

Faculty Perceptions of Community Service in Ethiopian Higher Education: A Case Study of Addis Ababa University

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Abstract

This study examined faculty perceptions of community service and identified factors that influence them. The study, conducted at Addis Ababa University, collected data from faculty, associate deans, department heads, community service professionals, and official documents through in-depth interviews and document reviews. The results indicated that faculty perception of community service is mainly associated with whether it is an independent/integrated activity, requires compulsory/voluntary participation, professional/non-professional roles, and is initiated by the university/individuals. The study also revealed that perception of community service significantly impacts faculty's engagement in community service. The study further demonstrated a lack of clear policy direction, a reduced emphasis on community service within the university, inconsistent academic promotion practices, and a lack of accountability as some of the factors influencing faculty perceptions of community service. The study affirms a dire need to make community service more central to faculty roles and implement more explicit accountability measures to ensure faculty participation in community service activities.

Key words: community service; Ethiopia, faculty perceptions, third university mission

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Résumé: Cette étude vise à examiner la perception qu'ont les enseignants du service communautaire et à identifier les facteurs qui l'influencent. Elle a été menée à l'université d'Addis-Abeba, et les données ont été recueillies auprès des enseignants, des vice-doyens, des chefs de département, des professionnels du service communautaire et à partir de documents officiels, au moyen d'entretiens approfondis et d'analyses de documents. Les résultats ont indiqué que la perception qu'ont les enseignants du service communautaire est principalement liée au fait qu'il s'agisse d'une activité indépendante ou intégrée, qu'elle nécessite une participation obligatoire ou volontaire, qu'elle implique des rôles professionnels ou non professionnels, et qu'elle soit initiée par l'université ou par des individus. L'étude a également révélé que la perception qu'ont les enseignants du service communautaire a un impact significatif sur leur engagement dans ce domaine. L'étude a révélé que l'absence d'orientation politique claire, la diminution de l'importance accordée au service communautaire au sein de l'université, l'incohérence des pratiques de promotion académique et le manque de responsabilité sont parmi les facteurs qui influencent la perception du service communautaire par les enseignants. Il est donc urgent de placer le service communautaire au cœur des rôles des enseignants et de mettre en œuvre des mesures de responsabilité plus explicites afin de garantir la participation des enseignants aux activités de service communautaire.

Mots clés: Service communautaire ; Éthiopie, Perception des enseignants, Université

Introduction

The history of universities spans three generations based on their missions (Schelkunov, 2018). The first-generation universities originated in medieval Europe to teach people about the cultural experiences of the past. At that time, their single mission was to conserve and transmit knowledge through teaching (Nabaho et al., 2022). The second-generation universities emerged in the early nineteenth century, expanding the mission of universities to focus on the production of scientific knowledge. The third-generation universities gained recognition in the West at the end of the twentieth century and represent a new generation of universities that effectively combine teaching and research functions with a third mission of addressing the existing needs of societies and states (Schelkunov, 2018).

The revolution in information and communication technology, globalization, the emergence of the knowledge economy, political turbulence, the worldwide financial crisis, and their impacts on university

funding have all thrown new light and new demands on universities worldwide to revisit their missions (Hadidi and Kirby, 2016). The model of Humboldtian University represented a new momentum within the higher education realm and was an invention of the early 20th century, driven by the growing number of students, the shift to knowledge-based societies, the increasing importance of science within such societies, and other pertinent issues (Paletschek, 2002).

Universities faced growing pressure to contribute to the economic development of their localities due to changes in social and economic outlooks (Pugh et al., 2016). As a result, new ways of thinking have emerged in universities, which allows mutual interaction between universities and societal organizations to eventually lead to the emergence of the third mission of universities—community service. Community service, also referred to as the third core mission of universities, is an emergent and multifaceted phenomenon linked to the universities' social and economic mission (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). Community service is a broad concept that encompasses various university activities outside academic environments (Karlsen and Larrea, 2019; Molas-Gallart and Castro-Martínez, 2007). In light of these changes, community service has become a focus and topic of discussion within the higher education community. Although teaching and research are still considered the primary tasks of universities, other activities, such as technology transfer and social engagement, have expanded the scope of their responsibilities. These activities, referred to as the third mission/community service, aim to enhance the impact of science in society and reflect the evolving role of universities (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher, 2020).

