

Rural-based universities in South Africa Albatrosses or potential nodes for sustainable development?

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Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on how two rural-based universities in South Africa can contribute towards sustainable development especially in their immediate rural communities. It addresses the following questions: what conditions or policy frameworks exist that can engender a sustainable development trajectory? How can rural-based universities reconstitute themselves so they can become effective agents for sustainable rural development? Historically, because of apartheid policies, these and other black universities were on the margins of the knowledge production process and have not effectively engaged in real development activities that would meaningfully improve the livelihoods of rural dwellers. The research identified policy and legislative instruments and strategies that can promote a dynamic interaction with other institutions thus empowering and promoting sustainability. The aim of the paper is to raise awareness about existing possibilities at the disposal of these institutions.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is the outcome of two research initiatives: one was a doctoral study by one of the authors, and the other was a study conducted at both universities. Both studies involved extensive interviews with a wide spectrum of stakeholders (local and provincial authorities, members of the business and university communities). Both also involved document analyses.

Findings – That rural-based universities are advantageously situated and possess a variety of characteristics that can enable them to effectively contribute to sustainable development. These include their strategic location within the rural communities; reinventing their mission orientation so as to enhance their research capacity; expanding their intellectual/entrepreneurial/social capital; and the establishment of strong collaborative relationships.

Practical implications – The first aim of the paper is to raise the awareness of policy makers and other stakeholders about the strategic value of these institutions. The awareness should lead to a series of engagements with appropriate individuals with the view to develop appropriate strategies for application.

Originality/value – The contribution of rural-based universities to sustainable development has not been sufficiently researched in South Africa and, therefore, the study fills the gap by adding valuable knowledge, new perspectives, and presents possibilities for consideration.

Introduction

A discussion of rural-based universities in South Africa and whether they can become centers for sustainable development needs to be located within the context of the history of apartheid policies that also shaped the landscape of higher education in South Africa. To this end, the paper will discuss:

- the apartheid origins of rural-based universities in South Africa;
- perspectives on sustainable development in South Africa; and
- the role of higher education in general and rural-based universities in particular within the sustainable development strategies of government.

It argues that given the geopolitical origins and purposes which higher education in South Africa served, the new government strategies for sustainable development and the new proposals for mergers, provide rural-based universities an opportunity to play a meaningful role in South Africa's reconstruction and sustainable development program. This is based on the strategic location of these institutions in the rural hinterland of South Africa, government's higher education merger plan that is linked to the human resource development strategy of the country and expects all higher education institutions to play a role.

Apartheid origins of rural-based black universities

Rural-based universities are the progeny of the so-called apartheid policy of “separate development” and became institutionalized through the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. The act formalized and entrenched racially segregated education in the tertiary sector. It became an important part of the broader “divide and rule” strategy used to enforce racial and ethnic division. Blacks were further Balkanized into different ethnic groups and each group was given “national” status and encouraged to develop a sense of venerated cultural insularity. Accordingly, the 1959 Act established ethnic universities situated in the rural hinterland (**Nkomo, 1984**).

Bunting (2002) summarizes well the rationale for the establishment of these universities in pointing out that it was overtly political and instrumental; they were not established because of an academic need for institutions of the kind they became. They were instrumental institutions in the sense of having been set up to train black people who would be useful to the apartheid state, and political in the sense that their existence played a role in the maintenance of the overall apartheid socio-political agenda. Their “useful graduates” were primarily the black teachers required by the black school system

and the black civil servants required by the racially divided civil service of the Republic of South Africa (**Bunting, 2002, p. 74**). Furthermore, the intellectual climate of the historically black universities was informed by the apartheid philosophy. In the early years, their academic staff members tended to come primarily from their historically white-Afrikaans-medium universities, which functioned with instrumentalist notions of knowledge. These academics readily accepted an academic ethos with a strong “training” focus and, in particular, a focus that placed little emphasis on the production of new knowledge or critical and analytical skills. As a consequence, few of the academics employed by these institutions believed it necessary to introduce research and post-graduate programs in these universities to pursue higher intellectual objectives. The intellectual agenda of the institutions often became no more than that of the material taught in previous years at historically white Afrikaans-medium universities (**Bunting, 2002, pp. 75-6**).

