

Why engagement with their contexts should be at the heart of what universities do – USAf CEO, Prof Ahmed Bawa.

Professor Ahmed Bawa is a very congenial person. Look at photographs of him, and in almost every one he has a smile on his face. Meet him in person, and he laughs easily. He is a wonderful raconteur, whether it be on a public platform, or one-to-one in his CEO's office at Universities SA in Pretoria. He is able to captivate audiences with his resonant voice and chatty manner even when articulating complex ideas such as the role of universities in the modern world. But his favourite story, and one which really makes his face light up, is about fermentation.

He has told it many times. It is mentioned in his chapter on community engagement in the 2014 book *Higher Education and Community-Based Research - Creating a Global Vision*; it was in the paper he presented at the international human rights organisation, Council of Europe's Global Higher Education Forum held in Rome in June last year; and he spoke about it in his acceptance speech at the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center for Community Partnerships in November when he was presented with its Transformative Leadership Award, an accolade which "recognises ongoing dedication to producing significant societal change and to working successfully to transform institutions to help realise that goal".

It is a wonderful tale, well worth repeating, and one which exemplifies the very essence of the role of universities that Bawa is so passionate about. It starts with Dr Mduduzi "Mdu" Paul Mokoena, now in microbiology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal but who used to be a senior lecturer at Durban University of Technology (DUT) when Bawa was its Vice-Chancellor. Bawa tells how Mokoena "received a little research grant and decided what he was going to do is study the way fermentation had evolved in the preparation of foods in Inanda outside Durban.

"Now the question is: how do you find that knowledge because you cannot Google it, you're not going to find it," says Bawa in his characteristic storyteller style. "You're not going to go to a conference and sit and hear about it. There is only one way of getting to that knowledge, and that is by speaking to four generations of women and asking them: how did you prepare this food? And then once you gather that information you then go to the laboratory and you test it out, which is what this guy did.

“With a group of students he went in and they interviewed hundreds of women, some very old, some very young and then they went back to the laboratory and they tested it. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t work. When it didn’t work, they went back to the women, spoke to them again; they adjusted things.

“The paper gets published. And it is fascinating because, about two or three weeks after the paper gets published they get an email from China saying, we really want to collaborate with you; because we are working on exactly the same thing here.”

Bawa says his interest is not so much about the Chinese connection but in the impact on the local community.

“All of a sudden two things happened. Knowledge which is deeply embedded in a community is codified, out in a publication, has international recognition, all of that jazz.

“The second thing is that those women see that the university is taking them seriously. All of a sudden they feel that this university is not just ‘a place where we send our children’ but it’s a place that represents ‘ways in which we do things’.

“This is a transformative project because it changes the notion that the university is the source of all knowledge. There’s a whole lot of embedded knowledge in society and part of the role of the university is to bring that knowledge to the fore.

“That fermentation process produced new knowledge - and it came out of engagement,” says Bawa.

Embedding and engaging to solve problems

Engagement can also create knowledge which has the potential to help solve a problem in surrounding communities. Bawa says academics shouldn’t think of “going to write a paper and somehow imagine that’s going to solve the problem.” There is another way of going about it. Let’s go in there, let’s learn what’s going on, let’s engage with those people, let’s engage with local government and let’s create a programme of activities which help to solve the problem.

“Now I am not suggesting universities will solve the problem but they will start producing knowledge which can be used to address the issues”. To do this, universities have to “very deliberately set up the mechanisms and structures through which this kind of engagement can take place,” he says “The Urban Futures Centre at DUT is an example of how an institution can set up the architecture for engagement.”

The Urban Futures Centre is making a difference

Although he doesn't mention it, it transpires Bawa was the driving force behind the establishment of the Urban Futures Centre at DUT in 2014; it was a Vice-Chancellor project when he headed the institution. “It was sort of his imaginary,” says Professor Monique Marks, whom he appointed to head it. Bawa talks with wonder about the work Marks is doing, such as not studying police activities from afar but going on the beat with them, and she responds to that by saying she regards herself as an ethnographer: “I immerse myself in the world of people I am trying to understand”.

So when she started the Urban Futures Centre's project known as “Street level drug use”, she went out with the police on drug busts.

Essentially the project involves 50 participants, all users of low-grade heroin known in KwaZulu-Natal as “whoonga”, who are now the only people in South Africa able to obtain long-term use of the opioid substitute, methadone. They obtain this at a drop-in centre in Durban. The project's results so far, with most of them on methadone for almost a year, “have been absolutely amazing,” says Marks:

- “Almost all of them have reconnected with their families.
- “Of those who had dropped out of school, two are now back at school;
- “Five of them are about to register at UKZN or DUT because they have matric exemption; and
- “22 out of the 50 are now in some form of employment; and, what Marks regards as “very significant” is
- “how much care the beneficiaries are taking of their own wellbeing and of their own health and personal hygiene.

“So there have been dramatic changes in quality of life and it is the quality of life changes that we are using to show the efficacy of an opioid substitution programme,” she says.

The engagement is not only between the 50 beneficiaries and the university but is also with those from other disciplines such as a social worker, medical doctor, and a nurse; and partnerships with primarily TB/HIV Care Association, as well as others such as Durban Metropolitan Police, the provincial and national health departments, the Dennis Hurley Centre, and the Big Brotherhood Community Theatre Group which worked with award-winning Durban-based director Neil Copen to create a play titled Ulwembu (spiderweb).

“The project is to demonstrate quality of life improvement in a local context but also to advocate for opioid substitution rollout in the public sector,” says Marks.

What USAf is doing to encourage engagement

Not all universities can do projects of the type the Urban Futures centres does, not least because their contexts differ. Furthermore, Bawa knows USAf cannot dictate. “Universities are fiercely independent so we can’t say to universities do this and that. What we can do is we can produce ideas. We can produce documents. We can get universities to start talking to each other and engaging on these issues. What would be very useful thing for us to do is produce a theoretical framework that will allow universities to have a decent discussion about what it means to them to be engaged.”

And this is exactly what he has done. Together with Professor Yusuf Ballim, chair of USAf’s Transformation Strategy Group, Bawa has written a position paper which is now a priority for 2018: to establish “a national project to theorise and to build models of universities that are seriously engaged in the local context in which they find themselves”.

The essentials of community engagement

Stellenbosch University labels its engagement “social impact”, the University of Cape Town talks of “social responsiveness”, the University of Pretoria does “social responsibility”. Whatever it is called, however, Bawa believes engagement needs “to be integrated into the core functions of universities

rather than as an add-on”; and “is not just community engagement but also with stakeholders and society in general”.

Community engagement can help transform universities

Bawa believes engagement can be “a powerful mechanism for institutional transformation”. A lofty ideal perhaps, but he explains it further: “One of the roles universities have to play is to produce graduates who demonstrate social responsibility, so one of the purposes of this kind of engagement is to try and ensure that these young people who are coming through classroom courses are also exposed to the link between theory and praxis.

“It is not just enough to have theoretical knowledge but that theoretical knowledge has to intersect at some point with the world of practice. That will help to transform the education programme, “ he says.

It’s all about connecting

Bawa is driven by the idea of transforming the image of universities as ivory towers removed from the world around them, which is why the fermentation research made such a impact on him. He says universities must try to connect with people so that they can “see their lives replicated” in the university. “When my parents sent me to university they just packed me off. My father had three years of schooling so he just had no idea where I was going to, and when I think about it now, it would be such an important thing for parents to have a much better understanding of the kind of institution their children were going to”.

This piece was written by Gillian Anstey, an independent writer commissioned by Universities SA