



SCIREA Journal of Education

ISSN: 2995-3901

<http://www.scirea.org/journal/Education>

November 19, 2025

Volume 10, Issue 6, December 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54647/education880636>

University and Community Engagement Today: Lessons from Scholar-Activists

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Abstract

Researchers and practitioners of community engagement (CE) at universities have dedicated significant effort to understanding who the community is, what CE entails, how it has evolved over time, and showcasing various case studies that illustrate the ways universities can engage with their communities and vice versa. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature on CE regarding the scholarly recognition of left-wing non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) led by influential public intellectuals rooted in working-class and left-wing movements in South Africa. Based on authentic primary, internet, and secondary sources, this article uncovers the hidden histories of deep political engagement led by prominent public intellectuals and activists that date back to the struggle against apartheid – a history that has

largely been overlooked in CE scholarship. Utilising the university as a foundation, these activists established LNGOs to support the working-class struggle.

Keywords: left-wing non-governmental organisations, scholar-activists, university, community engagement, South Africa

Introduction

In South Africa, ‘community engagement’ (CE) is often regarded as the third mission of higher education (HE), following teaching and research. Consequently, universities do not prioritise CE as central to their operations. To address this, academics, researchers, practitioners, and Universities South Africa (USAf) – a membership organisation representing public universities – have coordinated various interventions to elevate CE within HE leadership (Saidi 2023; Saidi & Boti 2023).

To advance scholarship on CE in HE, we respectfully argue that the growing body of research on CE resembles what is often referred to as "petition" or "grievance" studies. This implies that CE scholars are conducting their research to persuade decision-makers that CE should be a central mission of universities or elevated to a primary mission. Hence, this scholarship advocates for CE to be recognised as a primary mission of universities, aiming to persuade decision-makers of its importance (Motala & Vally 2022; Johnson 2020).

Like many CE scholars and practitioners (Kruss & Gastrow 2015; Fongwa et al., 2022), we believe that universities, as anchors of development, must play a significant and expanded role in local community development and broader societal advancement. From the outset, we want to emphasise that our paper acknowledges the intellectual and practical contributions of CE scholars, particularly those committed to using CE as a means to improve the lives of working-class and marginalised communities (Petersen, Kruss & Van Rheede 2022; Kruss & Petersen, 2022).

This paper departs from conventional perspectives in CE research, which typically emphasise university roles in city development, service learning, and traditional outreach programmes (Kruss, McGrath, Petersen & Gastrow 2015; Muthama & McKenna 2024; Kruger & Steyn 2024). Instead, we explore the under-researched and politically charged dimension of CE, which we find both challenging and compelling.

We challenge traditional scholarly views by foregrounding the often overlooked, profound, and even intimidating history of radical CE. This history can be unsettling for modern observers, particularly those who have never experienced the highly politicised CE led by the scholar-activists that will be discussed in this paper. Today, in post-apartheid South Africa, we have the freedom to openly discuss this past, benefiting from free speech and academic autonomy that scholar-activists and their non-governmental organizations (NGOs) did not have in the 1970s and 1980s. The most courageous scholar-activists of CE were, in fact, revolutionaries who utilised university spaces to organise and advocate for the liberation of the oppressed. Even after leaving the university, they continued to work as activists within communities and working-class organisations. We further assert that activist-scholars – scholars who engaged in *political* activism – played a crucial role in developing CE as a praxis. They skilfully combined theory and practice, allowing political CE to flourish in the 1970s and 1980s.

Similar to the mainstream CE discussed by Kruss and Gastrow (2015) and Fongwa, Luescher, Mtawa, & Mataga 2022, politically charged CE also grappled with resource constraints. However, political community engagement (PCE) presents more significant and concerning challenges that warrant deeper attention. Scholar-activists leading these political efforts often risk facing detention, bans, house arrests, and even death due to their involvement with the community. Despite these formidable challenges, they find fulfillment in their work and consider this engagement essential, though it is often complex and emotionally draining. We refer to this type of engagement as ‘political community engagement’ (PCE), a concept that has largely been overlooked in existing academic discussions on CE.

The current approach to CE in HE has been widely examined within a development framework by progressive scholars (Saidi 2023). However, this approach often fails to explicitly acknowledge its political nature, which generally aligns with progressive and developmental ideals (Maponya 2017; Dube & Hendricks 2023), rather than adopting a radical stance, as seen in the cases discussed in this paper.

