

Examining Community Service Practices at Addis Ababa University

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Abstract: The study aims to examine community service practices and the methods by which the service is implemented at Addis Ababa University. A qualitative research strategy was adopted, incorporating a case study approach, with data collected from faculty members, department heads, community service personnel, and associate deans through interviews and analysis of relevant documents. Situations attributed to deficiencies in directives, strategic documentation, leadership support, and the structural arrangement of the community service mission hinder the faculty from actively engaging in community service missions. Though the study found that the community service tasks implemented have been limited, some strategies/ways promoted include project-based community engagement activities funded by external bodies, university-initiated and funded engagements, community service-learning/field education, and volunteerism/individual staff-initiated engagements. The results of the study imply the necessity of creating clear guideline that facilitates the engagement of academic staff in community service initiatives, awareness-raising sessions for the faculty on community service, promoting a culture of engagement and empathy, and establishing partnerships in different units of the university. These can lead to the successful accomplishment of the mission.

Keywords: Addis Ababa University, community service mission, faculty, university missions.

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Introduction

Universities have for long been recognized as institutions of higher learning with distinct missions and objectives, primarily focused on educating society and advancing knowledge. As Maassen (1997) notes, they are historically rooted in the pursuit of truth and the preservation of intellectual heritage. Initially, education was their central function, as emphasized by Keerberg et al. (2013), but this role has gradually expanded over time.

The transformation of universities began with major reforms such as Germany's Humboldtian model in the early 19th century, which introduced research as a core institutional function, marking what Etzkowitz et al., (2000) termed the "first academic revolution" (Nabaho et al., 2022). Since then, universities have increasingly embraced broader societal roles, engaging more actively with external organizations and communities. This evolution has fostered reciprocal knowledge exchange, leading to the emergence of a third mission: community service.

Community service now stands alongside teaching and research as a fundamental university responsibility. It plays a vital role in higher education, enabling universities to build connections with external stakeholders, generate social impact, and strengthen strategies for public involvement (Spânu, Ulmeanu, & Doicin, 2024). It reflects a shift toward addressing societal challenges, promoting economic development, and enhancing public well-being. In today's rapidly changing world, universities are seen as engines of innovation and social progress, facing growing expectations to contribute tangible solutions to global issues, foster equity, and collaborate with diverse stakeholders. Deimel (2017) argues that these pressures necessitate continuous adaptation to remain relevant and impactful. Through its community service mission activities, Caucasus University strengthens its connection with society and shows that it is not only an academic institution but also a civic institution—one that serves the public good

and works to promote social progress and development (Grdzeldze & Akobia, 2024).

This study focuses on the third mission, community service, which involves direct engagement with society through initiatives that respond to local needs, generate mutual benefits, and support sustainable development. Broadly defined, community service encompasses all university-led efforts aimed at benefiting the public. Its significance has grown due to several factors: increased faculty awareness of their societal responsibilities, greater public recognition of academic resources, and stronger partnerships between universities and industry (Rubens et al., 2017). Kemp (2013) describes these evolving relationships as “town and gown” dynamics, underscoring the importance of mutual collaboration for shared progress.

Universities worldwide are reassessing their roles and interactions with communities at various levels to navigate the complexities of a knowledge-based society (Balmasova & Zinevich, 2019). Rubens et al., (2017) liken the modern university to a three-legged stool, supported equally by teaching, research, and community service.

As societal transformations accelerate, universities must remain responsive to the emerging needs of their communities. Their ability to fulfill institutional missions increasingly depends on meaningful connections with local communities, primarily facilitated through community service programs. Globally, academic and policy discussions have intensified around university-community engagement as a strategy for addressing multifaceted social, political, environmental, and economic challenges (Hall et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2011). The integration of community service as a core mission has become central to higher education reform (Goddard et al., 1994). The third mission of a university—community service—is fundamental in “building solid university-society synergies and promoting local and regional development” (Ndimbo & Nkwabi, 2025, p.1).

Strengthening the relationship between universities and communities is essential for effective engagement. Goddard et al., (2016) advocate for renewed civic commitment within higher education to foster deeper societal collaboration. To align with public needs, universities must ensure that their community service initiatives are both impactful and sustainable. Clifford and Petrescu (2012) emphasize that long-term engagement contributes to the development of meaningful capacity within communities, which requires identifying best practices and addressing persistent challenges.

Despite their efforts, universities often encounter barriers in implementing community service programs. Adekalu et al., (2018) identify four key challenges: limited funding, resistance from community members, gaps in understanding between academics and the public, and time constraints due to competing responsibilities. Additionally, Boucher et al., (2003) highlight that both institutional type and regional context influence the effectiveness of university-community engagement. Breznitz and Feldman (2012) argue that universities cannot lead regional development alone if local stakeholders lack the capacity to appreciate and apply academic knowledge. This highlights the importance of carefully examining community needs to ensure responsive and effective engagement.

Conceptual Framework

Historically, universities have served as central hubs for research and knowledge creation, in addition to their role of addressing public needs. Their contributions have undeniably shaped societal development through the generation and dissemination of knowledge. However, the evolving global landscape, particularly the transformations witnessed in the final decades of the 20th century, has prompted a rethinking of this traditional role (Soeiro et al., 2012). Today, universities are increasingly expected to expand their scope and actively respond to the diverse needs of the communities they inhabit.

While the range of stakeholders that universities engage with may differ, the notion of a "third mission" has gained recognition as a core institutional function. Molas-Gallart et al., (2002) argue that universities' involvement in non-academic activities represents a strategic opening toward their surrounding communities, fostering mutual benefits for both academia and society (Krčmářová, 2011; Driscoll, 2008).