The foundation of black universities on apartheid ideology, which promoted inequalities across racial groups, meant that these institutions also reflected the inequalities of the broader society. In summarizing some of these inequalities, the **National Commission on Higher Education (1996)** pointed to the highly stratified nature of the higher education sector in South Africa in terms of race and gender. The pattern was that the greater the prestige, status and influence particular positions had, the greater the extent to which white men dominated. For example, in 1990, 92 percent of the executive/administrative management members in higher education institutions were white (**National Commission on Higher Education, 1996, p. 38**). These institutions were also poorly funded, resulting in profoundly impoverished intellectual cultures that still, to varying degrees, remain deeply steeped in their current incarnation. The funding formula which government used to finance universities was also biased towards historically white universities and against black universities. This was particularly the case where the formula rewarded course offerings in the natural sciences which included life, physical and mathematical sciences, health care and health sciences, engineering, architecture and the agricultural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities group which includes all other disciplines, on the other. More funding was allocated to the former subject groups than to the latter, which perpetuated the practice of in-built inequalities between these two sets of institutions. These practices led to South Africa's higher education system being one of the most fragmented and highly unequal systems in the world.

New possibilities

Since, 1999, government has embarked on a series of policy reform initiatives that might provide rural-based universities an opportunity to contribute to sustainable development. These initiatives culminated in the approval of a merger plan by government aimed at transforming the landscape of higher education in the country. The racialized basis of funding has, in some ways, been tampered within the newly proposed merger plan of higher education institutions underway in South Africa.

Perspectives on sustainable development in the South African context

There are different perspectives and senses in which the concept of sustainable development is applied in the South African context, which is related to the history of the country. The first is sustainable development as it relates to the sustainability of the higher education institutions in terms of relevant program offerings, research and development. This conception emanates from the reality of a two-tier racially-segregated system of higher education with white, urban institutions intrinsically linked to the economic development of the country and therefore well funded; and black, rural institutions linked to the old Bantustan system and therefore, poorly resourced. With the dawn of the new era, coupled with the challenges and birth pains of transition, most black rural institutions were saddled with massive debts, which rendered them financially unsustainable and therefore, threatened with the possibility of closure. It is a complex of disabilities that are inscribed in their genetic constitution that are behind the general perception that they are albatrosses that deserve closure. The restructuring of the higher education system had, amongst other goals, to deal with the problem by setting them on a path towards sustainability.

The second conception of sustainability is more systemic and relates to laying a solid foundation in the restructuring of the higher education system. According to the National Working Group report (**NWG, 2001b**), sustainability of the system implies ensuring among other things that:

- reconfiguration should strengthen the weak elements in the system and not weaken the strong;
- every possible measure should be taken to secure the financial viability and stability of institutions; and
- each institution in the system should have a critical mass of academic, administrative and management capacity at its disposal, and that steps should be taken to build such capacity where it is lacking or inadequate (**NWG, 2001b, p. 65**).

The other form of sustainable development goes beyond the educational sector and refers to the general socio-economic development aimed at better life for all South Africans. It combines multiple strategies aimed at ensuring that stable economic growth is linked to eradication of apartheid's legacy of poverty and inequality. It combines direct poverty alleviation programs with broadening of social services and infrastructure: housing, electrification, social development, health, education, water, telecommunications, sport and recreational facilities. Eradication of poverty is viewed as fundamental to the restoration of the dignity of the majority of South Africa's people. All government departments in their respective delivery areas are expected to execute their tasks with this objective as one of their central points of reference. The priorities identified by the department of social development include development and implementation of an integrated poverty eradication strategy that provides direct benefits for those who are in need, within a sustainable development approach (**Government Communications and Information System, 2002, pp. 53-4**)

The South African Government's approach to sustainable development is better enunciated in the Integrated and Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS), which was unveiled by government in, 2000. The elements of the vision behind this strategy help to elucidate the concept of sustainable development. The report explains the concepts “rural development” and “sustainability” in the following ways:

- Rural development: is multi-dimensional and much broader than poverty alleviation through social programs and transfers. It places emphasis on changing environments to enable poor people to earn more, to invest in themselves and their communities and to contribute toward maintenance of key infrastructure; a successful strategy will make people less poor, rather than more comfortable in their poverty.
- Sustainable: is derived from increased local growth, and where rural people care about success and are able to access resources to keep the strategy going.