In contrast, PCE is explicitly political and aims for radical or revolutionary change. This approach is led by scholar-activists who utilise their academic positions at universities or their participation in student activism, similar to the efforts of Steve Biko, to promote revolutionary goals. These individuals often collaborate with leftist non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) or non-mainstream NGOs, which are frequently directed by scholar-activists and activists.

The existing literature often overlooks the contributions of scholar-activists and their LNGOs to CE. We address this gap by highlighting their role in PCE, drawing on primary sources, including archival materials and online content. Specifically, we analyse the contributions of Rick Turner, Steve Biko, Neville Alexander, Eddie Webster, and David Cooper – scholar-activists who established LNGOs under the political repression of pre-1994 South Africa. Finally, we examine the disconnection between universities and LNGOs, revealing that collaborations, when they occur, are often sporadic. We conclude by offering insights into this disconnect and its implications for the future of CE.

Literature Review

The first strand of literature on CE in HE highlights the significant role universities play in the development of cities, towns, and villages, positioning them as vital anchors for progress. In this context, development includes not only providing infrastructure and technical support to rural and working-class communities but also promoting human rights and social welfare. These efforts manifest through service learning and the cultivation of professionals – such as teachers, nurses, lawyers, and healthcare workers – dedicated to serving their communities (Daniels & Adonis 2020; Fongwa et al., 2022).

This body of literature is instrumental in advocating for CE within HE in South Africa. It reflects a commitment to addressing the needs and aspirations of rural and urban communities often overlooked by the mainstream economy. Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that this literature seeks to elevate CE, ensuring it is recognised as an essential component of the university's mission, rather than being viewed as a 'poor cousin' (Motala & Vally 2022) or "stepchild" (Johnson 2020).

This writing also offers a critique of the dominant discourse on the Global North's universities and their 'economics of capitalist innovation'. For instance, Kruss and Gastrow (2015, ix) describe this focus as centring on 'how to enhance technology transfer, establish effective incubation facilities, support patents and licensing, or other forms of profitable commercialisation of intellectual property'. They argue that universities in developing regions, such as southern Africa, face a different mandate: to serve as 'key agents for inclusive social and economic development'. This responsibility includes reducing poverty and enabling all social groups to create opportunities (Kruss & Gastrow 2015, ix).

Examples of CE initiatives in their work include projects led by institutions such as the University of Fort Hare, the University of Pretoria, and the University of the Western Cape,

targeting rural and urban marginalised communities. However, like much of the literature on CE and universities in South Africa, Kruss and Gastrow (2015) acknowledge structural challenges. These include inadequate funding, poor alignment between research, academic programmes, and CE, and the limited institutionalisation of CE within universities.

Fongwa et al. (2022), like Kruss and Gastrow (2015), examine the role of universities in South Africa and other African countries in local development and community support. They similarly conclude that resource constraints and misalignments between universities' research and teaching agendas must be addressed to enable universities to play an active developmental role in their communities.

In their collection on the role of universities in developing cities and towns, Bank, Cloete & Van Schalkwyk ((2018) highlight how scholarship often prioritises issues such as access to education, the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, governance, curricula, and funding. They argue that the role of universities in local development is frequently overlooked, despite their significant contributions to town and city development even during apartheid. Blank et al. (2018) emphasise the concept of 'place-based development', which integrates CE by requiring universities to engage local communities and structures while building precincts and infrastructure that contribute to local advancement.

Building on this international and South African literature, recent scholarship has sought to position universities and CE at the centre of the post-COVID-19 recovery and South Africa's ongoing social and economic crises. This effort was advanced by the second Universities South Africa (USAf) Higher Education Conference in 2021, a collaboration between USAf and the Council on Higher Education (CHE). Held from 6–8 October in 2021 under the theme 'The Engaged University', the conference explored how South Africa's 26 public universities were engaging with local, national, and global society and the economy. The event included participation from 23 Vice-Chancellors or university principals, 146 speakers and session chairs, and over 2,000 virtual participants (USAf 2021).