Globally, interpretations of this third mission vary. German universities often prioritize economic and technological contributions, placing less emphasis on civic engagement (Berghäuser & Hoelscher, 2020). In contrast, American institutions embed "service" as a foundational value, reflecting their commitment to societal impact across local, national, and international spheres (O'Banion & Wilson, 2010). Vietnamese universities prioritize technology transfer and entrepreneurship to address community needs (Dinh, 2021), whereas European and OECD countries leverage academic knowledge to drive both economic and social progress (Bonaccorsi et al., 2010).

These diverse approaches underscore the contextual nature of community service in higher education. Despite regional variations, activities conducted beyond teaching and research—particularly those involving collaboration with external communities—are broadly categorized under the university's service mission. The concept remains fluid, shaped by institutional priorities and societal expectations.

At its core, community service reflects the dynamic relationship between universities and broader society, including non-academic partners. Traditionally, teaching and research have been recognized as the primary missions of universities. However, the emergence of community service as a third mission, though often underdeveloped, signals a growing emphasis on societal engagement. Unlike the well-established metrics for teaching and research, this third mission remains comparatively underexplored and less systematically assessed (Carrión et al., 2012).

Community service encompasses a wide array of initiatives, including support for students with disabilities, lifelong learning programs, partnerships with local communities, and efforts to widen access to higher education for marginalized and underrepresented groups. It also involves designing targeted services and exemplary practices to address the challenges faced by disadvantaged populations. Soeiro et al., (2006) raise critical questions about whether such expansive engagements fall within the formal remit of universities and how they influence institutional operations.

Montesinos et al., (2008) conceptualize the third mission through three interrelated dimensions: social, entrepreneurial, and innovative. The social dimension emphasizes non-financial contributions that enhance societal well-being and institutional reputation. The entrepreneurial aspect enables universities to pursue income-generating ventures, while the innovative dimension involves securing venture capital and offering consultancy services to governments.

Although scholarly discourse often situates the third mission within specific national or institutional contexts, universities must translate these conceptual frameworks into tangible actions that address real-world community needs. In Ethiopia, and particularly at Addis Ababa University (AAU), strengthening the social engagement dimension holds strategic importance. Within AAU's institutional documents, the terms "community service" and "community engagement" are used interchangeably. According to the university's 2024 Senate Legislation, community service is defined as "a service rendered by the University community to communities, government institutions, businesses, non-profit organizations, and society at large to address challenges through capacity building, awareness creation and whenever possible, to improving the quality of lives" (AAU, 2024b, p. 9). The same legislation describes community engagement as "mutually beneficial scholarly collaborations and partnerships of the university community with local, regional and international communities to address their specific needs centered on social, economic and cultural developments and

challenges” (AAU, 2024b, p. 9). While the definitions differ slightly in emphasis, both reflect AAU’s commitment to inclusive, responsive, and transformative societal engagement.

The foundation of the conceptual framework used for this study begins with the university’s overarching mission, which traditionally includes teaching and research. In recent decades, this mission has expanded to include a third pillar, community service, reflecting the institution’s responsibility to engage with and contribute to societal development (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Achieving this mission requires the actual implementation of community service activities at a given university. It includes outreach programs, partnerships with local organizations, student-led initiatives, and faculty involvement in addressing community needs. The practice is shaped by institutional values and strategic priorities.

It is important to note that effective community service depends on the active participation of key stakeholders, faculty, students, community members, NGOs, and government bodies. Their collaboration ensures that service initiatives are relevant, inclusive, and mutually beneficial. Engagement also fosters trust and long-term relationships between the university and the community. Gorski and Mehta (2016) and Kuttner et al., (2019) highlight that faculty, as a backbone of the university’s workforce, significantly contribute to the effective implementation of the university’s service mission through their engagement, commitment, and expertise.

Support mechanisms, including funding, policy frameworks, leadership commitment, and administrative infrastructure, play a crucial role in enabling and sustaining community service efforts. As Spânu et al., (2024) contend, policy instruments such as funding schemes, performance metrics, impact assessments, regional development plans, and public-private partnerships, are used to support and evaluate universities’ engagement in their community service mission.

Without adequate institutional backing, even well-intentioned programs may struggle to achieve impact. The ultimate goal of community service is to generate positive outcomes for society. This includes improvements in education, health, economic development, and social equity. The framework emphasizes that stakeholder engagement and institutional support are key drivers of meaningful societal impact.

Despite its importance, community service faces several obstacles. These may include limited resources, lack of time, misalignment between academic and community priorities, and resistance from stakeholders. Identifying and addressing these challenges is essential for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of service initiatives.

Conceptual Framework Diagram

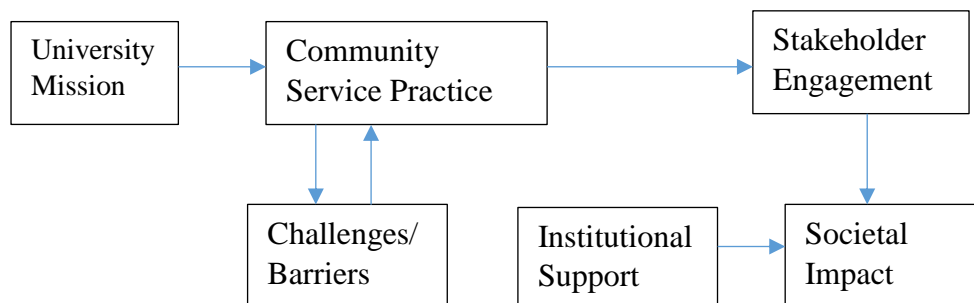


Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework (Developed by the authors)

Statement of the Problem

In Ethiopia, while most studies on higher education have primarily focused on teaching and research, some have also examined the third mission of universities. However, the majority of existing research has emphasized policy frameworks, broad program implementation, or

institutional-level reports. These studies have provided valuable insights into the strategic and policy dimensions of community service, but paid little attention to how it is actually experienced by faculty within their teaching and research roles. In the case of AAU, previous works have often described the university's initiatives in general terms without examining the day-to-day practices and challenges encountered by academic staff, who are the primary agents in implementing this mission. This creates a critical gap, as the effectiveness and sustainability of community service depend not only on institutional policies but also on how faculty members engage with and overcome barriers in the process. Addressing this gap, the present study contributes by offering a qualitative case study that illuminates faculty perspectives on the practices of AAU's community service mission. In doing so, the study extends existing literature, moves beyond descriptive accounts, and provides context-specific insights that can inform both institutional strategies at AAU and broader higher education policy in Ethiopia.

