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Fostering Intra-University Collaborative Culture In Marginalised Institutions

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Fostering Intra-University Collaborative Culture In Marginalised Institutions

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Abstract

Collaboration is essential for success in community-engaged research and development projects, particularly in academic institutions, where interdisciplinary practice is becoming more prevalent. However, lack of communication, trust, and shared goals, among other factors, make university researchers face challenges which often deter effective intra-university collaboration. Consequently, this leads to missed opportunities and duplication of efforts, making it almost impossible for universities to address critical societal challenges. This paper emanates from a qualitative study in which academic staff and postgraduate students drawn from all faculties of the University of Venda reflected on strengthening a culture of collaboration among researchers and enhancing their chances of being relevant in historically disadvantaged communities. Data were collected through interest group-specific reflection circles and online interviews before being subjected to thematic content analysis. Findings reveal that (a) building a collaborative culture; (b) facilitating collaboration; (c) project management for collaboration, communication and feedback; (d) recognition and rewards, and (e) encouraging diversity and inclusion were important ways to strengthen the partnership between researchers in previously marginalised communities. This study contends that interdisciplinary collaboration could enhance researchers' capabilities and an institution's academic standing by ensuring the university-engaged research effectiveness in the rural communities it serves. Strengthening collaboration among researchers within the same rural-based university is essential because it allows the university to achieve its goals, advance knowledge and contribute to social change in a meaningful, sustainable manner.

Keywords: Collaboration, community engagement, development projects, interdisciplinary practice, intra-university culture, reflection circles, rural development

Favoriser une culture de collaboration intra-universitaire dans les institutions marginalisées

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Résumé

La collaboration est essentielle à la réussite des projets de recherche et développement impliquant la communauté, en particulier dans les établissements universitaires, où la pratique interdisciplinaire est de plus en plus répandue. Cependant, le manque de communication, de confiance et d'objectifs communs, entre autres facteurs, place les chercheurs universitaires face à des difficultés qui freinent souvent une collaboration intra-universitaire efficace. Par conséquent, cela entraîne des occasions manquées et des doublons, rendant presque impossible pour les universités de relever les défis sociétaux critiques. Cet article est issu d'une étude qualitative dans laquelle des enseignants-chercheurs et des étudiants de troisième cycle issus de toutes les facultés de l'Université de Venda ont réfléchi au renforcement d'une culture de collaboration entre chercheurs et à l'amélioration de leurs chances d'être pertinents au sein de communautés historiquement défavorisées. Les données ont été recueillies lors de cercles de réflexion spécifiques à des groupes d'intérêt et d'entretiens en ligne, avant d'être soumises à une analyse de contenu thématique. Les résultats révèlent que (a) la création d'une culture de collaboration ; (b) la facilitation de la collaboration ; (c) la gestion de projet pour la collaboration, la communication et le retour d'information ; (d) la reconnaissance et les récompenses, et (e) l'encouragement de la diversité et de l'inclusion ont été des moyens importants de renforcer le partenariat entre chercheurs issus de communautés auparavant marginalisées. Cette étude soutient que la collaboration interdisciplinaire pourrait améliorer les capacités des chercheurs et la réputation académique d'une institution en garantissant l'efficacité de la recherche universitaire au sein des communautés rurales qu'elle dessert. Le renforcement de la collaboration entre chercheurs au sein d'une même université rurale est essentiel, car cela permet à l'université d'atteindre ses objectifs, de faire progresser les connaissances et de contribuer au changement social de manière significative et durable.

Mots-clés : Collaboration, engagement communautaire, projets de développement, pratique interdisciplinaire, culture intra-universitaire, cercles de réflexion, développement rural

1.0 Introduction

Historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa continue to face numerous challenges stemming from the legacy of apartheid, an institutionalised system of racial segregation and discrimination that ended in 1994 (Saka, 2024). Skewed economic distribution and high unemployment leading to increased poverty and inequality, health and education disparities, and a lack of basic services, are some of the difficulties that historically underprivileged communities in South Africa continue to face, perpetuating intergenerational poverty cycles.

Interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers in rural-based universities, which are sites for innovation, research, development, and knowledge diffusion, is essential. A vibrant academic environment fosters interdisciplinary collaborations between scholars, which is crucial to developing academia and addressing pressing societal issues (Bebegal-Mirabent & Martin-Sanchez, 2024). The importance of this collaborative culture within universities cannot be overstated, especially in South Africa, where historically underserved institutions strive to compete nationally and globally. According to Mabachi et al. (2020), these institutions frequently struggle with problems like scarce resources, competing agendas, institutional bureaucracy, and inadequate finance; therefore, if the growth of a collaborative culture is not encouraged, the institution's ability to execute its goals may be problematic.

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the key challenges to intra-university engaged research collaboration within historically marginalised institutions in South Africa.
- To develop strategies and recommendations to strengthen intra-university collaboration culture among interdisciplinary researchers in historically disadvantaged institutions, considering the unique context and challenges they face.

2.0 Background

The legacy of apartheid has left deep-rooted disparities, especially among historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa. They face many challenges and limitations such as (a) economic inequality, (b) unemployment, (c) inadequate access to basic services, (d) poor educational infrastructure, (e) housing challenges, (f) health disparities, (g) social fragmentation, and (h) crime, among other challenges (Ntombela & Ntombela, 2022). It is important to note that these challenges and limitations are interconnected and deeply rooted in South Africa's historical context. Addressing them requires comprehensive and sustained efforts in policy reforms, targeted interventions, equitable resource allocation, and inclusive economic development.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of engaged research for rural development, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities (Adade Williams et al., 2020; Netshandama, 2023; Thondhlana et al., 2021). Most marginalised communities in developing nations often lack the resources and expertise to address the complex issues they face, such as limited access to healthcare, struggling economies, deteriorating climate and environmental concerns, and communication infrastructure challenges. Apart from these common problems, each community usually faces unique challenges that require unique answers and solutions. As a result, the various university faculties and departments must

work together to effectively address all aspects of the challenges that may need answers in the target community. Cowie et al. (2020) are concerned about the lack of or delayed development in these communities, and they propose enhancing engaged research work.