Universities are expected to contribute to their community through community service missions beyond the traditional academic core functions of teaching and research (Salomaa, 2019). Usually, this third mission is defined as a lingering and blurry concept that covers all the activities distinct from teaching and research outside academic environments (Görason et al., 2009; Vorley and Nelles, 2008). It is often considered a mission implemented as part of university-community cooperation that is intended to produce benefits for the community, and it is primarily characterized by the relationship between universities and society at large or non-academic partners.

Fundamentally, community service enables the use of universities' knowledge, human capital, intellectual property, and infrastructure resources to help meet the needs of government, industry, and society. In many cases, universities do not function only as service providers.

They, too, derive significant benefits from their interactions with the communities they serve (Mugabi, 2014). Both direct and indirect benefits are felt at different levels within the institution, including students, staff, departments, and centers, and beyond. As external communities embrace knowledge, universities can benefit from it as it provides them with opportunities for new insights and knowledge discovery. Stressing the value of a community service mission, Fitzgerald, et al. (2012) affirmed that, in addition to research and teaching, universities must give attention to community service practices to succeed in the twenty-first century.

Community service enhances the core functions of universities by strengthening teaching, research, and learning. Faculty engagement in community service enables academics to connect instruction with real societal challenges, update course content, and deepen classroom experiences. It also opens new opportunities for research by providing access to diverse settings, data, and interdisciplinary collaboration, thereby expanding disciplinary knowledge. For students, participation in community service promotes motivation, self-confidence, career readiness, social awareness, and networking skills. Overall, community service fosters a dynamic partnership between universities and communities, supporting mutual learning and the exchange of valuable resources (Beere et al., 2011). Therefore, community service, as part of a university's mission, offers an ethical, reflexive, and socially responsive approach to university-community relationships, with practices that aspire to understand and respond to community needs, views, and expectations.

In comparative terms, studies on teaching and research missions of universities in Africa abound, but few on the third mission (Nabaho et al., 2022; Preece, 2013). In contrast to Western countries such as the US and Britain, university-community engagement is a relatively new concept in Continental Europe and Africa (Koekkoek et al., 2021). According to Mugabi (2014), other than a few case studies, research at African universities that scrutinize the status and character of the community service mission is lacking.

In Nigeria, studies indicate that university and faculty involvement in community service activities is deficient and formal engagements take little or no acquaintance to immediate local communities (Awwalu and Najeemah, 2014; Ifedili and Ifedili, 2015; Onwuemele, 2018) which are attributed to insufficient access to research grants and funds (Akpan et al., 2016; Egwunyenga, 2008).

With the expectation of improving their economy and engagement with universities, local communities in Ghana willingly provided their land; however, the universities are serving the interests of only the privileged few (Agbodeka, 1998). Although community service and development are embedded in the establishment of universities in Ghana, a notable tension exists between Ghanaian universities and their host communities, as the host communities have accused universities of renegeing on, excluding, and neglecting their social responsibilities (Agyeman et al., 2021). In a study conducted at three universities in South Africa, Mohale (2023) noted considerable resistance to accepting community service as a major role for universities.

The Ethiopian higher education system has undergone significant and multifaceted changes since the establishment of the country's first higher education institution in 1950. Since then, one of the three responsibilities that universities are supposed to fulfill is community service (Sellamna and Gebremedhin, 2015; Tamrat, 2022).

In 1964, Addis Ababa University (AAU), then known as Haileselassie I University, announced the first university national service programme called the Ethiopian University Service (Wole, 1999) which required university students to serve mainly in rural areas of the nation. The Provisional Military Administrative Council (the Dergue), established as a new government after the 1974 revolution, terminated the programme as it asserted that students engaged in political activism contrary to the mission's aim, and instead established a new service called Development through Cooperation Campaign (Tamrat, 2022). During the campaign (between 1974 and 1976), schools from grade eleven and above were closed as students and staff members were deployed throughout the country (Amare, 1988).

Currently, despite their differences, all universities in Ethiopia are required to pursue a community service mission, as one of their core functions. Highlighting the importance of community service in education, the Ministry of Education has stated in its higher education proclamations that community service is one of the core missions of universities. The Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation (Proclamation No. 1152/2019) declares that every institution shall “undertake and encourage relevant study, research, and community services in national and local priority areas and disseminate the findings as may be appropriate” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019, p.11451). This applies to all universities regardless of their differences in ownership (i.e., public and private),

resources, capacities, and types (i.e., comprehensive, research, applied science) (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2020).