Consequently, researchers have attempted to assess this concept at various times. For example, Abebe (2019), in a historical study of university students' engagement in community service in Ethiopia, attempted to assess the two known national community services provided during the Haileseilasie and Dergue regimes. He recommends aligning the community service mission of universities with the interests of the community rather than otherwise. In another empirical study conducted at Debre Markos University, Mengist in his attempt to study the practices and challenges of the community service mission of the university, found that the challenges that affect community service practices include lack of budget, weak University-Industry Linkage (UIL), poor staff commitment, and fragile monitoring and evaluation practice from the management side (Mengist, 2022). Bekele (2020) compared two universities, Addis Ababa and Jimma, to investigate the process of institutionalizing the universities' third mission, community service, using a mixed-methods research approach. He ultimately identified the underdeveloped institutionalization of community service missions in both universities.

Desta & Belay (2018) examined the nature, benefits, challenges, and opportunities of university-community engagement in their study at the University of Gondar. They found that, despite the importance of collaborative work for both the university and the community, several challenges and constraints hinder the success of this collaboration. Wole (1999) provided an insight into the attempts of local innovations made to advance a symbolic relationship between higher education and community service in Ethiopia, noting them as an essential requirement for graduation of regular Ethiopian students of the university, the Ethiopian University Service (UES), a program of one-year student-service introduced in 1964 by the then Haileseilasie I university (now AAU). University students were then committed and enthusiastic about taking part in the service (Adamu & Balsvik, 2017). Meanwhile, this study focuses on an in depth examination of the case of AAU, the country's flagship university.

All Ethiopian universities recognize the importance of community service mission. An assessment of the mission statements of most universities in the country reveals that, in addition to their teaching and research missions, they typically aim to provide community service in response to national needs, socio-economic transformation, and the country's sustainable development. Regardless of their differences in resources and capacities, public and private universities have also been required to deliver quality teaching, research, and community service (Hunde et al., 2020, p.9).

However, more attention is given to the two missions (teaching and research) than to the community service. Although community service contributes to faculty promotion, its measurement lacks objectivity and is given a lower weight than the teaching and research missions. At AAU, the attention given to community service remains unclear, accounting for only 12.5% of the total workload. Additionally, adequate funding is not allocated to the mission, and there are structural issues, including the absence of a clear framework in the organizational structure. It is unclear why community service has not received equal attention to the other two

missions and this issue needs to be addressed.

At AAU, the implementation of the community service mission has encountered persistent challenges. Faculty members frequently report being overburdened with teaching and research responsibilities, which limits their active participation in service activities. While similar issues have been observed at other universities globally, at AAU, the problem has been documented in institutional reviews (AAU, 2021) and highlighted in internal reports from the Office of Community Engagement. This study, therefore, focuses on how faculty members at AAU experience the mission, situating the problem within the local context while acknowledging its broader significance.

By examining its practices, the findings aim to advance academic discourse and inform policies and practices that enhance the role of community service in promoting societal progress. In line with this purpose, the study is guided by the following research questions: How do faculty members at AAU engage in the implementation of the community service mission? What forms of community service practices are carried out by faculty members at AAU?

Definition of Key Terms

Faculty- staff members who are academicians (teachers, department heads, and college deans).

Community service - “mutually beneficial scholarly collaborations and partnerships between the university community and local, regional, and international communities, focused on addressing specific social, economic, and cultural challenges and developments” (AAU, 2024a, p. 8).

Community service officials/ professionals - individuals/professionals who are responsible for coordinating the

community service mission of the university and are assigned to the community service engagement office of the university.

Community service engagement office - an office established under the vice president for research and community transfer, and is responsible for managing and coordinating the community service mission of the university.

University mission - the three core missions of the university (teaching, research, and community service).

Methods

Universities, beyond teaching and research, are mandated to serve society by identifying community needs, sharing knowledge, and addressing local problems. In Ethiopia, community service is a recognized function of higher education institutions. This study examined AAU's faculty engagement in community service. The university was selected as a case study due to its long history and influential role in shaping university practices nationwide.

A qualitative research technique was used to investigate AAU's community service mission practices. An instrumental case study design was used to gain a complete understanding of the issue under consideration. Stake (2003) notes that this method allows for a comprehensive assessment of broader issues related to the university's community service mission. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, with interviews serving as the primary source.

The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed and multiple rather than fixed or universally measurable. Within this perspective, the research seeks to capture how AAU faculty, department heads, and leaders perceive and interpret the community service mission in their institutional context. Reality, from this

ontological standpoint, is shaped by social interactions, cultural practices, and institutional settings; thus, the meaning of community service at AAU is understood as dynamic and context-dependent.

Epistemologically, knowledge is regarded as subjective and co-constructed by the researcher and participants through dialogue, reflection, and interaction. This stance justifies the use of qualitative methods, particularly interviews and document analysis, which enable in-depth, context-specific insights into participants' lived experiences. As Saunders et al., (2007) and Bahari (2010) argue, social phenomena evolve through ongoing interactions, making them subject to continuous reinterpretation.