Engaged research is citizen focused. Its importance stems from its dependency on raw, unfiltered information from citizens, particularly those previously excluded due to colonialism, which sidelined the majority black population. Pelletier et al. (2020) emphasised the significance of recognising community members as valuable experts to prevent the perception or experience of forced collaboration or tokenism. Thus, community-engaged research promotes meaningful science and community engagement to improve the community, increase the quality and impact of research, and enhance the capacity to adopt evidence-based practice. The purpose of engaged research for rural development is to build genuine partnerships (Luger et al., 2020) that can help foster mutual respect and trust, making it easier for people to participate in future studies, especially those from populations that have historically been excluded.

Engaged research involves the active participation of researchers and communities where critical issues requiring urgent solutions are identified. Thus, researchers working with and in communities may help co-create culturally sensitive and locally relevant solutions to perennial challenges. Therefore, universities must strive to foster a culture of collaboration within the university to conduct successful research work for the rural development of South Africa's historically deprived communities. Developing interdisciplinary research teams, creating knowledge-sharing platforms, and fostering collaboration form the groundwork for successful joint projects and promote a culture of collaboration within the university. According to Swart et al. (2022), teams from different faculties must develop knowledge-sharing mechanisms before approaching external communities. Research results of such coordinated efforts can translate into tangible benefits that can contribute to the development of the target communities. As a result, through dedicated research, the university can partner with local communities to develop innovations and solutions to the challenges those communities are facing. Universities, by definition, are centres of knowledge and innovation with wide expertise and, therefore, play an essential role in enabling social innovation through their teaching, research, and community engagement activities (Bayuo et al., 2020).

A collaborative and participatory approach involving local communities, researchers, and other stakeholders in addressing real-world problems and promoting positive social transformation demonstrates engaged research. Thus, successful engaged research necessitates close collaboration and communication among all parties involved—internal and external—in any community initiative (Nyahodza & Higgs, 2017). By first fostering a culture of collaboration within universities and spreading it to the broader concerted work with local traditional authorities, universities can create more effective, sustainable, and equitable solutions for rural development in these communities. Interdisciplinary research involving communities fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among university stakeholders and rural communities, merging scholarly and socially attained skills and ensuring sustainable solutions that remain relevant over time (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022).

Collaborative community-engaged research is important because it produces research findings that are more inclusive and relevant to the needs and priorities of the community involved. However, researchers working within the same academic institutions in different faculties may face challenges in

collaboration. When different, distinct intra-university research team members collaborate, they bring different research values, cultures, and working methods which may impede progress (Yang et al., 2020). Poor communication, distrust, and unclear goals can complicate and affect the research work conducted within the university. In their study, O’Doherty et al. (2018) propose that poor communication among collaborating researchers from different faculties and departments may be due to a lack of resources, insufficient institutional support, and limited tools and strategies for directing community initiatives. While Liu et al. (2021) opine that social norms, cognitive biases, hierarchies, and bad relationships are facilitators and barriers to effective intra-institutional communication efforts. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2021) argue that poor communication can also be a reaction to ‘poor communication’ such as bad body language, which may be viewed as disrespectful by other intra-university members.

Researchers from different fields may also have different priorities, approaches, and communication styles, making collaboration problematic. In their study, Rapanta et al. (2020) assert that time constraints frequently affect intra-university engaged research work because it requires a significant investment of time and resources, making it difficult for researchers to juggle teaching, research, and other responsibilities. Therefore, collaboration for engaged research is essential since it necessitates the dismantling of traditional university silos. Departments, schools, faculties, and research centres are examples of silos. It can be difficult for universities to promote engaged research when there is a lack of communication and collaboration between these silos (Randolph et al., 2022). They further indicated that for university community-engaged research to succeed, it must begin with collaborative training that is community-informed, employing internal and external experts and community leaders as co-facilitators (Randolph et al., 2022). Consequently, engaged research with little or no understanding can compromise the noble endeavour.

Besides poor communication, trust and shared values are required for effective collaboration among interdisciplinary research committees. Camilleri et al. (2023) concur that trust and shared values are vital to institutional collaboration. People who trust one another are more likely to collaborate and share resources, which can lead to stronger relationships and the growth of social capital. Carr et al. (2018, p.39) identified social capital elements such as shared values, understanding, and trust as valuable in intra-institutional projects. Vasseur et al. (2022) identified social trust, institutional trust, and social networks as the three elements of social capital. Therefore, social capital is the backbone of intra-university engaged research projects.

While certain factors can improve the effectiveness of stakeholders working together in community engagement, some universities do not promote authentic collaboration. Instead, they pressure researchers to collaborate by offering financial rewards or other motivations. This can push researchers to indulge in collaboration half-heartedly but just to tick boxes by publishing co-authored community-related papers without collaborating (Kienast, 2023). According to Haslam et al. (2020), genuine collaboration should be motivated by a sincere interest and willingness to work with all members from different disciplines and backgrounds towards a common goal, not just for financial gain.

Most researchers in higher education institutions do not realise the power of interdisciplinary community-engaged collaborative research. Yet, it is crucial for institutional and personal professional growth and standing locally,

nationally, and globally. Studies by various scholars, such as Legg and Hodges (2024) and Kassel et al. (2024), among others, resonate with this study on the importance of interdisciplinary community-engaged collaborative research. It is essential in addressing the problems faced by historically disadvantaged communities since it improves comprehension, empowers communities, makes the most of resources, encourages holistic solutions, and promotes long-term sustainability (Adade et al., 2020). This background motivates this study, which sought to examine challenges and ways to address these impediments of intra-university engaged research collaboration culture in historically underserved communities in South Africa.