The publication of articles by scholars who participated in the historic USAf and CHE conference on CE has positively impacted CE as both a scholarship and a practice, as highlighted by the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE). This special edition, released in 2023, reignited the debate about the crucial role that universities play in communities and society as a whole. Among other issues, the edition calls for a fundamental redefinition and reconfiguration of CE, aiming to transform universities into vital anchors for both their communities and the country at large. This perspective challenges the common belief that universities are merely 'ivory towers' focused on insignificant research and

academic projects, contributing little to community development and South Africa's overall progress (Saidi 2023; Vally 2023; Fongwa 2023; Saidi & Boti 2023).

However, to realise the ideals espoused by the 2023 special edition of the journal, some authors argue that stakeholders must address power relations between communities and universities. Due to their resources, universities can dictate the terms for CEs such as service learning, social and mutual aid, literacy and numeracy projects, community teaching, and research (Sathorar & Geduld 2021).

According to Vally (2023), there are attempts to conduct CEs in a manner that assumes knowledge is co-created and is based on Freirean pedagogies that respect knowledge from the communities. Literacy, numeracy, political education, and participatory action research conducted by some research centres at Nelson Mandela University and the University of Johannesburg have led to the emergence of community activists who are grassroots intellectuals.

When it comes to development in Africa, Fongwa (2023) and others highlight the role of universities as anchor institutions in towns and small cities, a perspective closely tied to CE. because they address universities' developmental roles, particularly in small cities and towns. Saidi and Boti (2023), referencing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at advancing social and human welfare and fostering a socially just world, argue that universities' institutional planning units and committees must integrate CE as part of their third mission. This compelling argument supports the institutionalisation of CE into universities' strategic planning review and learning.

Saidi (2023), Vally (2023), Fongwa (2023), and Saidi and Boti (2023) advance the debate on CE in HE by making specific recommendations, such as establishing long-term links between universities and communities, incorporating CE into university institutional planning, and envisioning universities as anchor institutions, particularly in towns and small cities.

We argue, however, that the aforementioned scholarship on CE and the 2021 historic conference of USAf and the CHE on CE missed a debate and discussion on the intricate nexus between CE, the universities, and what we call LNGOs. Defining NGOs can be complex because, although they are not government organisations, they interact with the government by receiving funding from government agencies and proposing solutions to government problems. On the other hand, they also tend to have a contentious relationship with the government. They can use various tools, such as protests and advocacy, to compel governments to adopt their positions. There is also a difference between mass organisations and community-based organisations (CBOs), which are membership-based organisations, on

the one hand, and NGOs run by a small group of professionals paid to perform their functions on the other (Hlatshwayo 2009; Sacks 2024).

Leftist NGOs

Sacks (2024, 7) provides a comprehensive definition of LNGOs when he argues:

... the Independent Left and the NGOs [in South Africa] it has founded play an outsized role relative to their numbers. They routinely punch above their weight, particularly in the realm of civil society. They are often able to enter mainstream discourse as if they already have the people on their side. ... these leftist NGOs, because their politics revolve around the centrality of popular struggle, insert themselves into mass-based labour organisations, community organisations, and social movements.

According to Sacks (2024), the LNGOs are politically to the left of liberalism, which is premised on individualism and very gradual changes. Unlike the scholars and practitioners of CE in general in South Africa, the LNGOs are explicitly political and anti-capitalist. They consider themselves to be contributing to the construction 'of a counter-hegemonic mass-based Left' or what we regard as organisations fighting capitalism (Sacks 2024, 7).

The scholarship of LNGOs is as old as capitalism itself. Throughout history, in Europe and other parts of the world, working-class intellectuals and activists have formed their own professional organisations to advance their struggles and interests (Pearce 2000). Hlatshwayo (2009) wrote about the evolution of LNGOs, previously referred to as South African service organisations, in the context of the Durban strikes of 1973. However, the limitation of mainstream CE work is that it does not explicitly locate the work of these LNGOs within the context of CE. The relationship between LNGOs and social movements is complementary and sometimes conflictual, in the sense that LNGOs are staffed by professionals with an explicit radical political platform, and they organise and help form membership-based formations or work with existing social movements that share their values.

In some respects, South African LNGOs have the power to define campaigns, establish partnerships, and raise funds both overseas and locally. In some instances, social movements, such as the Landless People Movement (LPM), have felt relegated to junior partners when working with the National Land Committee, an LNGO involved in the struggle for access to land in rural and urban areas of South Africa. Both organisations have since ceased to exist, but their relationship was characterised by strong forms of cooperation and occasional conflict

over resources and power (Greenberg 2004). Some of the conflict between social movements and LNGOs arises from the fact that the roles and responsibilities of each party are not explicitly negotiated, agreed upon, and endorsed by all parties involved (The Beautiful Trouble Team 2023).