University faculty have the most significant control and influence in implementing the community service mission; and their perceptions towards the practice, either positive or negative, affect implementation (Nabaho et al., 2022). Bosanac, Milutinović, and Lungulov (2023) stress that universities' community service is becoming more valued as the higher education system transitions towards a more socially responsible entity. Gorski and Mehta (2016) and Kuttner et al. (2019) also affirmed that, as the core of the university's workforce, faculty involvement, dedication, and experience play a crucial role in the success of service missions.

In Ethiopia, higher education research has mainly focused on teaching and research, while the third mission—community service—has been relatively neglected. However, the situation appears to be changing as new insights into its historical development, institutional challenges, and gaps in implementation are emerging. Recent research (Adamu and Balsvik, 2017) suggests that the Ethiopian University Service initiative effectively fostered strong student involvement, leading to important questions about the faculty's lack of similar engagement today. Concurrent historical studies by Abebe (2019) which studied student participation in national service programmes, during the Derg and Haile Selassie governments, consistently indicated a fundamental disconnect between institutional community service goals and actual community needs.

In a comparative institutional study on AAU and Jimma University, Bekele (2020) revealed a systemic weakness which lacked formalized structures to integrate community service as a core university function. The empirical work of Mengist (2020) on Debre Markos University further highlighted operational barriers, including chronic underfunding, weak university-industry partnerships, low faculty motivation, and insufficient institutional oversight, all of which hindered effective community service implementation. Similarly, in examining the dynamics of university-community partnerships at the University of Gondar, Desta and Belay (2018), identified the transformative potential and recurring obstacles in such collaborations.

While prior studies have examined student engagement, institutional policies, and operational challenges, a notable lack of research on faculty perceptions of community service is evident. Since faculty play a crucial role in sustaining community service missions, understanding their perceptions is essential for improving engagement strategies and

implementation. Therefore, this study examines the perceptions of faculty and community service professionals at AAU toward the university's third core function: community service. This is intended to help design evidence-based policies and directives that enable the university to achieve its mission and benefit the broader community.

Study Questions

The following two questions guided the study:

1. In what ways do faculty perceptions of community service shape their understanding and involvement in the university's community service implementation?
2. What factors influence faculty perceptions and involvement in the university's community service implementation?

Methodology

Although community service is a fundamental mission of all public universities in Ethiopia, the community service at AAU was purposefully selected as a case. AAU, the country's first and largest Flagship University, has inspired other public universities; and its lessons and experiences have also influenced the design, development and implementation of academic programmes, institutional policies and strategies. Therefore, the findings of this study are presumed to have significant implications for other public universities, providing them with valuable insights and guidance.

The study employed qualitative research to explore an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions on community service. Although faculty perception of the community service mission is essential for ensuring its effective implementation, this aspect has received little research attention in Ethiopia; hence qualitative research for understanding a phenomenon about which little is documented (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, cited in Adamu, 2014). Moreover, the qualitative approach enables researchers to gather data first hand from participants in natural settings (i.e., their work environments), fostering more profound and authentic insights into their perspectives (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). A qualitative case study is suitable for thoroughly understanding a problem (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) and therefore, this study employed an instrumental case study that uses a particular situation to examine a larger problem (Stake, 2003).

Based on the reports drawn from AAU's Community Service Office, five, out of its eight, colleges, where the community service programme is presumed to have better implementation, were purposefully selected. Twenty faculty members (i.e., four from each selected college), five department heads, five research and community service associate college deans (i.e., one

from each selected college), and three university-level community service professionals were selected as data sources. First, information was obtained on the faculty members who often engage in community service at the selected colleges. Then, purposive sampling, mainly snowball sampling, was used to select data sources with better knowledge and experience in community service. Although the study aimed to include a larger number of data sources, data saturation reached following thirty-three interviews, comprising thirty faculty members and three university community service staff members.

Official institutional and national documents were also used as sources of data. These data were used mainly to substantiate data generated from individuals. The first category of official documents was institutional documents (i.e., documents that are internal to the university). These included the senate legislation, the research and community service directive, guidelines for field attachment and guiding community service, community service frameworks, and a fact sheet from the Community Service Office, as well as the Intellectual Property Management Policy and annual reports. The second category of official documents includes government documents (i.e., documents external to the university). It also included the education and training policy, the Higher Education Proclamation, the Education Sector Development Plans, and the Education Development Roadmap. Official documents were used to substantiate data generated from the university community.

Data from study participants (i.e., associate deans, department heads, faculty, and community service experts) was collected through interviews and document review. The interview guide was structured to allow respondents to reflect on their perception of the community service mission based on their experience. The interviews, which lasted thirty to eighty minutes, were fully transcribed, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' perspectives and experiences. Document review was employed to collect data from official institutional and national documents.