3.0 Problem Statement

The problem facing research and development practitioners in South African institutions is limited collaboration, which diminishes the quality and impact of their projects. These practitioners frequently encounter challenges such as scarce resources, conflicting priorities, institutional bureaucracy, insufficient funding, time constraints, resistance to change, and unclear research goals. Additionally, poor communication, lack of trust, and misaligned objectives further hinder collaboration, leading to missed opportunities, duplicated efforts, and inefficiencies. Effective collaboration is essential to maximise results, enhance expertise, foster innovation, and leverage collective knowledge. Without it, projects suffer from compromised goals and wasted potential. This issue is particularly dire in historically underserved institutions, which struggle to optimise resources, address societal challenges, and compete with urban-based counterparts. This study, therefore, seeks to identify the key challenges and develop strategies to strengthen collaboration among research and development practitioners working within historically underserved institutions. This study's problem is significant for South Africa because it addresses the critical issue of limited collaboration among research and development practitioners within the same institutions. In a country where resources are often scarce and bureaucratic hurdles abound, effective collaboration becomes imperative to enhance the quality and impact of projects.

3.1 Integrated Reflective Model

This study employs Yeoh and Cheong's (2023) integrated reflective model to examine how academic staff and postgraduate students reflect on interdisciplinary community engagement activities with the intention to learn and benefit from their experiences. It investigates how these activities foster collaboration among participants and enhance their relevance and impact in the historically disadvantaged communities they serve. The integrated model combines three reflective models developed by (a) Jasper's (2003) ERA cycle (J) (b) Driscoll's (2006) Model of Reflection (D), and (c) Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle (G) (Yeoh & Cheong, 2023). It blends them into a cohesive framework (see Figure 1).

The merged models reduced Gibbs's six-stage cycle to align with Jasper and Driscoll's three-stage models. Each model's strengths are preserved while the other models address the weaknesses. Thus, Yeoh and Cheong's integrated model provides a comprehensive framework for analysing participants' experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of their engagement processes. Yeoh and Cheong's circular model maintains repetitive nurture, particularly embedded in Jasper's ERA model, consisting of three abstract nouns, ensuring reflection is a continuous process. Driscoll's (1994, 2007, as cited by Yeoh & Cheong, 2023) model of reflection, developed and influenced by Borton's

(1970, as cited by Yeoh & Cheong, 2023) work and Kolb’s (1984, as cited by Yeoh & Cheong, 2023) experiential learning cycle, proposes trigger questions: “What? So what?” and “Now what?” (Mulryan-Kyne, 2021, p. 507). These trigger questions provide clarity and focus through straightforward questioning, simplifying Jasper’s abstract nouns. Similarly, the integration of Gibbs’ (1998) six-step Reflective Cycle—Description–Feeling–Evaluation–Analysis–Conclusion–Action plan—adds a layer of depth to the reflection process, particularly in evaluating and analysing experiences, thoughts, and actions can help reflect the reliability and applicability of participants’ observations (Paterson & Chapman, 2013; Yeoh & Cheong, 2023). Together, these models create a balanced framework that supports detailed analysis and practical application, ensuring that participants can derive meaningful insights from their interdisciplinary community engagement activities.

Reflective practices are essential in community projects and initiatives, facilitating complex participant interactions. Through iterative reflection, individuals and groups shape and exchange values, behaviours, perceptions, and knowledge. This process fosters the creation of dynamic structures and spaces that enable action and drive social change (Moreno et al., 2020).

Figure 1. An integrated reflective model combining Jasper (J), Driscoll (D) and Gibbs (G).

Jasper’s (J) (2003) ERA cycle of reflective practice

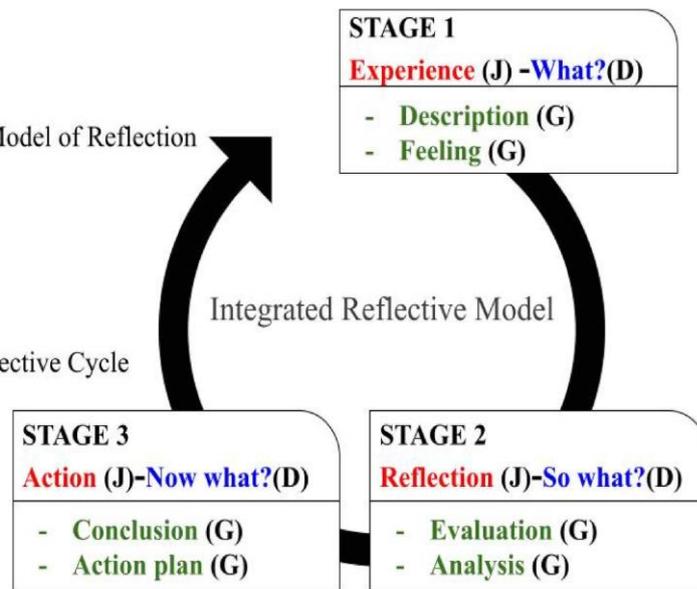
1. Experience
2. Reflection
3. Action

Driscoll’s (D) (2007) Model of Reflection

1. What?
2. So what?
3. Now what?

Gibbs’ (G) (1988) Reflective Cycle

1. Description
2. Feeling
3. Evaluation
4. Analysis
5. Conclusion
6. Action plan



Source: (Yeoh & Cheong, 2023, p.7)

4.0 Research Methodology

This qualitative study utilises reflections from academic staff and postgraduate students across all faculties of the University of Venda. The participants are members of the community engagement committee and have served in this role for over a year at the time of participation. Jarvis and Baloyi (2020) claim that reflective study design is an active process coined by the father of educational reflection, Dewey, in the 1900s. They say that reflection is essential for professional competence development in all professions. Reflective study enables researchers to gain new perspectives on existing practices, critically appraise their work, and develop new insights through introspection (Stewart, 2021). Reflective data can be collected through different data collection techniques. Though earlier studies which used reflections were mostly aligned with educational and health studies, contemporary researchers from different fields have started adopting this design. Chen (2023) notes three different contexts where reflection could occur: reflection-on-action, which refers to reflection after an action; reflection-in-action, which happens during an action; and reflection-for-action, which refers to reflections done before an action occurs. The researchers can safely argue that this study utilised all three categories identified by Chen (2023) since the participants had previously engaged in interdisciplinary research, they were also in action, since some collaborative research projects were running and for action, since there were some new future-engaged projects they were designing.

