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Author

BROWN-LUTHANGO, Mercy

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Community-university engagement and the Philippi CityLab in Cape Town and the challenge of collaboration across boundaries

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Abstract

Debates about the role of the university in society have been going on for many decades. There have been several calls for a more 'engaged' form of scholarship which applies itself consciously to the pursuit of applied knowledge which can contribute towards solving some of the most pressing societal challenges. Closer collaboration between universities and community groups has been identified as a central component of this form of scholarship. This paper interrogates the literature on the role of universities in society, with a specific focus on university-community partnerships, and discusses the experience of the Philippi CityLab in Cape Town, South Africa to shed some light on the complexities, challenges and rewards of university-community interactions. The case of the Philippi CityLab confirms many of the pre-requisites for 'successful' collaboration between universities and communities as identified in the literature. The paper argues that the ideal of a more engaged scholarship is certainly worth pursuing and that there is no doubt that South African universities do

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have a role to play in terms of working with communities to find workable solutions to the myriad of development challenges which they face. However, the experience of the Philippi CityLab also shows that stakeholders should not be naïve about the time, effort and investment which these kinds of engagements require and the difficulty of establishing, maintaining and sustaining genuine, mutually beneficial university-community collaborations. Furthermore, a truly engaged scholarship requires a significant transformation of the institutional context within universities in order to not only facilitate and support, but also reward research which seek closer collaboration between universities and communities. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Brown-Luthango, Mercy, E-Mail: mercy.brown-luthango@uct.ac.za