Sacks (2024) correctly argues that the weaknesses and strengths of LNGOs have not been investigated in depth because the literature on social movements and NGOs tends to focus on mainstream NGOs that lack radical and anti-capitalist politics, despite the fact that these mainstream NGOs may have individuals with radical politics who are not hegemonic within those organisations (cf. Choudry & Kapoor 2013; Nagar 2006; Petras 1999).

Like scholars of universities and development (Kruss & Gastrow 2015; Fongwa et al., 2022), LNGOs are driven by the imperatives of development, specifically for working-class communities in urban and rural areas. Unlike most scholars and practitioners of CE (Bank, Cloete & Van Schalkwyk 2018), who often refrain from explicitly declaring their progressive politics, LNGOs openly embrace and display their radical political stance. It could also be said that LGNOs wear their hearts on their proverbial sleeves. This public declaration of radical politics may be inspired by Karl Marx and Engels, whose politics and philosophy influenced many within the LNGO movement. As Marx and Engels (1848) stated : ‘The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions’.

In fact, LNGOs use their anti-capitalist politics to determine whether they can form partnerships with other organisations. In contrast to mainstream CE, which enters communities with an understanding that those communities may have different political persuasions – including traditional and reactionary politics – and is prepared to work with all sections of the community regardless of their political beliefs (Fongwa et al., 2022), LNGOs only collaborate with communities or organisations involved in struggles for development and access to services, aiming to engage in dialogue and education that seeks to create a progressive political consciousness that opposes capitalism (Hlatshwayo 2009). To advance the struggle against capitalism, LNGOs tend to possess financial and intellectual resources as they are able to raise funds to support struggles for development and democracy. However, this sometimes causes conflicts with social movements that may feel the LNGOs are using their power and resources to control them (Steyn 2015).

In conclusion, we argue that the glaring weakness of the literature analysed above on LNGOs is its failure to overtly discuss the role of LNGOs from the perspective of CE (Hlatshwayo 2009; Steyn 2015; Sacks 2024). This paper is thus somewhat of a response to the challenge

posed by Cooper (2009), who once called upon researchers involved in CE to include the fourth helix of ‘civil society’ (CS) or social movements – alongside the traditionally defined three components of universities, government, and business. Although Cooper (2009) was not specific about the type of civil society or CS to be included in the helix, we found it necessary to specify and write about CE in the context of the relationship between LNGOs and universities. David Cooper, a Marxist, practised what he preached, as he was instrumental in building political relationships with leftist university-based activists in Cape Town, workers, and LNGOs in the 1980s. However, such active and visible collaborations and engagements date back even to the 1960s, according to our argument.

Turner’s Turn to CE

Rick Turner, a South African scholar-activist, was awarded a PhD in Philosophy in France in 1966. Inspired by the French student movement of the 1960s, he returned to South Africa in 1967 and took up several teaching positions. Turner had several meetings with Steven Biko, a leader of the South African Student Organisation (SASO), which had split from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). The aim was to mend the relationship between the two organisations. As an advisor to NUSAS, Turner provided support to students such as David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, and David Davis, who had initiated the NUSAS Wages Commission, tasked with advocating for better wages for black workers and improved working conditions. In 1972, along with trade unionist Harriet Bolton and Cheadle, Turner and the Student Wages Commission established a base at the Garment Union head office in Durban to assist in creating the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF), which was responsible for defending and advancing the interests of black workers (South African History Online [SAHO] 2023).

As an academic at the University of Natal (now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal), Turner encouraged white students to participate in the unionisation of black workers, leading to the formation of the NUSAS Wages Commission in 1971. Turner and others played a significant role in establishing the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) and the South African Labour Bulletin, a publication intended to support the emerging workers’ movement. Following the strikes in Durban in 1973, Turner collaborated with Gerry Maré, Alec Erwin, Eddie Webster, and John Copelyn, playing a key role in recruiting and training numerous future labour organisers. After the Durban strikes, the GFWBF underwent a transformation to meet the growing need for industrial unions. White radicals founded the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) to organise the various emerging unions.