Study Participants

Five of AAU's eight colleges were intentionally selected based on their more substantial involvement in community service, as indicated by data from the Community Service Engagement Office. These colleges include: Education and Language Studies, School of Law, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Natural and Computational Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture. The rationale behind this selection was that participants from these colleges would offer more substantive insights into existing practices, the central focus of the study, compared to colleges with relatively limited engagement, which could nonetheless provide valuable data on barriers to participation.

To identify participants with direct experience or responsibility in implementing AAU's community service mission, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The sample included three university-level community service officials, along with four academic staff members, a department head, and an associate dean from each of the selected colleges. University-level officials were purposefully chosen for their comprehensive knowledge of institutional community service practices. Similarly, department heads and associate

deans were selected due to their oversight roles within their respective units.

Snowball sampling was applied to recruit academic staff, as it is particularly effective in locating information-rich individuals capable of offering nuanced perspectives. In total, thirty-three participants took part in the study.

Data Generation Tools

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in quiet settings to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. Each session lasted between thirty and eighty minutes, was audio-recorded, and supplemented with field notes. Probing questions were employed to elicit detailed and reflective responses (Gillham, 2005). To safeguard anonymity, participants were assigned unique identifiers (e.g., Int1, Int2, Int3).

In addition to the interviews, a document review was conducted to enrich and triangulate the findings. Internal documents included AAU's strategic plans, statutes, senate legislation, recruitment and promotion policies, field attachment guidelines, intellectual property policies, and annual reports. External sources comprised government policies, higher education proclamations, Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs), and other relevant directives. These documents provided essential contextual grounding and supported the validation of interview data.

Data Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the case, this study employed a rigorous thematic analysis approach, which is particularly effective for generating rich, nuanced interpretations of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Direct quotations from participants were used to substantiate key findings and enhance the credibility and authenticity of the analysis.

All interview data were transcribed non-verbatim, systematically reviewed, and coded. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into categories, which were subsequently organized into overarching themes and sub-themes. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

Document analysis was conducted as a complementary strategy to enrich and triangulate the interview data. Internal documents, including AAU's strategic plans, senate legislation, recruitment and promotion policies, field attachment guidelines, intellectual property policies, and annual reports, were examined alongside external sources such as government policies, higher education proclamations, and ESDPs. These materials provided contextual depth and supported the validation of emergent themes.

To ensure analytical trustworthiness, interview transcripts were cross-checked against audio recordings to resolve discrepancies, and document data were systematically compared with interview evidence. Peer debriefing was employed throughout the analysis to enhance credibility, reduce bias, and ensure methodological rigor. This comprehensive and systematic approach yielded a trustworthy and analytically robust account of the university's community service mission and its implementation.

Findings

Drawing from the primary research questions and the data analysis, the study's findings were organized into two main themes: *institutional support for the community service mission*, including policies and guidelines, organizational structure, and leadership commitment; and *the strategies employed to engage in community services*, such as

project-based, university-initiated, service learning, and voluntary engagement.

Institutional Support for Community Service Mission

The Ethiopian government has mandated community service as a core mission for all public and private universities. This directive is embedded in the 2019 Higher Education Proclamation, emphasizing universities' role in national development and poverty reduction. As a result, Ethiopian universities actively engage in community service activities, aligning their efforts with national priorities and local needs (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019). This commitment to community service is evident in the mission statements of most universities, which highlight the importance of contributing to socio-economic transformation and sustainable development.

As the country's oldest and largest university, AAU is expected to adhere to the proclamation and support its community service mission. The university's dedication to community service can be assessed by examining several factors, including its official policies and strategies for community engagement, the level of commitment shown by its leadership, and the specific organizational structures established to fulfill its community service goals.

Policies and Guidelines

University policies are crucial in ensuring the successful implementation of institutional missions and goals, including community service. As Sayamol et al., (2022) highlighted, institutional policies significantly shape higher education institutions' collaborations with local communities. Similarly, Spânu et al., (2024) emphasize the vital role of policy documents in effectively executing community service activities within higher education institutions. The study participants highlighted that the lack of clear policies and guidelines was one of the major factors

that deterred the effective implementation of community service at AAU. In their words:

Regarding the university's community service guidelines, several areas require improvement. At present, our approach to community service activities lacks structure and consistency. There are no clear, written guidelines that define what is expected or prohibited. Instead, instructions are occasionally issued by someone in a position of authority, directing us to take specific actions as needed. (Int17)

To date, no formal policy documents for community service have been developed. Like the evaluation forms used for assessing faculty teaching performance each semester, a dedicated evaluation form for community service activities should be created and filled out every semester to ensure faculty participation in community service. (Int1)

Incorporating teacher performance evaluations related to community engagement could be an important consideration for the university as part of its faculty appraisal process. While this is not yet a standard practice, the significance of community service is acknowledged in the university's policies and strategic planning documents. For example, the AAU Senate Legislation recognizes community service as one of its core missions aimed at addressing the nation's needs, aspirations, and priorities. This policy document even offers an operational definition of community service as "mutually beneficial scholarly collaborations and partnerships between the university community and local, regional, and international communities, focused on addressing specific social, economic, and cultural challenges and developments" (AAU, 2024a, p.8). The Senate Legislation also states that community engagement is a duty and responsibility for all academic staff and outlines clear principles and general provisions for community service at AAU.

Community service is also well-identified in the university's five-year strategic plan, which includes outreach, services, and engagement as one of its nine strategic themes (AAU, 2024b).