The strategy document argues that it is designed to realize a vision that will:

... attain socially cohesive and stable rural communities with viable institutions, sustainable economies and universal access to social amenities, able to attract and retain skilled and knowledgeable people, who are equipped to contribute to growth and development ... The strategy in its totality presents an opportunity for South Africa's rural people to realise their own potential and contribute more fully to their country's future (**ISRDS, 2000, pp. 4-5**).

What is critical to the successful implementation of the ISRDS is the decentralization approach that is recommended on the basis of international experience that shows the failure of centralized development projects in the 1970s. South Africa is in an ideal position to take on board one of the key lessons of the international experience, namely, that successful rural development must be implemented in a participatory and decentralized fashion in order to respond to articulated priorities and observed opportunities at the local level. The reform of municipal government places organs of local government in a central role in integrating programs to achieve synergistic rural development. Many will need assistance and guidance to develop capacity, but their role and responsibilities are clearly established (**ISRDS, 2000, pp. 4-5**). This approach is further supported by recent experiences in program design, which suggest that decentralization accompanied by promotion of greater local power and autonomy in decision making can offer opportunities to improve outcomes. The evidence indicates that institutional capacity to meet the responsibilities and obligations of decentralized authorities must be created and nurtured; and a clearly defined system of incentives and penalties is required to contribute to more efficient investment decision making and to discourage misuse of funds. Some complementary measures to support the ISRDS are:

- human resource development and capacity building;
- land reform;
- implementing the revised program;
- community-based income generation projects;

- social assistance and safety nets; and
- rural finance (**ISRDS, 2000, pp. 8-9**)

Restructuring of higher education

One of the first initiatives undertaken by the post-apartheid government was to develop legislative and policy tools aimed at transforming the higher education system in line with the vision of government. Amongst some of the policy tools developed were the **White Paper 3 on Higher Education (1997)** which outlines the program for the transformation of the system; the human resource development strategy document, developed in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor to meet the socio-economic needs of the country, the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) which addressed the policy goals which higher education needs to address and how it will address them, the development of new institutional landscape documents which culminated in the adoption of the merger plan aimed at transforming the higher education system but also put in place the new institutional types in line with the government's vision for transforming the system. What emerged out of these documents was a new conceptualization of the role higher education is to play in the local, regional and national development of the country that cuts across racial, ethnic, urban and rural divides. The role of higher educational institutions is conceptualized and defined along regional and national development goals and no longer according to race and ethnicity as in the past:

- In particular, the White Paper 3 on higher education proposed the creation of a single coordinated system of higher education that is planned, governed and funded as a single system.

It also argued that the goal of a single coordinated system requires an assessment of an optimal number and type of institutions needed to ensure a higher educational system which is, on one hand, affordable and sustainable and, on the other, able to contribute effectively to social and economic development.

To this end, the NPHE, which was released in March 2001, provides the implementation framework for achieving the White Paper's vision of a single national co-ordinated higher education system that is affordable, sustainable and which is responsive and contributes to the human resource and research needs of the country. Some of the policy goals and strategic objectives it outlines include:

- increasing access and to produce graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet human resource needs of the country;
- ensuring diversity in the institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and program differentiation to meet national and regional skills and knowledge needs;
- building high-level research capacity, including sustaining current strength, as well as to promote research linked to national development needs; and

- building new institutional identities and organizational forms through restructuring the institutional landscape of the higher education system (**National Plan for Higher Education, 2001a, p. 14**).

Education, in general, and higher education, in particular, is accorded a central role in human resource strategy development aimed at reducing apartheid inequalities and contributing towards poverty eradication and sustainable development. The Education Ministry has pursued this challenge with great determination. In March 2001, the Minister of Education appointed the National Working Group to advise him on the restructuring of the institutional landscape of higher education system; to propose the appropriate arrangements for restructuring the provision of higher education on a regional basis through the development of new institutional and organizational forms, including institutional mergers and rationalization of program development and delivery. The NWG's main consideration was the role and capacity of the higher education system in the long-term to meet the human resource and knowledge needs of the country.