Although Turner was not actively involved in TUACC, he served as an advisor to the organisers, including David Hemson, Paula Ensor, Halton Cheadle, Omar Badsha, Johnny Copelyn, Alec Erwin, and Gerry Maré. The Durban strikes of 1973 saw about 100,000 black workers participating in strikes for better wages and living conditions, which increased the interaction between students, academics, and workers (Keniston 2013).

Between 1972 and 1973, black trade unions were formed out of the activities stemming from the Durban strikes. These included the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU), Furniture and Timber Workers' Union (FTWU), National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), and Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU). All these unions were coordinated by the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC), which later formed the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Subsequently, in 1985, FOSATU and the other unions launched COSATU, which became the most influential trade union federation in South Africa's politics and industrial relations (Baskin 1991).

Rick Turner was arguably among the most effectual white anti-apartheid activists of the era. Biko espoused black consciousness, while Turner was a Marxist philosopher. Biko was murdered by apartheid police in 1977, and Turner was shot dead by an apartheid assassin in 1978 (Keniston 2013).

Biko's CE

In 1966, Steve Biko became a medical student at the Black Section of the Medical School of the University of Natal. Biko and his fellow students strongly believed that black students needed to abandon NUSAS and organise themselves separately, as the white-dominated NUSAS could not adequately represent the interests and needs of black individuals. Both Biko and Turner were inspired by the works of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and radical, who emphasised the importance of taking complex ideas and philosophies and using them to educate the masses so that they could liberate themselves (Vally, Wa Bofelo, & Treat 2013).

In 1968, Biko and his comrades established the South African Student Organisation (SASO), with Biko serving as its first president at the inaugural congress held in 1969 at Turfloop, a university in northern South Africa. SASO became the home and voice of black students who would not have been heard had they remained within NUSAS. Biko was elected Publications Director for SASO, where he wrote prolifically under the pseudonym Frank Talk. Biko and his fellow students took critical education seriously and founded a broader black

consciousness political organisation called the Black People's Convention (BPC) in 1972, precisely because SASO believed that black liberation had to be advanced by black communities outside university campuses. The South African Students' Movement (SASM), partly influenced by SASO, was formed in 1972 and played a crucial role in the June 1976 uprisings that spread throughout the country (Diseko 1992).

The Black Allied Workers' Union (BAWU) was a national trade union federation in South Africa, established on 27 August 1972 through the initiative of SASO. BAWU collaborated closely with the Black People's Convention (BPC) and played a significant role in the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). It advocated for an independent trade union movement led by black workers. Biko and his comrades from the BPC established the Black Workers' Project (BWP), drawing inspiration from the works of Paulo Freire and emphasising the importance of providing dialogical education to black workers (Vally 1994).

In 1973, the apartheid regime banned Biko, restricting him to King William's Town in the Eastern Cape. Despite this, he established a BPC office that became a hub for BCM activities. Biko continued working for local communities, founding the Zanempilo Clinic and a crèche, and providing critical education after leaving the University of Natal. In 1975, he initiated the Zimele Trust Fund to support political prisoners and their families and launched the Ginsberg Trust to aid black students. Inspired by movements like the Black Panther Party, which provided free breakfasts and health projects in the United States, Biko and Black Consciousness activists emphasised mutual aid and community development to show that radical politics must deliver tangible benefits to the oppressed. Like other advocates of development and CE (Kruss & Gastrow 2015; Fongwa et al., 2022), Biko aimed to empower black communities to counter apartheid-induced underdevelopment and demonstrate their ability to run self-sustaining programmes (Morgan 2020).

Durban, Johannesburg and Webster

Edward (Eddie) Webster, who passed away in 2024, was a revered scholar-activist admired by students, academics, activists, and trade unionists, much like Rick Turner. Often overlooked is Webster's background – his grandparents and parents were missionaries involved in educating black students in the Eastern Cape. His parents, devout Christians, taught prominent figures such as Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, and Robert Sobukwe. This exposure to influential black leaders, who shaped South African and global history, likely influenced Webster's alignment with the oppressed (Valodia 2024).

Webster's politics and academic career earned him widespread respect among Black workers, who arguably chose him as their ally in their struggle for justice. During the Durban strikes of

January 1973, workers marched with chants and songs, voicing their demands for better conditions. The following month, Webster joined the Department of Sociology at the University of Natal, where he quickly connected with the banned activist Rick Turner. Reflecting on this pivotal meeting, Webster later remarked:

I was woken the next morning by an emissary from the recently banned political science lecturer, Rick Turner. He said Rick wanted to meet me. I readily agreed and spent the rest of the day with Rick and his wife Fozia Fisher at their rambling Bellair home. We discussed the organisational possibilities for change (Webster 2022a, 2-3).