Contrary to the views expressed by study participants, there is a guideline for community engagement. This guideline was developed to address key challenges hindering the effective implementation of community service, such as the limited attention given to it, primarily due to the lack of a functional governance structure and unclear roles and responsibilities for academic staff concerning community engagement. These issues have impacted the university's ability to equally prioritize and execute its three core missions (AAU, 2019). The guideline outlines strategic approaches, governance structures, and other relevant aspects of the university's planned involvement in community services. The university has recognized several challenges in implementing the community engagement guideline effectively. To overcome these obstacles and ensure the institutionalization of community service, AAU developed rubrics to guide community engagement activities (AAU, 2021). These rubrics are designed to provide a clear framework for evaluating and enhancing the quality and impact of community engagement initiatives. By developing the rubrics to guide community engagement, AAU aims to streamline the integration of community service into its academic and administrative processes, ensuring that it becomes a more consistent and impactful part of the university's mission. Moreover, these rubrics are intended to support faculty in aligning their community service efforts with the university's broader strategic goals, fostering deeper connections between the institution and the communities it serves. Study participants highlighted that the absence of clear policies and guidelines is one factor that discourages them from participating in community service activities.

Research findings also indicated that when universities lack clear policies that support or encourage community service engagement, faculty may be discouraged from participating in such activities (O'Meara, 2016). Despite the existence of key policies, strategies, and

guidelines that provide clear direction for implementing community service, as revealed in the document review, this finding suggests that faculty members may not be fully aware of these resources. It indicates a potential gap in the university's efforts to effectively communicate and disseminate important documents to its stakeholders through the most efficient channels. Studies indicate that a gap in dissemination affects effective policy implementations (Ashcraft et al., 2020; Mthethwa, 2012).

Organizational Structure

The organizational structure of a university is pivotal in ensuring the successful execution of its core missions, especially those related to community service. Within higher education institutions, this mission is uniquely shaped by the institution's priorities, culture, and relationship with its stakeholders. For community service to be impactful, the structure must not only exist at the central administrative level but also extend seamlessly to the university's grassroots, such as colleges, departments, and individual academic units. At AAU, the Office of Community Services operates under the office of the Vice President for Research and Technology Transfer and is led by a director. The document review revealed that, in addition to the director, the community service office has three experts, each responsible for community relations, program integration, and grant support. While establishing the community service office, staffing it with necessary experts is a positive step, but is challenging. The human resources for the central office are insufficient for a university as big as AAU, impacting one of its core missions of community engagement. The situation is even worse when we go down the tier as community service does not have a structure at the college and department levels. One of the study participants noted, "There is an increasing expectation for community service engagement at the department and college levels, but community service structure hardly exists at these levels" (Int19).

Study participants also identified organizational structure as a factor influencing the implementation of community service.

Due to weak institutional structures, academic and administrative staff often fail to fully understand the scope or purpose of community service. This has led to a diminished sense of engagement, overshadowing most activities in the teaching and learning processes. As Int14 suggested, establishing community service structures at the departmental level could address these challenges and increase visibility. (Int22)

Decentralizing the community service framework ensures that it becomes a shared institutional endeavor, fostering collaboration across disciplines and aligning the university's resources with the needs of the communities it serves (Helling et al., 2005). In addition to decentralization, the effectiveness of organizational structure depends on its ability to provide robust procedures, support mechanisms, and channels for communication and awareness creation. At AAU, the faculty's lack of awareness about the university's community service plan is also associated with poor organizational structure. A participant said, "The primary focus should be raising awareness among staff members through an organizational structure that reaches the grassroots level, but we do not have that structure" (Int7). Another participant further highlighted the inadequacy of the current structure, stating, "Particularly in the last two years, there has been no community service at all, and I have not heard anything regarding community engagement. Nothing is being talked about it." (Int13)

An effective and well-integrated organizational structure is crucial for ensuring that faculty and staff clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in community service engagement (Wade & Demb, 2009). Such a structure also promotes active participation, empowering academic staff to make significant contributions to addressing societal challenges. However, as highlighted by the document review and participant insights, community service—despite being one of the university's three core missions—lacks an adequate organizational framework to support its activities effectively or achieve its intended goals. As a result, this mission has been comparatively under-prioritized.

Leadership Commitment

Leadership commitment is a cornerstone for effectively implementing a university's organizational missions, including community service endeavors. Strong leadership provides strategic direction, allocates resources effectively, and fosters an environment that enables community engagement initiatives. Without active support and commitment from leadership, the success of such programs may be compromised, as their guidance is crucial for aligning these efforts with the institution's overarching goals. Studies also emphasized that leadership is vital in fostering faculty involvement in community service (Holland, 2009; Sandmann & Plater, 2009). At AAU, concerns have been raised regarding the limited prioritization of community service mandates and activities within the university's organizational framework. Community service initiatives often receive less attention than the university's teaching and research missions. Study participants emphasized that these traditional academic functions are given precedence, overshadowing the importance of the community service mission. For example, a participant noted that while teaching and research are fundamental, their dominance frequently sidelines community service, reflecting a gap in institutional prioritization of core missions (Int9). The study finding further highlighted that community service is often seen as a secondary concern, if not entirely overlooked, due to the primary focus on teaching and research.

The management's main focus is on teaching and learning, with research as a secondary priority, often addressed if time permits. Community service, however, seems to be regarded as an afterthought, with a somewhat dismissive attitude. This neglect suggests that they may not fully appreciate the importance of community engagement. (Int12)

Another participant echoed this sentiment, claiming that not only community service is neglected, but even the core mission of teaching can be compromised to accommodate governmental priorities (Int4).