The study population comprised 65 members—staff and postgraduate students—of the community engagement committee led by the Institute for Rural Development (IRD) director at the University of Venda. A typical case purposive sampling strategy was adopted, enabling the researcher to identify information-rich participants (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Sixteen community engagement committee coordinators were recruited to participate in the one-day brainstorming workshop, while 12 ordinary members were subsequently recruited to respond to Google Docs asynchronous interview questions online. Torres et al. (2017, p. 23) define asynchronous video interviews as web-based interactions that do not require both parties to be online simultaneously, often termed ‘one-way’ or ‘non-live’ exchanges. While their study emphasises video, the core principle of asynchronous self-documentation applies equally to text-based tools like Google Forms. In this study, the researchers adapted their framework using Google Forms as a structured, non-live method to collect participants' reflections. Participants were selected from all four faculties—(a) Health Sciences; (b) Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education; (c) Management, Commerce, and Law; and (d) Science, Engineering, and Agriculture, with experience in citizen-driven community development initiatives with six traditional authorities, undersigned Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs). The coordinators and committee members who previously participated in the 2022/2023 interdisciplinary engaged scholarship paper writing projects were considered. The failure of the two projects, despite the effort and resources put in by the IRD, motivated the director to organise a collaborative leadership reflective workshop, which also inspired this study.

Female coordinators were assigned even numbers during the leadership reflective workshop, and male coordinators were assigned odd numbers. The director chaired the reflective workshop, and the participants shared feedback on the multidisciplinary projects in small groups of four. The small focus groups facilitated a structured, reflective, and efficient data collection process where participants reflected on the two study questions. Strahan and Poteat (2020, p. 1) commended reflections as a method that enabled participants to connect

interests, engagement, and accomplishment to varying extents, enhancing self-introspection and responsible decision-making capacities. They further claim that a community that encourages introspection also offers a platform for individuals to articulate their initial thoughts or emotions, which is necessary for collaborative activities. Participants wrote concise reflective answers on notepads, which were gathered as raw data. To identify important themes through iterative comparison (Gibbs' Analysis; Driscoll's 'So what?'). The researchers arranged the reflective notes in accordance with Gibbs' Description phase and Driscoll's 'What?' stage. Ultimately, tactics and suggestions for enhancing interdisciplinary cooperation were combined into practical sub-themes, mirroring Driscoll's 'Now what?' and Jasper's transformative results. This integrated approach thoroughly analysed collaborative experiences within marginalised institutional contexts by combining Driscoll's staged questioning, Jasper's emphasis on practical application, and Gibbs' structured reflective cycle.

Besides the reflective focus groups, data were also collected using online asynchronous interviews from the IRD-led community of practice group members. Technological advancements have facilitated online methods for qualitative data collection, offering a user-friendly alternative to traditional face-to-face interviews (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021, p.396). In this study, asynchronous interview data were gathered through Google Forms, allowing the participants to reflect on their responses anonymously and at their convenience, as supported by Opara et al. (2021). Opara et al. (2021) further claim that Google Docs is underutilised as a tool to facilitate qualitative interviews within research. It is an efficient word processing software which has the potential for conducting online interviews in qualitative data collection. They assert that Google Docs enables efficient online data collection by eliminating transcription needs and facilitating participants' reach in real-time without any traveling costs. However, worries over dropout rates, poor rapport, and a lack of non-verbal clues in online interviews are highlighted by Harris et al. (2024). This study minimised the impact of the limitations by triangulating online asynchronous interview findings with focus group data. Thus, ordinary members' views were used as secondary data to support the analysis and interpretation of primary findings gathered through reflective focus group discussions.

4.1 Ethical Issues

All the selected participants signed the consent form before the reflective workshop and completed the Google Docs forms. No one was coerced to join the reflective focus groups or to respond to the asynchronous reflective interview questions, but they willingly agreed to participate. Despite agreeing to use their deliberations for research, this study protects the participants' identities.

5.0 Results of Qualitative Study

This study used reflexive thematic analysis. This flexible, user-friendly and adaptable qualitative research method identifies and interprets data patterns or themes (Byrne, 2022). It helped to gather rich and detailed data from the participants' experiences, opinions, and perspectives. Reflective thematic analysis follows a six-phase process for data engagement, coding, and theme development (Byrne, 2022). Using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework to explore participants' experiences and perspectives, the first author familiarised herself with the reflective focus group data, jotted down notes and analysed data, fished out themes and subthemes to address interdisciplinary collaboration challenges among the University of Venda engaged researchers. The second author cross-checked and revised the proposed themes and

subthemes to ensure accuracy, consistency, and coherence. Writing up was done mainly by the first author, and the second author reread and tightened the loose ends of the report. The approach was suitable for the research inquiry and allowed the researchers to gather extensive and intricate information regarding the participants' encounters and viewpoints. Naeem et al. (2023) applauded this approach because it allows the story within the data to unfold organically and acknowledges the researcher's pivotal role in creating knowledge, which is inherently subjective (Cena et al., 2024). The asynchronous online interviews were conducted after finalising the focus group findings, allowing participants to reflect and contribute additional insights to complement the coordinators' perspectives. The findings will be presented concurrently under the identified themes.

Question 1: What are the key challenges to intra-university engaged research collaboration within historically marginalised institutions in South Africa?

An analysis of all 16 participant responses (reflections) was aligned and merged into six main themes by merging related ideas. The themes were (a) building a collaborative culture, (b) facilitating collaboration, (c) project management for collaboration, (d) communication and feedback, (e) recognition and rewards, and (f) diversity and inclusion. These are analysed in detail as main themes below.

Question 2: What strategies and recommendations can be developed to enhance the culture of intra-university collaboration among interdisciplinary researchers in historically disadvantaged institutions, considering the distinct context and challenges they encounter?