Webster's university position was both a deployment and a political appointment. Before starting, he received a political briefing and mandate from the banned Rick Turner. Webster recalls: 'By sunset, Rick had persuaded me to join the Working Committee of a planned workers' college, the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE), and to join the board of the soon-to-be-launched *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB)' (Webster 2022a, 3).

Through a social survey on the attitudes of black workers in Durban, Webster found they had not forgotten leaders like Moses Mabhida, prominent figures in the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the 1950s, later banned and exiled by the apartheid regime. The survey revealed that black workers' struggles centred on dignity – a cause also championed by Steve Biko and his associates, who engaged in political education and mobilisation, often connected to the University of Natal (Webster 2022).

In 1976, Webster and four NUSAS members were arrested and put on trial. Reflecting on that time, Webster recalls it as a particularly challenging year, as he was already out on bail for calling for Nelson Mandela's release and was required to report to the police station twice a week. The stakes were high – Turner was assassinated in 1978, and Biko was murdered in detention in 1977. Radical CE, as practiced by Biko, Turner, and Webster, was profound, thrilling, and perilous. Taking a stand under the apartheid regime often led to arrests and even death, as seen in the cases of these scholar-activists (Ludwig 2024).

Radical CE dissolved the divide between public and private life, transforming it from a typical nine-to-five job into a profound, all-encompassing commitment. Homes became offices, and work consumed personal lives. Meetings, workshops with workers, and urgent political writing defined the lives of Turner, Biko, Webster, and others. While risky, their activism led to partial victories, such as wage increases and mutual aid support, offering both challenges and growth (Webster 2022).

Another significant challenge faced by those involved in public and community engagement (PCE), such as Webster, is navigating the dual role of scholar and activist. As a scholar, one must maintain academic rigour by advancing scholarship, conducting research, publishing in reputable national and international outlets, and fulfilling teaching responsibilities. At the same time, as an activist, one must remain committed to CE and social movements. Webster (2022b, 53) addresses this tension, stating: ‘I prefer the stance of critical engagement. Finding a balance is never easy, as it involves a challenging combination of commitment to the goals of these movements while remaining true to evidence, data, and your own judgment and conscience’.

Cooper in Cape Town

Based in Cape Town, David Cooper is a retired engaged scholar-activist who has written extensively on ‘The University in Development’ and theorised the Fourth Industrial Revolution, led by university-based global knowledge (Cooper 2011). Notably, he discussed this concept in 2010, well before it entered public discourse in 2016 (Schwab 2017). Since the early 1980s, Cooper has advocated for university collaboration with civil society to develop continuing education and research for the social and economic liberation of workers and working-class communities (Johnson & Cooper 2014).

At the age of 20, during his second year as an electrical engineering student, Cooper took part in the University of Cape Town's (UCT) August 1968 sit-in, held in protest against the university's refusal to appoint Archie Mafeje as a lecturer due to his race. During the sit-in, Cooper attended revolutionary lectures on the May 1968 Paris student-worker uprisings, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and international socialism, all of which significantly heightened his political awareness. After completing his engineering degree, he taught mathematics and science at Kensington High School in Cape Town before pursuing sociology studies in Birmingham, England, where he focused on revolutions in the Global South and the 1917 Russian Revolution (Cooper 2024).

After earning his PhD in the 1970s based on fieldwork with Botswana's working class (Cooper 1979), Cooper joined UCT's Sociology Department in 1981. In 1983, he co-founded the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), a leftist NGO within the department. ILRIG produced booklets on workers' struggles in Botswana, Bolivia, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, and Brazil, written by Cooper, his sister Linda Cooper (a UCT educator involved in workers' education), and colleagues like David Fig and other contributors. These

materials, written through a Marxist historical-political-economy lens, were designed for workers' education workshops and progressive trade unions.

Cooper coordinated ILRIG's research-education initiatives, which included contributions from UCT sociology students like Dinga Sikwebu (later associated with NUMSA), who helped produce and translate materials into Xhosa, Zulu, Setswana, and Afrikaans. Other students, such as the late Oupa Lehulere and Sakhela Buhlungu (now Vice-Chancellor of Fort Hare), also worked with ILRIG, assisting in workshops and translations. A key goal of Cooper's work was integrating Marxist sociological ideas into educational workshops for emerging mass struggle organisations across South Africa.