Highlighting concerns about the leadership's lack of commitment to community service, a respondent observed that the Community Service Office only seems to capture the leadership's attention sporadically, stating, "I question whether the management genuinely prioritizes this mission as a fundamental objective of the university." (Int2)

The trend of placing greater emphasis on teaching and research missions at the expense of community service is not unique to AAU. Research shows that universities in various countries also prioritize teaching and research over community engagement (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Málovics et al., 2024). However, as the above excerpts indicate, AAU's pronounced lack of leadership commitment further exacerbates the challenges in advancing community service as a core mission. Without a strong backing of the leadership, the implementation of community engagement initiatives risks being inconsistent and underfunded, undermining the broader objectives of the third mission of higher education. On the other hand, when there is leadership support and commitment, it is possible to have impactful community services. Kaplan (2015) highlights that Northern Illinois University owes much of its community engagement success to its top administration's consistent support and strategic leadership. Their active involvement and guidance have been instrumental in fostering and sustaining effective community involvement initiatives.

Strategies Used for Engaging in Community Services

Universities use different strategies to engage with their communities to achieve the community service mission. Common community engagement strategies comprise civic engagement, outreach and partnership, service learning, and community-based research, each with a unique focus (Muwanguzi et al., 2023). For example, the Philippine University has four key community engagement programs (Bernardo et al., 2012), including curriculum integration, institutional advocacy, community development, and volunteer formation. These strategies offer opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and alumni to become

more actively involved in community participation by living and working in a community for a certain period.

At AAU, the Senate Legislation (AAU, 2024a) and the Guideline for Community Engagement (2024b) stipulate that each academic staff member must engage in community service activities, requiring at least three credit hours each year. This mandatory participation potentially fosters communication and collaboration between the university and local communities. The document review results of the current study show that various strategies are promoted at AAU to foster university-community interactions. The major community service engagement strategies include project-based community engagement activities funded by external bodies, university-initiated and funded engagements, community service-learning, and volunteerism/individual staff-initiated engagements. Such diversification of community service participation allows faculty to address a broader range of concerns and reach a wider community.

(i) Project-based and externally funded community engagement

Not all community service mission activities at AAU are financed by its community engagement office. External organizations and funders support some. Various colleges and departments within the university undertake externally funded community service projects. While some projects employ dedicated staff recruited specifically for their implementation, faculty from the respective colleges or institutes also contribute to these efforts. Community engagement in these cases is primarily carried out by project staff, who manage the operational aspects. Faculty members, however, are actively involved, particularly in delivering training programs focused on capacity building. Beyond training, faculty members also contribute to policy development, offering insights derived from their research, which may be thematic or project-based. From the project's inception, collaboration with the university plays a key role, beginning with the design phase, which allows faculty to engage meaningfully. Students also participate in some of these

initiatives as volunteers, receiving minimal compensation, such as transportation allowances, for their contributions. Participants highlighted that the community service activities embedded within such projects align closely with the university's teaching, research, and community engagement missions. Study participants highlighted that a key benefit of this approach to community service engagement is the frequent use of research findings as the basis for these interventions. Collaboration with external stakeholders, particularly government sectors, was also noted as a crucial aspect of these projects. However, a respondent (Int32) stressed the need for the university to institutionalize such collaborations to ensure sustainability and effectiveness. Interdisciplinary collaboration across departments was cited as essential for addressing complex societal issues, and this approach is actively encouraged by the university's community engagement office.

Participants indicated that financial constraints are a major challenge to realizing the university's community service mission. External funding for projects was viewed as critical to overcoming these limitations and achieving mission objectives that the university's limited budget could not support. A respondent claims, "...given the existing budget constraint for the community service mission at the university level, such project-based and externally funded community service mechanisms help address the challenges related to implementing activities under the community service mission" (Int3). Though participants expressed a positive attitude toward this engagement method, reliance on inconsistent project funding poses a challenge, necessitating alignment with funder priorities and raising concerns about long-term sustainability. As noted by the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (2006, p. 3), reliance on project-based funding may lead to "episodic support," which hinders the development of structures necessary to sustain community engagement in the long term. Besides, participants highlighted that if such funded community service approaches were implemented continuously, the mission could become

more practical and effective. They agreed that this approach can contribute meaningfully to the mission's success.

(ii) *University-initiated and funded community engagements*

One of the primary methods for attaining AAU's community service mission is an initiative generated and funded by the university itself. This technique involves planning community service activities for the university over a specified period and within a budget assigned by the university's community service office. Utilizing internal finance, this technique allocates available resources among academic institutions by integrating service activities with pressing community needs, thereby enhancing the mission's practical impact and relevance. However, this approach requires careful analysis to align institutional goals with available budgets and ensure the long-term sustainability of community service activities.

As per the participants, although the university's funding for community services is insufficient, a certain amount of money is allocated each year for academic staff members to participate in community service activities on a competitive basis. In partnership with academic institutions, the Office for Community Service identifies themes and objectives and prepares calls for project proposals to facilitate this. Projects funded by the community service program can run from one to three years, mobilizing the target community around a shared purpose and making them the primary beneficiaries.

The university's Office of Community Service organizes activities financed by the university. Academic staff members, ideally as a team, and academic units (such as departments, colleges, and institutes) can respond to the office's call for proposals. These proposals are initially reviewed by their respective colleges or institutes before being forwarded to the Office for Community Service for final evaluation. The relevance of proposals is assessed using a format designed to analyze initiatives, taking into account available funds and priority areas. A

review team appointed by the office examines the proposals. After the final screening, the office and the project team leader or academic department sign a project agreement to ensure appropriate funding for the chosen applications.

According to the participants, university-funded community service activities are considerably limited in both their quantity and scope. Consequently, these initiatives do not effectively engage all faculties, despite the university's regulations stipulating that faculty members should allocate 12.5% of their time to community service. Nonetheless, as stated by the Vice President for Research and Technology Transfer Office (2024), in the last four years, only 73 community service projects were initiated and financed by the university, which means, on average, 19 projects per year, which is insignificant compared with the number of university faculty. Regarding this, a respondent claimed:

Although we are expected to participate in the university's community service mission, it is not easy to engage all faculty in university-funded community service activities because of the small number of projects awarded each year by the University Community Service Office. (Int26)

Any staff who engages in university-initiated community service projects is eligible to receive a certification or letter of participation, which can be used for promotion and a three-credit-hour exemption from workload per semester (AAU, 2021).