Under this question, participants reflected on possible solutions to address the six issues/main themes identified in question one. From their reflections, the researchers identified and analysed 22 strategies under each central theme outlined below as subthemes.

This study employed Yeoh and Cheong's (2023) integrated reflective model as an analytical framework to critically examine the challenges and potential solutions associated with intra-university interdisciplinary collaboration within a historically marginalised higher education institution in South Africa. The researchers examined and consolidated the findings corresponding to both research questions (see Figures 2–7), which revealed recurring patterns. Each primary theme delineates a distinct area of concern, and the subthemes show the proposed interventions that exhibit cross-cutting applicability across multiple identified challenges in interdisciplinary collaboration. This interconnectedness underscores the systemic nature of the barriers and the potential for integrated strategies to address them.

5.1 Theme 1: Building a Collaborative Culture

This was one of the most popular themes. All the participants highlighted the challenges interdisciplinary researchers encounter in building a collaborative culture. They concluded that interdisciplinary researchers from historically disadvantaged institutions were pompous and did not like working fairly with postgraduate students. However, participants 1, 4, 9, and 16 were of the view that researchers from different departments and faculties preferred working in silos. This resonates with the assertions by Rapanta et al. (2020) who bemoan the other pressing responsibilities which staff members have to deal with, which keep them preoccupied, leaving no room to focus on building a conducive interdisciplinary collaborative environment. Leveraging diverse perspectives and expertise, merging strengths and minimising weaknesses of

each discipline to address challenges and achieve common goals effectively is crucial. It would help to create an environment that encourages and supports a collaborative culture. When the participants were asked for their views on the strategies and recommendations to deal with the struggle of building a collaborative culture, they suggested five recommendations (see Figure 2). While coordinators noted reluctance among different disciplines to effectively collaborate in engaged scholarship, though consenting, the committee members added that hierarchy and ego often discourage juniors' and postgraduates' involvement, highlighting a perceived selectiveness that undermines inclusivity for all.

Figure 2. Theme 1 and subthemes.



5.2 Theme 2: Facilitating Collaboration

Some coordinators who participated in the reflective analysis of their experience as members of failed interdisciplinary engaged research suggested facilitating collaboration as a common challenge, especially when multidisciplinary researchers are expected to work on one project together. For example, Participants 5, 9, 14, and 16 cited that facilitating researchers from different faculties is challenging, hindering effective collaboration. The solutions submitted by the participants are clearly articulated in Figure 3. Concerning the collaboration challenges, committee members confirmed the difficulty of coordinating multidisciplinary teams, citing inconsistent institutional support and lack of clear leadership as barriers, which mirrors coordinators' concerns about fragmented efforts. To motivate what they referred to as boundary-crossing activities, Qi et al. (2024) propose expanding funding bodies to promote productive interactions across different fields and facilitate research and knowledge flow.

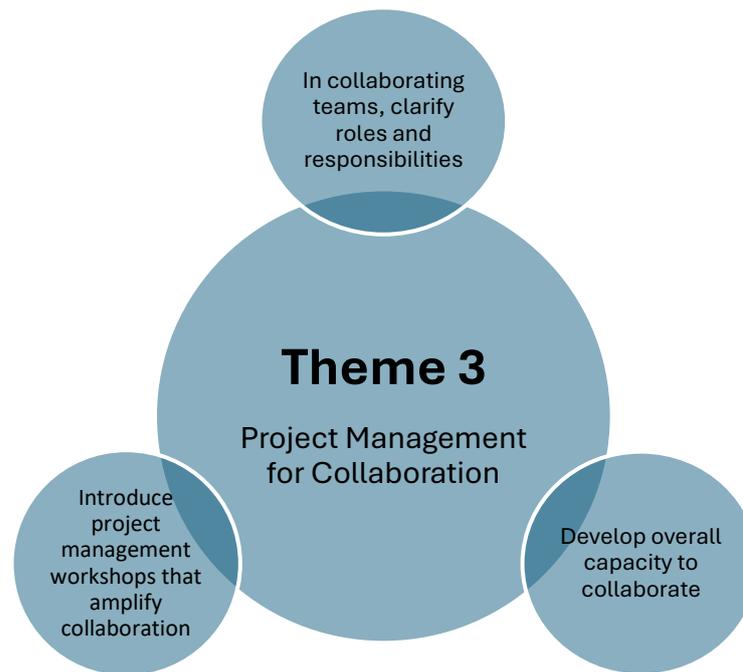
Figure 3: Theme 2 and subthemes.



5.3 Theme 3: Project Management for Collaboration

Most participants felt that a lack of project collaboration management skills was a challenge that many academics were unwilling to accept. Participants 1, 7, 10, 13, and 12 highlighted this theme. The fact that the members of this community engagement scholarship were all from the lowest to the highest academics worsened these problems, as stated by Participant 10. In developing proposals for addressing project management collaboration challenges effectively, participants suggested solutions articulated in Figure 4. Like coordinators' reflections attained from the committee members through the Google Forms interview responses acknowledged weak project management skills among researchers and emphasised the lack of formal training and unclear role allocations as major contributors to failed initiatives. Most of the participants proposed solutions to address the challenge hindering effective project management collaboration at the institution. They cited the importance of a dedicated funding mechanism for interdisciplinary projects, structured collaboration among diverse members, improved communication tools, project management training, and multidisciplinary research techniques training. To overcome these challenges, Nwulu et al. (2023) mostly resonated with this study's findings, though they excluded the issue of funding, which is pivotal in a rural-based, historically disadvantaged institution. However, they proposed that managers adopt digital tools for real-time data sharing as crucial in contemporary management initiatives, even though the study context is not privy to such sophisticated technologies.