The potential to become centers for sustainable development

One intriguing contradiction of the legacy of apartheid planning and rationale is that flowing from the restructuring of higher education institutions and program rationalization, what was regarded as wastage and duplication under apartheid, has the possibility of becoming a resource for sustainable development in a new South Africa. In making recommendations for institutional reconfiguration, the NWG identified the strengths and weaknesses of each institution and suggested what it deemed as an appropriate role each institution is to play in the new context.

For the purpose of this paper, the focus is upon the status of rural-based universities, namely, the universities of Fort Hare and the North, which came into existence as black universities under the apartheid's Extension of University Education Act of 1959.

The two institutions are being retained under the new reconfigured landscape, albeit in different forms. With respect to the University of Fort Hare, the Ministry of Education rejected the NWG's recommendation for the merger of Fort Hare with a historically white Rhodes University, but rather for it to be retained as a separate institution incorporating the East London campus of Rhodes University and the Health Sciences of the Faculty of the University of the Transkei (another rural university). Fort Hare is going to focus on expanding access in the East London area, which is in line with the designation of East London as an industrial development zone in the Provincial Government (**DOE, 2002, p. 10**). The NWG had indicated that the evidence suggests that growth in higher education in the region will be centered in the East London area since this is where the population is growing.

The University of the North, based in Limpopo Province, is to merge with one other university: the Medical University of Southern Africanh, which provides medical training for black people, to form a new University of Limpopo. The NWG suggests that such a

merger would result in an institution with the basis and the potential for a wide and comprehensive range of vocational, technological and professional training and of general and formative education. Each institution is expected to gain from these merger proposals. It is recommended that MEDUNSA (an institution specializing in the health sciences) should orient its vision and mission deliberately to the Limpopo Province (one of the most impoverished provinces) and other rural regions and help to bring about a strong health science and health service program in these areas through co-ordination and consolidation with nursing, pharmacy and optometry courses at the present University of the North and with related programs at the University of Venda. The NWG further proposed that all nursing and agricultural training should be incorporated into the new institution. This would, on the one hand, take advantage of these training programs, and on the other, strengthen the career-focused component of the proposed new university's mission and educational profile. It was also recommended that gradual introduction of more certificate and diploma programs and short courses, as well as other technikon-type qualifications so that vocational and technological needs of the region can be met also. The analysis undertaken by the NWG suggests that with the merger of these three institutions, once concluded, could produce a new multi-campus institution with a sustainable size of about 16,000 students (compared to 6,000, 3,000, 3,000, respectively) found presently in the three separate institutions. The program profile would most probably meet the required balance among the different categories (science and technology, business/management, education and humanities), unlike the exclusively humanities and social science orientation inherited from the apartheid era; and between the different kinds of educational goals (sub-degrees skills-training, vocational, professional, general formative), in keeping with the NPHE (NWG, 2001b, p. 44). In response to the recommendations of the NWG, the Minister of Education approved the merger of the University of North and MEDUNSA and retained the University of Venda as a separate institution offering a combination of university and technikon type programs.

The proposals of the NWG and the Department of Education's merger plan have given rural universities new opportunities and have put them on an historic growth path which, for the first time since their establishment, provides them with an extraordinary opportunity to link their missions and roles to economic and industrial development of their immediate communities. The diversity of program offering will also enable them to develop programs that will enable them to play a role in rural development. The ISRDS's decentralization approach enables the institutions to direct their work towards rural development aimed at building local social capacity. With these universities located in the rural hinterland, there will be no need to build new infrastructure where training of the required human resources should take place. They are strategically located to play a catalytic development role. Being linked to rural and industrial development nodal points in their respective regions, there will be opportunities for synergistic partnerships with local businesses, civic bodies, industry, local and provincial governments thus contributing to meaningful socio-economic growth and development.

The four complementary measures identified in the ISRD namely: land reform; implementing the revised program; community-based income generation projects; social

assistance and safety nets; and rural finance pose a challenge for universities to be responsive by developing programs that will address these needs. This does not suggest that these institutions should adopt an instrumentalist approach towards development, but to adopt comprehensive innovative strategies whereby, teaching programs have inbuilt research components with appropriate monitoring and implementation capabilities that will turn them into local and regional assets.