The accuracy and trustworthiness of the collected data were verified by re-listening to the audio recordings of the interview and comparing them with the transcripts to identify any discrepancies. This process involved emphasizing overlapping or ambiguous words and clarifying them, as well as verifying and cross-checking the data collected through document review and interview. Peer debriefing was employed throughout all research stages to establish validity and trustworthiness.

The study employed a rigorous thematic analysis technique to analyze data, aiming for in-depth and rich descriptions of the case under study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following the review of the data and grouping codes, the generated codes were clustered into categories, yielding two major themes and four sub-themes.

Results and Discussion

Community service is recognized as a core mission of universities and is positively emphasized in national and institutional policy documents. The Ethiopian Education and Training Policy states that universities prioritize research, technology transfer, and community service within the development corridors and areas where they are located. Further, the policy mandates that at least 5% of an institution's budget be allocated to support research and community service projects, depending on the mission of institutions, classified as research, comprehensive, applied science, science and technology, and specialized (Ministry of Education, 2023). The Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation also states that “every institution shall undertake and encourage relevant studies, research, and community service in national and local priority areas, disseminate the findings as appropriate, and, when necessary, engage in joint academic and research projects with national and international institutions or research centers.” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019). The AAU Senate Legislation also clearly indicates that as a premier research university in Ethiopia, providing need-based community service is one of its responsibilities.

Brandt et al., (2018) stress the importance of a nuanced understanding of community service, considering the unique contextual elements specific to each university. At AAU, community service is defined as “a service rendered by the university community to communities, government institutions, businesses, non-profit organizations, and society at large, to address challenges through capacity building, awareness creation, and, whenever possible, improving the quality of lives” (AAU, 2023, p. 14). This contextual understanding is crucial for effective and impactful community service.

While including community service as one of the core missions of public universities is crucial, it is not sufficient for achieving this mission. The implementation and success of this mission significantly depend on the perception of faculty who engage in community service activities (Bingle and Hatcher, 2002; O’Meara, 2008). This underscores the influence and responsibility of faculty in the success of community service initiatives.

In this study, research participants perceive community service in various ways, with several factors influencing their perceptions.

A. Faculty Perception of the Implementation of Community Service Mission

Study participants viewed community service as an integral part of the university mission, though divergence and lack of clarity in what a community service mission implementation entails were evident. Competing voices, arguments and interpretations have emanated due to the fluid nature of the concept, particularly concerning which university activities can be categorized within the community service mission (Nabaho et al., 2022; Papadimitriou, 2020).

While discussing the community service mission in universities, Perold and Omar (1997) also delineated the concept of service into three different ways: An activity that is largely unpaid and done voluntarily; actions performed in support of a higher cause or ideal, like national service programmes; and a professional, organized arrangement where specialized services are offered for payment.

Based on the findings of this research, faculty perceptions of community service regarding its implementation could be understood as (i) an independent versus integrated activity, (ii) a compulsory versus voluntary activity, (iii) a professional versus nonprofessional activity, and (iv) a university versus individual-staff initiated activity.

Community Service as an Independent Versus Integrated Activity

Community service can be viewed as an independent mission and an integrated part of other university missions. Study participants hold that, community service can stand alone and function independently, amidst other core functions. However, other respondents noted difficulties in perceiving community service in isolation, highlighting the interrelatedness of the university's missions and functions.

While examining how community service relates to the university's other two core missions respondents connected the essence of community service with teaching and research, comparing the three missions to the three legs of a stool. They contend that as a stool cannot properly function with a leg missing, the university cannot consider to be meeting its goals without the three core missions operating together.

Several respondents emphasized the interconnected nature of the university's core missions. One respondent noted, "The missions cannot

be viewed in isolation. They are deeply intertwined in our daily work and collectively contribute to the university's broader objectives" (R25). Another respondent expanded on this perspective, explaining that faculty members often simultaneously advance all three missions through their work, even when they are primarily focused on one area (R6). The participants noted that activities undertaken as part of the teaching mission can enhance research and community service initiatives. This is also the case in other universities. For example, at the University of Vienna, "the Third Mission is strongly connected with research and teaching, while simultaneously expanding these missions to engagement with society and economy" (Brandt et al., 2018, p.24).