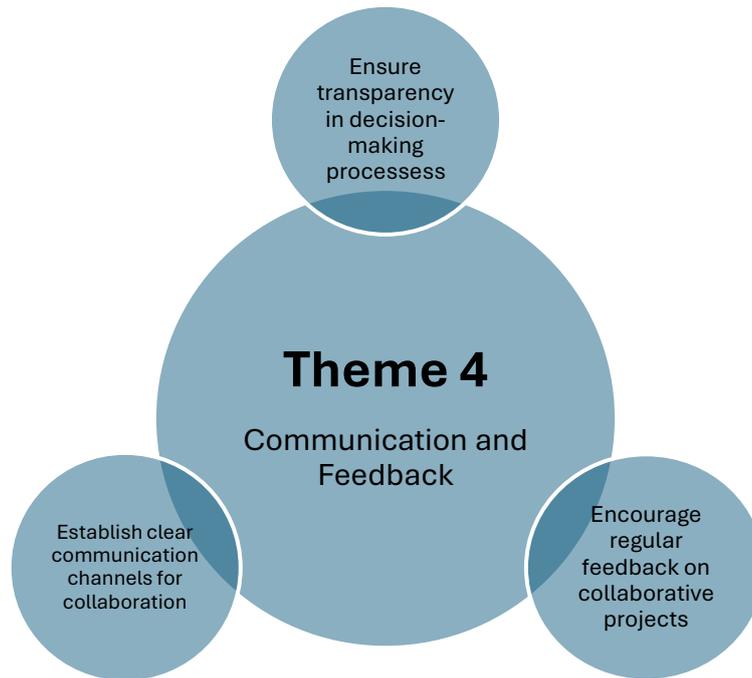
Figure 4. Theme 3 and subthemes.



5.4 Theme 4: Communication and Feedback

Figure 5 shows one popular theme according to the participants' reflections. All the participants raised concerns about communication challenges and delayed or a lack of feedback. For instance, some junior participants cited a lack of feedback from seniors as their primary challenge. In contrast, seniors felt juniors did not bring input and feedback when given tasks, hence the failed paper projects. Participants 1, 5, 9, 13, 14, 15, and 16 cited the university location as challenging to effective intra-university communication among researchers. Since the institution is in a rural context, sometimes stakeholders encounter connectivity issues, frustrating communication or sending feedback on time. Participants suggested possible recommendations for help in dealing with these setbacks among engaged researchers, tabulated in Figure 5. Coordinators and committee members all pointed to breakdowns in communication. However, committee members were particularly critical of the absence of timely and constructive feedback from seniors, often leaving junior contributors feeling undervalued and excluded. Marzano et al. (2006) have highlighted the value of communication as a crucial tool for boosting the efficacy of engaged scholarship in interdisciplinary research since 2006. Building on this fundamental realisation, Tangwe and Benyin (2025) contend that promoting interdisciplinarity in higher education research and learning requires and benefits strategic communication. Together, these perspectives highlight a growing consensus that communication as a skill and a strategy enables interdisciplinary collaboration to thrive across an evolving academic context.

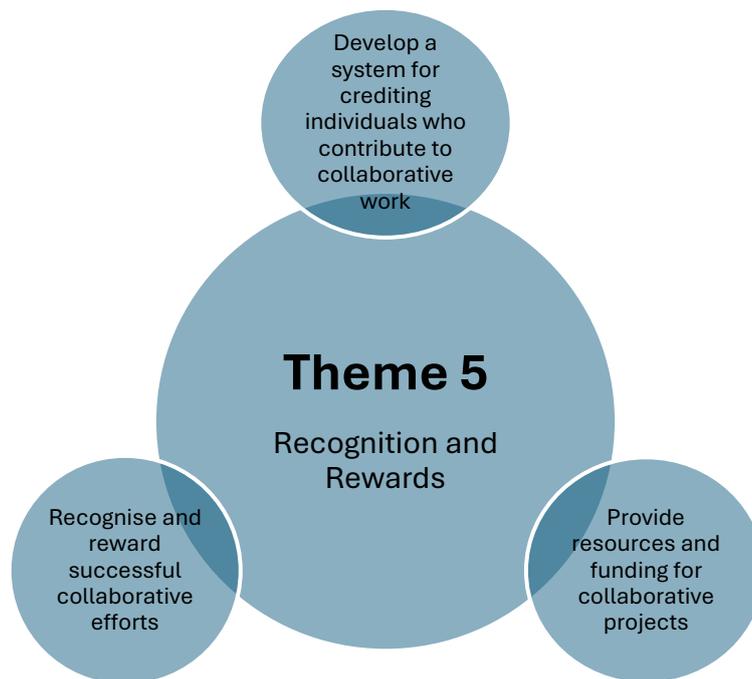
Figure 5. Theme 4 and subthemes.



5.5 Theme 5: Recognition and Rewards

Participants 3, 9, and 15 identified a lack of recognition and rewards as a limitation to developing an efficient and sustainable intra-university collaboration culture. Thus, participants are discouraged by the lack of rewards or recognition when teams push through all the other challenges to achieve success. Participants 6 and 4 pointed out that the responsible stakeholder needs to be considerate when looking at the rural setting researchers must navigate and serve. Participants proposed three recommendations presented in Figure 6. Though coordinators discussed limited incentives for collaboration, committee members stressed the demotivation stemming from a recognition system perceived as biased toward senior academics with higher publication metrics. This issue, raised by committee members, is not a new phenomenon but an ongoing issue; as discussed by Celestin et al. (2024), senior researchers are favoured because of their extensive networks and publication histories, placing junior researchers at a disadvantage as they establish their academic profiles.