The regional/provincial rationale applied in the restructuring and merger plan forces local business, provincial government departments and civic bodies to use these local institutions if they are to contribute to provincial revenue and capacity generation. As stated earlier, this plan encourages approaches that cut across racial and ethnic divides. In instances where in the past, white businesses, provincial governments and local municipalities would look for research support and innovation from former white institutions located outside their provinces, now they will have to look locally for that kind of support.

These new opportunities further present new challenges for these institutions. The research conducted by the HSRC (Nkomo and Maja, 2004) shows that the University of the North and the University of Fort Hare have not taken sufficient steps to take advantage of new opportunities presented by the new context. These new opportunities offer rural-based universities the ability to also unlock themselves from their spatial isolation (through effective employment of technology – a la U of N Scotland H & I and Ghandigram Rural University) and to reconnect with their immediate communities and broader society. The panacea is the adoption of a development vision and ethos; an entrepreneurial spirit that can reinvent the institutions through welding the various critical elements such as infrastructure, intellect, social capital and technology with local needs and knowledge systems. Their location gives them an extraordinary advantage to infuse sustainability into rural development and to serve as the integrative tissue.

In the following section the author presents three graphic representations of the traditional posture of the rural universities in South Africa and the possibilities offered by the legislative and policy frameworks that can help unleash their intellectual and creative energies.

The albatross or static condition

The rural sector has historically suffered gross neglect from central governments whose *locus* was invariably on the urban centers. Because of the urban bias the rural sector has not enjoyed the same degree of interest, effort and investment as its urban counterpart. Universities have suffered the same fate. In such circumstances the university is virtually nonexistent as far as its surrounding habitat is concerned. **Figure 1** shows the perilous nature of this condition.

The static university does not produce any meaningful intellectual energy to kindle sustainable development. In other words it is indifferent, consciously or unconsciously, to

its immediate environment. An environment of abject poverty and hopelessness surrounds it. Illiteracy is endemic and has an erosive effect on the quality of rural life. There is a high correlation between poverty and illiteracy; in turn illiteracy leads to high rates of unemployment; the latter leads to lower productivity; and in turn, suppressed productivity yields a lower GDP. This is the vicious cycle that characterizes the rural condition. In this situation, the university is a passive by-stander, worse, an albatross.

The dynamic condition

It is now immensely possible for the rural-based universities to be able to overcome their albatross condition. Through the policy instruments the requisite conditions now exist for turning them into engines of sustained development. The vicious cycle shown in **Figure 1** can be converted into a dynamic emancipatory culture.

Figure 2 situates the university at the center of the rural community where it endeavors to interact with the community in a meaningful way. Through active engagement with the community of institutions the university can contribute significantly to the building of social capital that can sustain development over time to benefit future generations. It can raise literacy through its core activities as a learning center resulting in high social capital; high literacy and social capital, increase prospects of employability (including self employment); leading to high productivity and a higher GDP; leading to higher standards of living and an improved quality of life and social well being.

The dynamic university and stakeholder interactive model

It all culminates in **Figure 3**, which is a more elaborate rendition of **Figure 2**. It is designed to convey the idea that sustainable development is multidimensional. It lends itself to the view that education is one amongst many levers capable of unleashing the full potential of each individual and, by extension, of the society as a whole; in this case, especially that of the rural community. Universities acting in isolation cannot activate the full range of potentials embedded in their immediate community or society at large unless they act in concert or in dynamic partnership with other institutions thus, generating synergies that are capable of arousing the collective potential within a broad-based, mutually-supportive, social infrastructure.

The vision portrayed in **Figure 3** should be situated within the framework of the NPHE and ISRD policy instruments.

In sum, for the rural universities to be able to play a catalytic role in sustainable development of the rural sector they should take the following into consideration.

Rural development

Rural development should be understood to include the improved provision of services, enhanced opportunities for income generation and local economic development, improved physical infrastructure, social cohesion and physical security within rural communities, active representation in local political processes, and effective provision for the vulnerable. Therefore, rural development in this context is much broader than poverty alleviation through social programs and transfers.