Cooper and his ILRIG comrades faced significant risks due to their deep involvement in LNCI CE with workers and trade unions. As scholar-activists, they encountered resistance not only from the apartheid regime but also, unexpectedly, from the ANC in exile during the late 1980s.

The apartheid state's Security Branch, for instance, visited the UCT Registrar to complain about ILRIG's booklets. However, the "liberal" registrar pointed out that these Sociology Department-based booklets were part of UCT's official research report. In 1985, the Bolivia booklet was banned by the apartheid regime, described by a Stellenbosch academic as 'promoting a revolution in South Africa'. ILRIG's lawyer successfully challenged this, and the ban was lifted by the South African Publications Board (SAPB).

Ironically, despite operating under repression, Cooper and his comrades faced criticism from the African National Congress (ANC) in exile. In 1988, NOVIB, ILRIG's Netherlands-based core funder since 1983, withdrew its funding. Cooper suspects this was due to the ANC perceiving ILRIG's 'workerist' focus as opposing the ANC and the United Democratic Front's prioritisation of national liberation over workers' struggles (Cooper 2024).

In the 1990s, Cooper shifted his research to university enrollment trends by class and race. During this time, he remained engaged in scholar-activism, spending a decade with Harold Wolpe's NGO at the University of the Western Cape, specifically in the Education Policy Unit (EPU) (Cooper 2019).

Neville Alexander, Khanya College, and Engaging the Universities

Neville Alexander, like David Cooper, dedicated much of his life to scholar-activism in Cape Town. After earning his PhD in Germany in 1961, he was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1964 to 1974. Despite the harsh conditions, Alexander turned the prison into a space for

learning, teaching fellow inmates to read and think critically. Even political opponents such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Ahmed Kathrada admired his generosity and camaraderie. Understanding the power of education for liberation, Alexander became director of the SACHED Trust in Cape Town in 1981. Dollie (2015, 102) notes that discussions to establish Khanya College began at SACHED Trust in 1983–1984, with records likely preserved in the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) archives. Sacks (2024, 82) observed:

Alexander would also become involved in two key non-governmental education organisations during the 1980s, Khanya College and the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED). SACHED began as a liberal organisation, but 1980s people's power helped radicalise the organisation. With Alexander's appointment as the Cape Town director and John Samuels as national director, SACHED embraced a Freirean approach to education for liberation.

The SACHED Trust's head office, located in Johannesburg, was led by John Samuel, an experienced radical educator in South Africa and across the African continent. Samuel later headed the ANC's Education Policy and the Nelson Mandela Foundation in the 1990s. Between 1983 and 1984, Neville Alexander participated in discussions with academics and activists about creating an institution for academically inclined students denied quality education under the Bantu Education system.

Like Steve Biko, Alexander believed that radical theories, such as Marxism, must be supported by concrete actions, emphasising that scholar-activists should practice what they preach. To this end, Alexander laid the groundwork for pre-university colleges in Cape Town and Johannesburg (Dollie 2011).

In 2012, Oupa Lehulere, a Marxist leader who coordinated Khanya College in Johannesburg from the early 1990s until 2021, paid tribute to Alexander. He acknowledged Alexander's instrumental role in founding Khanya College during the darkest days of apartheid:

It was visionary of him [Neville Alexander] to be one of Khanya College's founders in the midst of the apartheid education system. The organisation continues to be committed to justice and education and to work with community organisations. It is a tribute to the work he did (Lehulere 2012, 1).

The SACHED was founded in 1959 to counter apartheid's inferior education system, which aimed to confine Africans to roles as domestic workers and manual labourers rather than academics, engineers, or scientists. In 1986, SACHED established Khanya College as a pre-university college to provide alternative education for the liberation of the working class and

the oppressed. Both SACHED and Khanya College were non-sectarian, serving all liberation movements and individuals regardless of political affiliation.

Khanya College emerged in response to student struggles, including the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the early 1980s student revolts. It aimed to experiment with progressive education under apartheid and envision a post-apartheid educational future. Like Biko's social projects in the Eastern Cape and the Black Panther Party's initiatives in the United States, Khanya sought to provide a tangible alternative to the oppressive educational system – a significant challenge given limited resources and state repression.