Stressing the relationship between the community service mission and the other two core missions, a respondent claimed, "Community service mission and activities should be conducted based on research work that focuses on the community's interests" (R8). Studies also indicate that community service is a fundamental feature of universities, strongly related to faculty teaching and research responsibilities (Ogunsanya and Govender, 2019; Van der Sijde et al., 2012).

On the other hand, as a fundamental function of a university, the community service mission, at times, stands alone and directly serves the community. One participant noted that community service is essential and sometimes expected to provide an immediate response to community needs, unlike the teaching and research missions, which may have more long-term impacts. (R12)

Participants also perceived community service as an integral part of the university's core function and consider engagement in its service as they teach and also conduct research relevant to the broader community. On the other hand, faculty who perceived community service as an independent function often look for projects and opportunities outside the university. This implies that faculty perceptions of a community service significantly affect the way and condition of engagement.

Community Service as Compulsory versus Voluntary Activity

Some participants perceive community service as a compulsory activity to be engaged in. This is mainly based on the argument that the university has three core missions, and faculty are hired to contribute to achieving these missions. Although the AAU Senate Legislation does not list community engagement under the article on the duties and responsibilities of a faculty, it however states that "every faculty is required to engage in an approved and registered community engagement" while referring to the workload

of faculty (AAU, 2023, p. 59). Participants who considered community service as a compulsory activity noted that they are expected to allocate a certain amount of time to community engagement, although they admit its lack of equal weight to teaching or research and accountability attached to it. These participants do not directly associate community service with payment or compensation, but only do so when the request originates from the university. One participant noted:

By definition, community service is a free service. It must be done freely, and staff should not incur any costs while engaging in it. However, some staff members attempt to link community service with incentives despite the absence of guidelines that connect the service with incentives. (R1)

Another participant considers community service as his duty and prefers to do it for free, but if it requires much of his time, he may ask for compensation. He noted:

For example, a government office in Addis Ababa approached me, asking, 'You are an expert in this area; can you help us?' I agreed but mentioned that it would require a significant amount of my time. Initially, our engagement in community service activities was driven by our expertise. However, due to the extensive nature of the work, the issue of a professional fee would become a point of discussion. Such situations also occur. If I were in a better financial position, I might have done it entirely for free, which would be considered pure community service. (R14)

These responses indicated that faculty who perceive community services as one of their mandatory duties, did not disassociate it from payment, mainly because they consider such engagement as an opportunity for additional income. However, none of the national or institutional policies promote community service as a means of generating income for staff.

Some participants perceive community service as a voluntary activity that they engage in when they choose to. These participants also recognize the importance of community service to the community, the university, and the country as a whole. However, since they consider it as a voluntary service, they often expect monetary rewards. This is often when their community and government offices request them as a way of giving back to their society and country. They indicated cases where they do not expect payment or any financial reward, mainly when the request to engage in community

service activities originates from the university. This contradicts national and institutional policies that consider any community service activity undertaken by faculty as mandatory, performed without monetary compensation. The study also indicated that intrinsic and extrinsic incentives are the primary drivers of university-community engagement, and both can coexist within universities (Koekkoek et al., 2021).

Community Service as a Professional versus Nonprofessional Service

Participants' perceptions of community service varied regarding their engagement in activities that require professional expertise. Some participants argued that what should be counted as community engagement from a university perspective should be those community service activities they provide as university members and require their expertise and experience as a faculty or researcher. A proponent of this perception of community service noted:

All faculty must contribute to community service initiatives aligned with their expertise. This alignment ensures that they can effectively address pertinent issues within their profession. For example, a medical doctor provides community services that require medical expertise. Someone from the agriculture department would provide agriculture-related services, and faculty with law expertise would provide voluntary legal services. (R2)

The advocates of this concept also emphasized the rationale for providing community service within one's specific area of expertise. They argued that faculty are experts in their fields and can effectively address and explain the issues or questions that arise within their area of expertise. Onyx (2008) stated that the academic or research fellow assumes the role of an expert, and in this capacity, they are expected to provide professional advice to the targeted community group. While academics engage in community service, they often perform better or are more productive in their respective fields of study (Ćulum et al., 2015; O'Meara, 2002).

Respondents further noted that although they often provide community service as residents and citizens, those services may not require their academic and research knowledge and more so, they need not be a university member. Therefore, they argued that such services should not be counted as community service from the university's perspective because, first, those activities are not recognized or registered by the university; second, faculty members are engaged in those activities as individuals, not as experts, as they do not require academic expertise.