Universities play a vital role in promoting community development through various service engagements, often initiated and supported by the institution. These engagements often utilize academic staff expertise to address local or national concerns, enhance social well-being, and contribute to long-term development. However, due to economic limits, university-initiated and supported community service initiatives cannot always accommodate all academic staff members. Due to limited financial resources, the university prioritizes specific projects, limiting the

number of participating staff members. As a result, many academics may pass up opportunities to serve in their communities through institutional channels. This constraint has led to the emergence of new modes of involvement. Many academic staff members seek additional/further ways to contribute to community service and professional development.

(iii) *Community service learning/ field education*

While discussing the major forms of university-community engagement, Schuetze (2012) puts “service learning” as one of the known and recent forms of university partnership with their community. Service learning differs from field trips because it allows students to apply what they have learned in the classroom. While explaining service learning, Furco (1996) suggests that service learning is a form of practical education that benefits the service provider and the recipient by emphasizing both the service provided and the learning gained from the experience.

Academic fields use service-learning as a teaching strategy to enhance students' engagement in the curriculum and the community. This approach links classroom theory with real-world community needs by integrating community service with instruction. Bringle and Hatcher (2009) define service-learning as a credit-bearing educational experience where students engage in organized activities that address identified community needs. As a pedagogical technique, service learning fosters relationships between universities and community groups by integrating students with communities to achieve shared educational and social goals.

By integrating academic study with community service, service-learning helps students develop social responsibility and renews staff members' interest in their work. This approach strengthens the connection between theory and practice, provides students with real-world experience, fosters a sense of university community and social responsibility, and improves the mobilization of community resources and resource persons (O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009). One of the interviewees indicated that:

Classroom learning alone is often not enough for students to fully understand the content they have covered in class. Thus, students are taken into the field (community) to apply and better comprehend their theoretical knowledge through a program we call Field Education. (Int15)

Field education is crucial to the social work curriculum for training effective, competent, and ethical clinical social workers. Students and alumni recognize its importance, and accrediting bodies worldwide acknowledge its vital role in improving the quality of social work services offered to the public (Bogo, 2015; Omorogiuwa, 2023). It offers students co-curricular service opportunities that complement but are not entirely integrated into their formal academic studies. These opportunities are part of a program primarily aimed at deepening students' understanding of a particular field of study, while also placing significant importance on the service they deliver (Furco, 1996, p.5).

According to participants, the nature of the courses or disciplines can impact the level of engagement in community service (Int25, Int10, and Int31). While some courses are more academic and disciplinary, others are centered on community service (Int24). For example, the Social Work Department in universities is inherently focused on community service, as its name suggests.

Students participating in service-learning programs, such as Field Education, encounter a variety of learning experiences, including critical observation, report writing, seminars, reflective discussions, educational tours, workshops, training sessions, research, and hands-on practical interventions. Students' participation in service-learning programs enhances their understanding of community problems and needs, which can significantly contribute to addressing these issues. However, for service-learning initiatives to foster sustainable community development, Fourie (2003) highlighted the importance of integrating and iterating learning processes that engage with and draw from local knowledge systems and worldviews. This approach positions the

community as beneficiaries and active contributors to their development, enabling a genuine and lasting impact.

(iv) *Volunteer engagements/individual staff-initiated engagements*

According to the regulations established by the university, all staff members are required to engage in community service activities as part of the criteria for promotion. When staff members require a community service participation certificate—a critical component for promotion—they frequently opt to partake in activities they have independently initiated. Participants have indicated that this preference stems from the fact that university-funded and initiated community engagement projects do not adequately accommodate all staff members (Int27, Int30).

Volunteering is a vital mechanism for fostering relationships within the community and helping universities achieve their institutional objectives. This practice entails the direct and voluntary service rendered by academic staff and students as individuals or in groups to benefit the broader community (Harnish & Bridges, 2015). The Office of Community Service should actively engage volunteers from the university's academic staff and student body to advance its community service mission. According to Islary and Phungshok (2015), volunteerism is a method by which university volunteers (faculty and students) engage with the community outside the university for mutual benefits. They contend that the community members benefit from the volunteers' academic backgrounds and enjoy the capability to examine pertinent issues in the community critically. In contrast, volunteers can understand the community's dynamics, traditions, cultures, practices, and meaning systems that interplay within that community.

Participants in the current study report that volunteerism is one of the ways by which academic staff at the university engage in community service activities (Int4, Int5, and Int20). For example, (Int20) states, "Many of our activities are done on a volunteer basis." She mentions various freely given services, such as training community rights

promoters, advising vulnerable community groups on their rights, and teaching human rights issues. As stated by a respondent, volunteerism is the major category that lets academic staff engage in community service missions (Int29). Hence, the university needs to establish a culture of volunteering within its community. Buyakova and Malkova (2021) highlight volunteering and service-learning programs as crucial components in implementing the third mission of universities. This supports the idea that volunteerism is an integral part of the community service mission, making it an acceptable dimension of the university's third mission.

Given the various ways in which community service activities are practiced, AAU should evaluate and identify the approaches that can be used to excel based on its capacities and preferred interaction modalities. Undertaking this task presents both an opportunity and a responsibility for the university. Many participants in this study indicate that engaging in community service can also benefit the university in multiple ways. For instance, R19 states: "Having capable and engaged staff members can greatly benefit the university." He asserts that the university is defined by the collective efforts of its individuals, teams, and faculties. Another respondent (Int11) mentions, "Knowledge is inherently a two-way street," elaborating that university communities (staff, students, etc.) learn from the community they engage with. This respondent also notes that significant research topics can emerge from such community interactions.