There is a dire need to resuscitate the rural economies as potential engines of economic growth that would contribute towards their own development and the broad national development agenda. A strategy to achieve growth must be founded on an understanding of how rural areas grow. Growth in agriculture, tourism, forestry, and other primary activities generates additional income through linkage in expenditure and employment. For example, agricultural growth generates demand for inputs and the retailing activities associated with delivery. Also, natural resources will always be an important determining factor in rural development, as these may be the only resources that some rural areas are endowed with.

Sustainability

The strategy will be sustainable to the extent that it contributes to increased local growth that rural people care about its success, and are able to access the resources to keep it going. Thus, sustainability implies effective community participation to assure that the projects and activities undertaken respond to articulated priorities at the local level.

Integration

Finally, integration should be the goal of sustainable rural development programs. Simply put, the success of sustainable development depends on welding together a variety of players in the sector in order to generate the necessary synergy that can be sustained for the benefit of posterity (**Nkomo and Maja, 2004, pp. 122-4**).

The rural-based universities are advantageously situated and possess a variety of characteristics as shown below:

- strategic location within the rural community;
- existing physical infrastructure (no need to build additional physical capital – consider multiple usage);
- existing and potential intellectual capital (with mission reorientation as a precondition including application of the appropriate development paradigm, enhancement of research);
- possess potential to promote development of social capital;

- possess potential to promote appropriate and relevant teaching and learning methodologies; and
- possess potential to build strong collaborative relationships (partnerships) based on the “community of trust” notion (involving university, community, business, government, etc.).

A critical factor is the transformation of the mindset: that is, to encourage the development of attitudes, values and ethics that will serve as the fundamental core undergirding sustainable development. In this sense, these institutions can help to promote the fulfillment of the Rio Declaration to “equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations” *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992, page 2 (United Nations General Assembly, 1992, p. 2).*

Conclusions

Post-apartheid South Africa offers an enabling environment for the realization of potentialities that were stifled before: there is a democratic dispensation that is supportive of academic freedom; provides space for creativity and innovation; there is a progressive legislative and policy framework; opportunities to access technology that can break the spatial isolation exist; and a vision that encourages the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems and the creation of trust among all stakeholders. These conditions constitute the foundation for the conversion of the rural-based universities from being albatrosses to being catalytic agents of sustainable development.