John Samuel, SACHED's leader and Khanya College co-founder, emphasised the resilience and determination needed to ensure Khanya's success despite these obstacles. Initially, Khanya operated on two campuses: Johannesburg and Cape Town. When Khanya became independent from SACHED in 1993, both campuses became separate legal entities. However, Khanya Cape Town ceased operating as an independent institution in 1996. This article focuses on the experiences of the Johannesburg campus (Khanya College 2024).

In a posthumously published book chapter, Alexander (2014) reaffirmed his lifelong commitment to the highest form of CE until his passing in 2012. He commended his friend and comrade David Cooper for his seminal book *The University in Development* (Cooper 2011). Alexander (2014, 51) endorsed Cooper's call to add a 'fourth helix', representing socio-economic and cultural aspects, to the traditional University-Industry-Government (U-I-G) triple helix. He further emphasised that universities must be accountable to the 'disempowered mass of the people', which he identified as a primary constituency, especially in the Global South (Alexander 2014, 52).

Khanya College maintained special engagements with UCT and Wits – liberal elite universities with racist pasts that excluded black students and academics. For instance, Wits subjected Robert Sobukwe to extreme racism, while Archie Mafeje faced similar treatment at UCT (Moloi 2016). Until the mid-1980s, UCT, Wits, and Natal University operated under race-based proportional systems, admitting only a small number of black students. This left South Africa's overwhelmingly black majority grossly underrepresented in these institutions. Khanya College took advantage of the liberal guilt in the context of mass uprisings to negotiate an unprecedented deal, enabling black students from working-class communities and liberation organisations to access HE at liberal universities like Wits and UCT. *However, the University Act of the 1980s barred NGO colleges from offering accredited courses. To address this, Khanya courses were accredited by Indiana University in the United*

States. Students who passed two Khanya subjects earned automatic entry into Wits or UCT, along with university credits that allowed them to progress directly to second-year level. Students in the Khanya programme selected two of six academic subjects: mathematics, physics, sociology, economics, African history, and African literature. Subject combinations were chosen to maintain programme coherence, and course outlines were aligned with first-year university standards. Passing both Khanya courses guaranteed admission to Wits or UCT, with credits enabling continued study in the same disciplines at the second-year level.

The Khanya College courses were aligned with second- and third-year levels at liberal universities. Students were introduced to the radical pedagogies of Paulo Freire and others, with an emphasis on fostering critical analytical skills. The goal was to empower students to become agents of education and catalysts for radical change, working towards the emancipation of the oppressed. Regarding teaching and learning at Khanya College, Pape (1997, 292) observed: ‘... the predominant mode of teaching was interactive as opposed to the traditional teacher-centred approach. Discussions of methodology even before the college opened stressed the importance of small-group work and cooperative learning’.

After South Africa’s democratic transition in 1994, Khanya College ceased functioning as a bridging college, and the Cape Town campus closed. However, the Johannesburg campus continues as a movement-building institution supporting working-class struggles and campaigns (Khanya College 2024; Pape 1997).

In 1992, Alexander founded PRAESA (Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT, focusing on literacy and numeracy for working-class children receiving inferior education (PRAESA 2012). He retired as PRAESA’s director in 2011 but remained active in delivering educational programmes for the working class until his passing in 2012.

An educator to the core, Alexander also taught political prisoners on Robben Island between 1964 and 1974, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to empowering the oppressed through education (PRAESA 2012).

Conclusion

This article aimed to deepen the understanding of CE by highlighting the radical, exciting, and often perilous forms of CE practiced by scholar-activists during apartheid in South Africa.

Although their efforts were not framed as CE in the academic sense, figures like Turner, Biko, Webster, Cooper, and Alexander used the limited spaces provided by the apartheid system – such as universities and educational institutions – to advance the interests of the oppressed. These scholar-activists firmly believed in establishing leftist institutions to support working-class struggles.

While the post-apartheid context is different, contemporary CE scholars and practitioners can draw valuable lessons from their approaches. For these scholar-activists, CE was a calling, not merely a career offering financial or professional rewards. Further research into LNGOs and scholar-activists in post-apartheid South Africa could provide insights into how leftist intellectuals and activists navigate struggles and engage with communities, particularly the working class. This remains especially pertinent in a democratic South Africa still grappling with extreme inequality and the marginalisation of the working class.

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