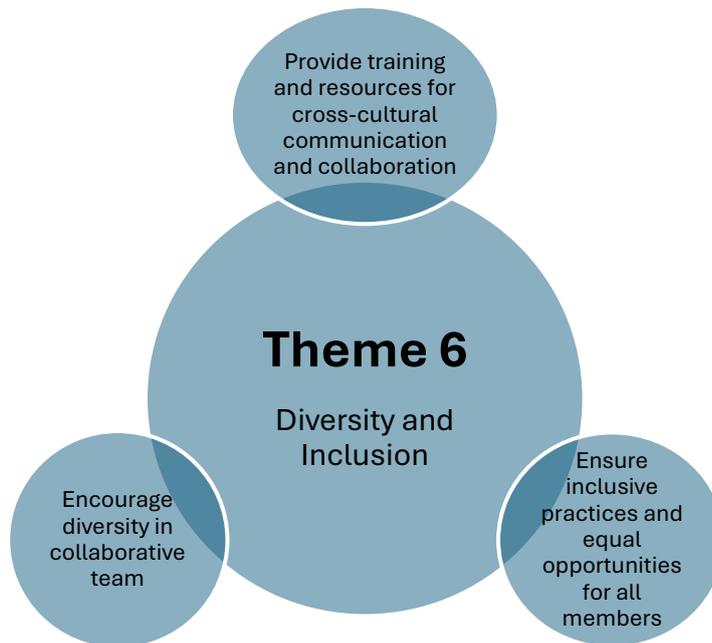
Figure 6. Theme 5 and subthemes.



5.6 Theme 6: Diversity and Inclusion

Some participants proposed diversity and inclusion as the main themes hindering the sustainable development of an intra-university collaborative culture. Participants 5, 8, and 16 said that the University, by its nature, despite differences in academic disciplines, also has researchers who speak different languages, religions, nationalities, races, and ages, to mention a few. This worsens issues of cultural and power dynamics among members. After reflecting on this challenge, participants proposed three recommendations in Figure 7. Committee members' responses reinforced the coordinators' concerns but emphasised cultural and linguistic exclusion, particularly affecting international students and staff in collaborative spaces.

Figure 7. Theme 6 and subthemes.



6.0 Discussion

This study employs Yeoh and Cheong's (2023) integrated reflective model, an approach that synthesizes Jasper's (2003) ERA cycle, Driscoll's (2006) 'What, So what, Now what' framework, and Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, to analyse academic staff and postgraduate students' reflections on intra-university interdisciplinary community engagement research. The model's iterative, three-stage structure—experience, reflection, action—ensures continuous learning while incorporating Gibbs' depth in evaluation and Driscoll's clarity in questioning. Participants' reflections revealed that collaborative culture thrives when grounded in communication, shared goals, and structured support. It promotes lifelong learning, advancing personal growth and enhancing potential performance in various contexts. The data confirmed the essence of developing an environment where collaborations can happen spontaneously. Thus, building a collaborative culture is crucial to intra-university-engaged scholarship. According to Mazzocchi (2019), engaging in multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary research allows scientists with diverse expertise and resources to collaborate, enabling them to contribute and develop new perspectives mutually. By fostering this collaborative environment, scientists can enhance their proficiency in a specific research area. This study shows that team-building workshops facilitate knowledge, skills, and resource sharing, which is central to developing a sustainable collaborative culture. However, in their study titled "Co-creation of New Solutions through Gamification: A Collaborative Innovation Practice", Patricio et al. (2020) perceive the importance of games to encourage building intra-institutional collaborations. They defined gamification as making non-game activities game-like to encourage users' motivation and engagement and provide more successful support approaches in developing a more collaborative context.

Resonating with Chowdhury (2021), participants' observations emphasised the importance of fostering collaboration in creating an environment that fosters innovation and teamwork to achieve shared goals. For intra-university

researchers engaged in research to optimise collaboration, they must ensure that every member understands the group dynamics and expectations, is ready to share information, resources and experiences, and is expected to develop research plans that align with other university core missions to prevent time conflicts. Similarly, project management for collaboration, listed as the third theme in Figure 3, recommends the introduction of project management workshops that may help amplify teamwork as crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of creating and facilitating a collaborative culture.

Communication and feedback, recognition and rewards, and diversity and inclusion were some of the main themes extracted from the reflective comments shared by the study participants during the intra-university collaboration workshop. The importance of communication and feedback in building effective collaboration among intra-university teams cannot be overemphasised. Participants in this study highlighted communication discord among members. For instance, junior participants cited a lack of feedback from seniors as their main challenge. In contrast, when given tasks, seniors felt juniors did not provide feedback, hence the failed paper projects. In their study, Chanana and Sangeeta (2021) concur with the reflective comments analysed in this study, emphasising that in collaborative projects, leaders must make sure that they reliably provide channels for feedback. Thus, effective collaboration among members from different disciplines in the case of the study scenario must be proactive in communication so that messages go in both directions. However, Dearden and Kleine (2021) argue that for communication to be transmitted easily, quickly, and efficiently, there is a need to introduce new digital technologies and consider digital literacy for the various stakeholders. Dearden and Kleine (2021) believe that effective communication can be realised only when the various intra-university collaboration team members are trained to use the communication tools. Participants suggested that interdisciplinary researchers fail to communicate because of a lack of honesty about their whereabouts, activities and strengths and weaknesses, which makes it difficult for other colleagues to know what to expect or how to help them. Participants suggested ensuring transparency in decision-making processes as key to strengthening a progressive, collaborative culture.

Findings also revealed the thought that for members to succeed in strengthening the intra-university culture of collaboration in engaged research requires incentives, be it points, rewards, funds, and others. Rejecting rewards and incentives, Haslam et al. (2020) insist that genuine cooperation among people from different disciplines and backgrounds should be motivated by a sincere desire and willingness to achieve a shared set of objectives rather than just seeking financial advantages. Similarly, Kienast (2023) claims that researchers may lack enthusiasm but feel compelled to engage in collaborative work to gain the proposed reward, but lack genuine passion, which makes their effort fake and unsustainable.

The analysed reflections also highlighted inclusivity and recognising or appreciating the distinctions between different disciplines' philosophies, methodologies, and academic principles in interdisciplinary collaborations. A study by Adade Williams et al. (2020) proposed that inclusivity and diversity are limited to diverse academic disciplines or positions and include ethnic culture and the respective local indigenous knowledge systems. Therefore, challenges in promoting inclusivity and diversity within university collaborations arise from varying ethical perspectives. The lack of clarity regarding the party responsible for addressing ethical concerns or harms becomes apparent, especially when different disciplines merge their ideas. However, Jenkins et al. (2020) argue that

when disciplines merge, they recognise and give a positive twist to ethics that is often (at least perceived to be) negative and forbids many open rooms for more creative normative work.

