establishing Centres for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement in Universities (2012-2017) (UGC, 2014) (University Grants Commission, 2015) lays the importance of CUE. Furthermore, the Indian ministers are constantly focusing on enhancing social responsibilities among Indian universities.

"Higher education cannot remain aloof; it needs constructive engagement and innovation. The answer to country"s sustainable transformation lies in its education system" (The words of Shri Prakash Javedekar, the then HRD minister. Collated from the minister's speeches at the 12th FICCI Higher Education Summit, Nov 2016 & Pre-investors Gujarat Summit, Oct 2016).

As per Planning Commission (2011), higher education institutions shall be actively involved in societal development to achieve the goals of sustainable growth and inclusive development.

## **III.** Methodology

To make universities more connected to the community, the students shall be made better exposed to the community. There can be various ways for engaging the students with the community including community-based courses in the curriculum, frequent visits to the community for learning from and researching with the community, project-based learning with the community, etc.

Research has been conducted with 311 students at Indian universities, selected randomly to understand how well they are connected to the community during COVID-19 and to identify areas that are missing and required to be institutionalised.

The students have been interviewed based on variables shown in Table III. The interview consisted of both open-ended and closeended questions. The close-ended responses were recorded through a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The data were analysed using Excel and SPSS. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha the value of which was calculated at 0.705 (refer to table IV). The reliability is well above the threshold (Hair et al., 2019).

# Table III: Variables

Variables	Literature
Infrastructure	Carnegie 2008, Hart et al. 2009
Funding	Furco 2010
Community voice	Carnegie 2008, Furco 2009
Credit courses	Gelmon et al. 2005, Furco 2010
Projects	Carnegie 2008,
Research	Gelmon et al. 2005
	Dobbs & Moore, 2002
Student participation	Gelmon et al. 2005, Hart et al.
	2011
Reward	Furco 2014
Prioritizing CUE by the teachers	Gelmon et al. 2005, Furco 2014
Training programs	Gelmon et al. 2005

Table III consists of two columns. Column one list down the variables that are been adopted and column two shows corresponding supporting literature. These variables are used to explore the community engagement status during covid-19 among Indian universities.

Table IV: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's	N of Items
Alpha	
.705	16

Table IV shows the value of cronbach's alpha that represents the data to be reliable. The calculation is carried out using SPSS.

## **IV. Analysis**

The analysis was carried out based on variables discussed in table III and is represented in the tabular format below.

Variables	Mean	Analysis
		*
I study courses focusing on community	4.729903537	There are very few universities that float
engagement		courses based on community engagement
There are Campus areas in my	3.861736334	The campus areas of the Indian
institution which are accessible to local		universities are not easily accessible for the
community member		use of local communities.
	4.707395498	The encouragement is missing among
Mar tao ah any ang ang ang tao ang ang		Indian teachers. One reason behind it is that
My teachers encourage me to carry out		the teachers themselves are not well
activities with local community member		acquainted with the meaning of community
		engagement.
	4.768488746	Only a few students reported that they
My teachers involve local community		involved locals in some of their projects.
members while organizing various		Those projects were specifically based on a
activities		neighbourhood and the locals were engaged
		only as respondednts.
My department organizes events [guest	4.993569132	a few students reported that their
lectures; training sessions] by community		department calls NGO representatives for
members [Local community members,		lectures. No local community members are
NGO representatives] for students		called for any kind of session.
NGO Tepresentatives for students	2 202200675	
	3.893890675	The students were interested in working
I have been rewarded for my		with the community but lack direction and
community engagement work by my		resources to carry out such activities. Only a
institution in recent years		few reported to receive a reward in the form
		of a certificate.

Table I: Variables used and their analysis

My university provides funds to carry out activities for the development of local communities		Most of the activities were organised by the teachers and students were only the participants. Hence only a few were aware about the fund allotment for such events.
My university organizes training programs, conferences or seminars focusing on Community Engagement		Students reported that participation in the outreach activities were a kind of training for them. The Indian universities were practising more of outreach than community engagement.
I involve community members while organizing any kind of activity	5.311897106	As revealed in the interview, this was true only when the activity was an outcome of a project carried out in neighbourhood.
I involve community members in assignments, dissertation or/and projects	4.848874598	Only a few students involved the community members in the projects. The students who were not engaged in any project were not exposed to dealing with locals at all.
I involve community members while collecting data for research	2.125401929	No respondent involved community member while collecting data
I involve community members while analysing data for research	2.125401929	No respondent involved community member while analysing data. In fact, the respondents were doubting on the role a community member can play in analysing a research data since it involves academic procedure.
I involve community members while sharing research results	1.945337621	No student ever shared research results with the community.

Above table consist of three columns. The first column denotes the detailed questions asked based on the variables listed in table III. Column two denotes the mean value of the responses received and column three analyse the results based on the mean value of the responses and the responses received during interviews.

#### V. Conclusion

The interviews revealed that community engagement in Indian universities was weak based on the variables observed in the study during covid-19. Globally, students and universities have been very active during the pandemic, the case is not similar in India as per the present study. Community-related work is categorized social connect or outreach in Indian universities. Outreach is a narrow concept and does not encourage the involvement of the community. The university is in a power position where they decide on an activity and carry it out with the locals (UNESCO chair report, 2015; Tandon and Hall, 2015). Indian universities are required to practise community engagement instead of outreach. This is possible by institutionalising community engagement practices. Institutionalisation is possible by making amendments to the ranking and accreditation parameters followed in the Indian higher education system. As discussed above, the Indian education system follows NIRF and NAAC majorly. These two agencies currently measure the 'outreach' or 'extension'. The outreach or extension, as discussed above, is a narrow form of community engagement. If NAAC and NIRF adopt parameters directly relating to community engagement, universities will start practising it seriously.

Any ranking agency should measure the number of activities voluntarily organised by the university students for social welfare or several services offered to the local communities by the university students. This will bridge the gap between universities and local communities. Especially, the rural communities that have been seriously deprived of basic education due to rapid technological adoption in the education sector. The parameters shall also be focusing on the research carried out by the students with the local communities.

A few factors were also identified by the authors as factors that will motivate the students to do more community engagement (refer to table V). Among the seven factors listed "Credit based Community engagement courses in the curriculum" and "Community Engagement as an essential criterion in placement" were chosen to be the most effective measures by the respondents.

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