Although literature indicates that volunteering provides individualized benefits for students and staff members, the benefits are even more extensive. The HEACF states: "Volunteering helps to promote a fairer, more cohesive society in which individuals feel they have a stake. It also helps to build bridges between communities and local organizations such as higher education institutions" (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005, p.1). Further emphasizing the benefits, a participant (Int18) asserted that community service cultivates a sense of ownership and connection from the community's perspective.

Additionally, a participant (Int8) noted that community service significantly enhances the university's reputation through active promotion. Several participants also associate community service initiatives with direct financial returns for the university. They suggest that certain communities or organizations may possess the financial capacity to seek the university's expertise for various research projects, thereby establishing mutual benefits through financial support and access to specialized knowledge (Int10, Int16). Stressing the importance of volunteer service in universities to engage with their community, Zhang and Liu (2023) noted that through volunteering, the resources of universities, including the professional expertise of the faculty, can be matched with societal needs to contribute to various services to the community.

Despite the engagement models on the service mission, each academic staff member is expected to engage in issues related to their expertise. For instance, physicians should engage in medical topics, agricultural academic staff should promote agricultural initiatives, and law academic staff should address legal service matters. Additionally, academic staff members must participate in awareness-raising sessions by providing training on the community service mission and engaging in the services. Most participants indicated that individual staff members' participation in various initiatives is considered community service. Participants noted that academic staff may engage in volunteer activities both individually and as part of teams, including involvement in professional societies, ethical review committees, board memberships, and other diverse enterprises. One interviewee remarked, "Consider the time they dedicate to such activities without remuneration; it is undoubtedly recognized as community service." (Int17)

Zhang and Liu (2024), in their study in Shenzhen, the pioneer city in China to establish a "City of Volunteers," mentioned that by impacting young minds and contributing to the cultivation of a culture of volunteerism and character development, universities have integrated

volunteer service into their campus culture through effective institutional oversight, infrastructure enhancement, and brand development.

Conclusions

This lack of adequate organizational structure highlights the importance of AAU enhancing its organizational structure and processes to ensure that community service is fully integrated into its institutional priorities. Strengthening this framework would elevate community engagement to a more prominent and functional aspect of the university's mission, fostering greater societal impact and alignment with its strategic objectives. This highlights the necessity for universities like AAU to adopt a more balanced approach that elevates the status of community service alongside teaching and research, ensuring a more holistic contribution to societal development.

The study reveals that although the community service mission is recognized as one core mission, its practice within AAU is often weak. Faculty engagement in community service falls short of expectations, and the university's third mission—community service—is not being fully realized. Many academic staff members are indifferent to the community service mission. The faculties are lagging in community service practices because of issues related to weak institutional support for the community service mission, such as policies and strategic documents, leadership commitment, and organizational structure.

Rather than meaningfully integrating community service into their professional roles, the AAU allows its faculty to participate in the mission in various unsystematic ways. Some of these ways include project-based community engagement activities funded by external bodies, university-initiated and funded engagements, community service-learning/Field Education, and volunteerism/individual staff-initiated engagements.

The study found that community service engagement practices are limited. So it is recommended that the university establish rules that facilitate the engagement of academic staff in community service initiatives. Besides, AAU needs to consider awareness-raising sessions for the faculty on the importance of the community service mission. Promoting a culture of engagement and empathy, and establishing partnerships in different university units, can lead to better accomplishment of the mission's objectives. The Office of Community Service should assume full responsibility of executing activities related to the community service mission by establishing and continuously revising effective policies and guidelines to improve the practice.

The current structure places responsibility for community service at the top management level but lacks practical implementation at the college and departmental levels. Since significant community service work is expected at these levels, this structure needs to be reassessed and improved to promote inter-unit collaboration. Hence, the findings provide universities elsewhere with valuable insights into improving their approach to community service and achieving the mission's objectives.

Implications

To develop academic staff practices of the community service mission, the study suggests establishing formal communication channels between different university units, providing incentive programs and motivating staff, ensuring strong leadership support for community service initiatives, recognizing and rewarding excellence in community service activities, revising the community service guidelines, prioritizing accountability in the university environment, and allocating dedicated resources. Therefore, it is recommended that clear guidelines be established to facilitate the engagement of academic staff in community service initiatives. Besides, AAU needs to consider awareness-raising sessions for the faculty on the importance of the community service mission. Promoting a culture of engagement and empathy, and establishing partnerships among different university units, can lead to

better accomplishment of the mission's objectives. The Office of Community Service should assume full responsibility for executing activities related to the community service mission by establishing and continuously revising effective policies and guidelines to improve the practice.

The necessity for collective action, informed strategies, and ongoing research to enhance community service missions in higher education institutions is highlighted. The findings aim to advance academic discourse and inform policies and practices that enhance the role of community service in promoting societal progress, thereby expanding the existing literature in this area.

Limitation

One notable limitation of this study is the exclusion of students, who represent a core constituency in the university community. As primary beneficiaries and potential contributors to community service initiatives, their perspectives could have offered valuable insights into the relevance, accessibility, and impact of such programs. Including student voices might have also illuminated gaps in engagement, motivation, or institutional support mechanisms that influence participation. Moreover, the study did not incorporate colleges with minimal active involvement in community service activities. While the focus on more engaged colleges allowed for a deeper exploration of existing practices, the absence of less active units limited the opportunity to understand structural, cultural, or resource-related barriers to participation. Insights from these colleges could have enriched the analysis by revealing underlying constraints, institutional disincentives, or competing priorities that hinder community engagement, thereby informing more inclusive and targeted strategies for future improvement. Subsequent research on community service practices is encouraged to overcome these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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