To accomplish the research objectives of rural development, a collaborative culture within the university is crucial. An influential intra-university culture of collaboration promotes cross-disciplinary research activities and facilitates knowledge sharing and networking. It helps establish partnerships and opportunities for researchers and students to share knowledge, which is essential when interacting with stakeholders in rural communities. However, the limitation of this study is that it has a relatively small participant pool. This may restrict the generalisability of its findings to all researchers at the selected institution and other universities similar to the University of Venda. Nevertheless, the findings offer valuable insights that can serve as a foundation for future research on this intriguing and relevant topic.

6.1 Critical Reflections of the Results on Engaged Scholarship: Challenges, Opportunities, and Institutional Strategies

Thematic analysis of reflections by University of Venda staff and postgraduate students highlights key challenges in enhancing intra-university collaboration. The proposed solutions address structural limitations and disciplinary divides. Strengthening interdisciplinary research is essential for rural-based universities in South Africa due to constrained resources, limited research opportunities, and the need to foster a collaborative academic culture. Limited funding and infrastructure hinder research efforts, yet resource-sharing initiatives can enhance institutional capacity (Ntombela & Ntombela, 2022). Rural areas offer distinctive research possibilities, such as environmental and health studies, reinforcing the need for interdisciplinary collaboration (Leyk et al., 2020). While a collaborative culture can increase engagement, productivity, and institutional reputation, scholars must navigate potential biases and disciplinary hierarchies that privilege publication metrics over mentoring and broader societal contributions (Celestin et al., 2024). Addressing societal challenges through research partnerships is vital, as evidenced by studies emphasising knowledge exchange and social impact (Marini Govigli et al., 2020). To foster collaboration in historically marginalised institutions, strategies such as interdisciplinary research hubs, capacity-building programs, community engagement, and supportive policies should be implemented, ensuring sustainable, equitable, and impactful scholarship. These measures can maximise resource utilisation, foster cross-disciplinary collaboration, and improve academic standing and reputation. Institutions should also recognise and reward collaborative efforts through incentives, open communication, and knowledge sharing. Training programs should cover communication, conflict resolution, and project management. Community engagement and regular assessments can help identify challenges and opportunities for improvement. International collaborations can bring diverse perspectives and resources. Policies should address intellectual property, data sharing, authorship, and project ownership issues.

7.0 Conclusions

This study sets out to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, in this study we sought to identify the key challenges frustrating efforts by various intra-university stakeholders' activities and the desire to establish a sustained interdisciplinary collaboration culture within historically marginalised institutions in South Africa. We also wanted to develop strategies and recommendations to strengthen intra-university collaboration culture among

interdisciplinary researchers in historically disadvantaged institutions, considering the unique context and challenges they face. The study participants identified six challenges hindering intra-university collaboration, namely, (a) building a collaborative culture, (b) facilitating collaboration, (c) project management for collaboration, (d) communication and feedback, (e) recognition and rewards, and (f) diversity and inclusion. This study identified building a collaborative culture, communication, and feedback as the main challenges hindering the development of a sustainable intra-university collaborative culture. Various possible solutions were put forward and analysed. Their implications were appraised.

This study concludes that despite the fears some participants raised about operating in previously sidelined locations, addressing some of the challenges can present the benefits this context offers. Thus, long-term collaboration will help the university access resources, tackle neighbourhood issues, promote knowledge sharing, take advantage of interdisciplinary approaches, improve funding opportunities, and aid local development. By embracing collaboration, the University of Venda and individual researchers participating in these initiatives can enhance research capabilities, academic standing, and impact on rural communities. Many rural development challenges require interdisciplinary solutions that draw upon the expertise of multiple disciplines, such as agriculture, engineering, social sciences, and public health (Athuman, 2023; Malanski et al., 2021). As a result, collaboration among staff members and postgraduate students from various disciplines and with different experiences enables the integration of diverse knowledge and approaches, leading to comprehensive and holistic solutions. This can enhance the quality and impact of research conducted by the university. Collaborations allow faculty and students to access advanced technologies, interdisciplinary approaches, and contemporary and relevant research methodologies. These collaborations can also enhance members' research and community engagement skills and rural communities' development communication skills. Thus, university-engaged scholars must gain from their interdisciplinary undertakings internally to build a strong force that can address societal woes effectively.

A lot must be done to enhance collaboration among rural development practitioners, particularly in rural-based South African universities such as the University of Venda. The study findings obtained through the integrated reflective model show useful and effective ways to enhance interdisciplinary research work. Thus, contribute to the birth of a united and organised team to drive development in surrounding communities where members are in dire need of support from local researchers to define and address their many challenges. This study concludes that for the rural university in South Africa to accomplish its objectives, advance knowledge, and contribute to the advancement of society, interdisciplinary academics and post-graduate students must continue to seek ways to strengthen the collaborative culture. Thus, this study adds to the academic conversation by highlighting the difficulties and potential solutions associated with intra-university and interdisciplinary collaboration among historically underrepresented institutions engaged researchers in South Africa. It provides valuable information to guide practice and policy, ultimately improving research outcomes and social impact.

The integrated reflective model by Jasper, Driscoll, and Gibbs improved the analysis by providing a structured yet flexible framework for critical reflection. The model helped uncover personal biases, break down participants' reflective perspectives, and translate insights into actionable strategies for fostering intra-university interdisciplinary collaborative culture in previously marginalised institutions such as the University of Venda.

7.1 Future Research

This study focused on the University of Venda, using a qualitative approach; however, future studies can broaden the design to a mixed-methods design using the reflective data collection method used in this study, but supplementing it with more quantitative data collected through a survey questionnaire. It will also help in increasing the number of participants. Instead of limiting the focus to one rural-based university, the next study can utilise reflections from more than one rural-based university and another poor community, which may not necessarily be rural-based. It can be an urban institution which is not in an affluent location. Future studies can also examine how encouraging collaboration can improve previously disadvantaged universities' research outputs and academic standing, nationally and globally.

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