Figure 1 The static or albatross condition

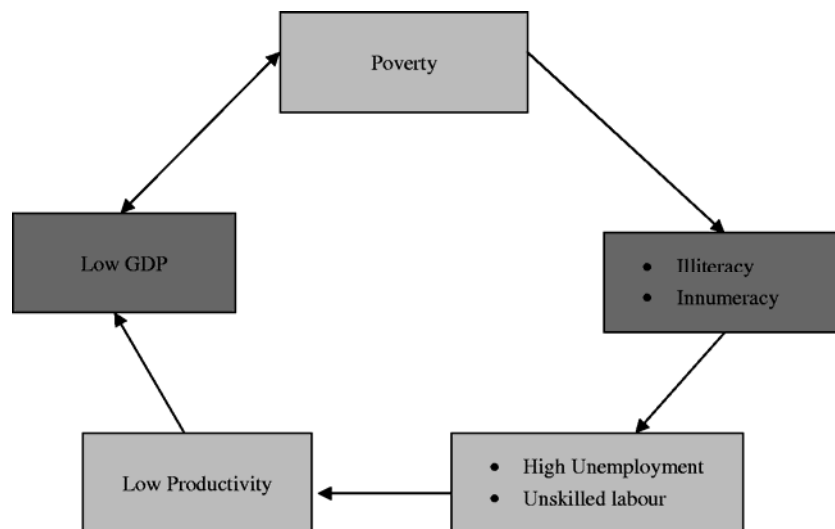


Figure 2 The dynamic catalytic condition

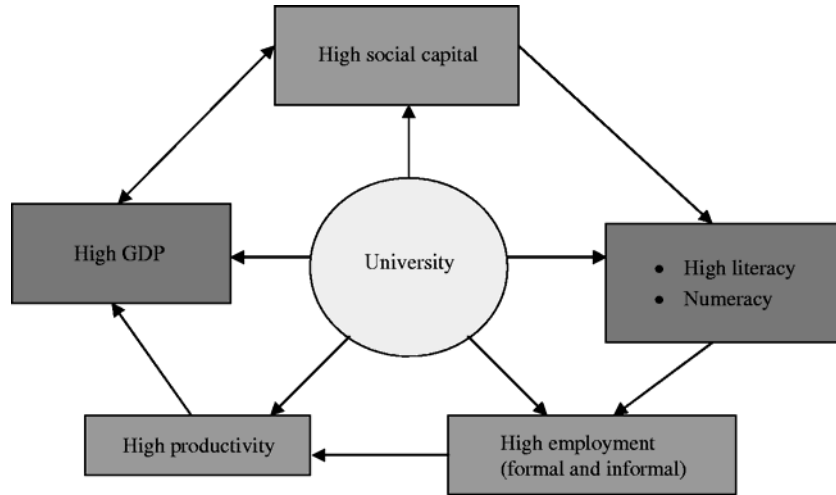
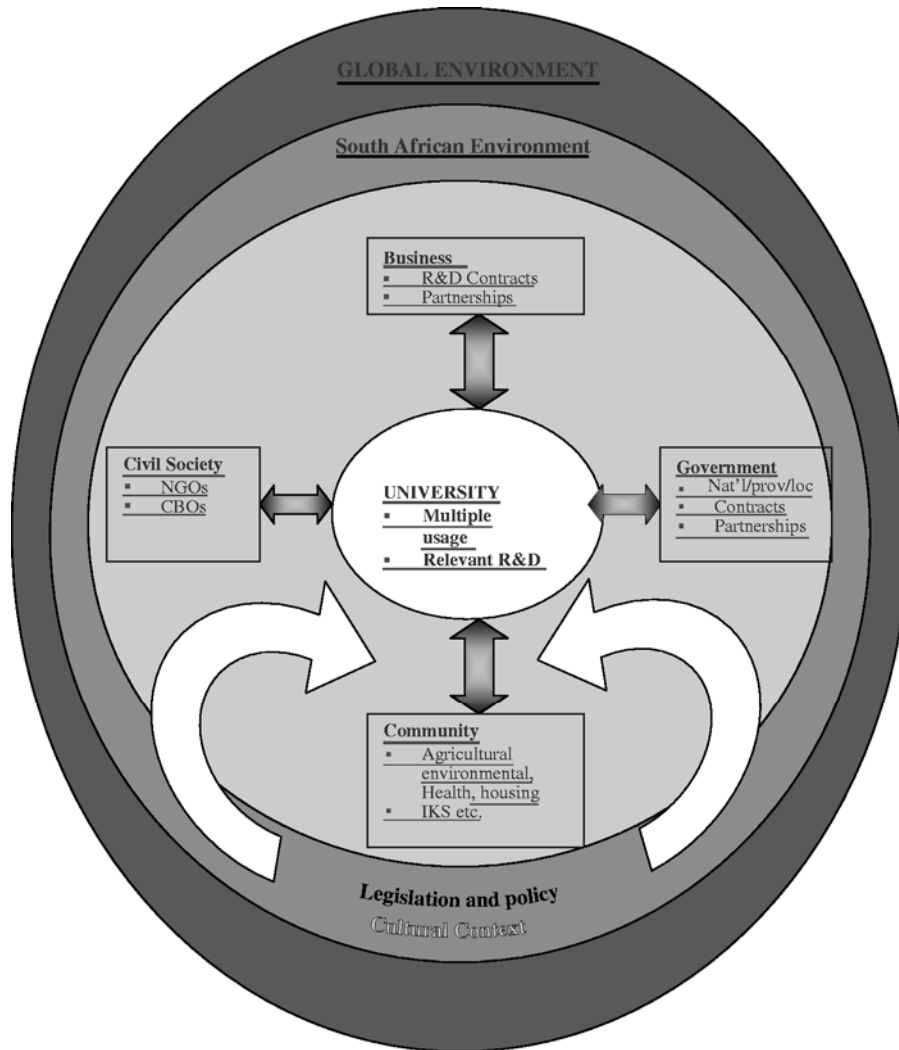


Figure 3 Dynamic university and stakeholder interaction



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