Contrary to what is stated above, some participants perceive community service as activities that require faculty engagement both in and outside their specific area of expertise. Proponents of this view argue that successfully executing a project outside one's specific area of expertise for the betterment of the community, regardless of the location, exemplifies the essence of community service, even if it is undertaken without formal affiliation with the university. (R15, R21) The main argument raised by these participants is that what makes community service is not the requirement of the expertise but rather the essence of providing the service. As long as the engagement benefits the community, it should be considered a form of community service.

Community Service Initiated by the University versus Individual Staff

University community service activities can be initiated by various parties, including the university's community service office or team, colleges, staff members, government offices, or local communities. Some participants asserted that the university's office for a community service is responsible for undertaking community service activities, and according to one: "Besides supervising and monitoring community service activities at the university, the Office of Community Service is primarily responsible for initiating all activities under the university's community service mission. (R5)

However, due to limited budget the university can only fund a small number of community engagement projects and offices. For example, over the past four years, it has awarded 73 community engagement projects (19 per year on average) through a competitive process (Vice President for Research and Technology Transfer, 2024). The university often expects community service projects to be carried out by a group of faculty; however, due to the limited number of projects, involving all faculty in the activities remains challenging. Participants described community services initiated and funded by the university as fair in terms of staff representation, as all faculty members are eligible to apply and compete. The main limitations of the exercise were described as relating to the lack of strong monitoring and evaluation of project implementation. Concerning this, a respondent said:

...for example, the department closely monitors teaching and learning activities and class schedules through timetables, attendance tracking, feedback systems, and follow-up procedures. However, similar mechanisms are absent for community service activities; there is no monitoring or oversight in place for these activities. (R29)

Along those lines a participant stated: "Let alone follow up, I see nothing more than a yearly report on the issue" (R9). Another one added: "Once the university or the Community Service office provides funding annually to the selected recipients, there is no further engagement. They do not conduct follow-up visits, only requesting a report on the activities". (R4)

Meanwhile, other participants argued that the idea of community service often emanates from individual staff members and felt that the university has not sufficiently focused on community service. One indicated:

Because of the limited attention of the university's, most community service activities are often initiated and implemented by individual staff members. (R11)

Participants also indicated that they use other opportunities, such as professional networks and memberships in different associations, to engage in community service. One observed:

From my observations, individual staff members often initiate community service activities based on their own experiences. These encounters can arise through involvement in professional societies, membership in ethics review committees, or managing various tasks, all of which are recognized as community service. (R16)

These observations indicate that faculty who perceive initiating community service as their main responsibility often expect the university to provide them with opportunities to engage in community service activities. On the other hand, faculty who perceive initiating community service as one of their responsibilities often engage in community service activities by taking advantage of opportunities that arise through various networks.

Staff engagement in community services through their network enhances access to community services in diverse areas where the community requires support from the faculty's experience and expertise. The problem with this type of community service is that, in most cases, it is neither recognized nor is it registered as a service provided by the university. The university also lacks the opportunity to follow up and provide leadership support as may be required. Moreover, in cases where a staff member leaves that position, the tasks may fail to be accomplished. A study by Bidandi et al. (2021) indicated that when community service activities are based on fragile relationships between individuals within universities and

specific communities outside the university or key staff members leave the university, the established trust and rapport with the community might be weakened or lost, affecting ongoing and future engagement efforts. Sometimes, community activities are also initiated directly by the community itself. The community may seek expertise from the university and approach individual staff members who they know in different capacities and engagements. The AAU Senate Legislation also states that “Community Engagement can be initiated at various levels of the AAU or by the community” (AAU, 2023, p. 88).

B. Factors Influencing Faculty Perceptions of Community Service Implementation

Community service is an increasingly prominent concept in higher education, gaining recognition in policies such as the Higher Education Proclamation and the University Senate Legislation. While faculty generally acknowledge community service as a core university mission requiring their active participation, framed as a means to address societal challenges, their perceptions often vary in practice. This study identified key factors shaping faculty perceptions, which in turn influence their interpretation and engagement with the university’s community service mission. These include insufficient institutional emphasis, a lack of guided implementation, weak accountability mechanisms, and a lack of detailed provision of community services, including their nature and requirements.

Institutional and National Policies

National and institutional policies lack sufficient clarity on whether community services are integrated into the other two missions of the university, or provided as a stand-alone service, or both. Those who perceive community services as integral to their research and teaching endeavours often do not engage in other forms of community service, assuming they are fulfilling their expected responsibilities. These participants argue that conducting research addresses a community's problems, though, this is not the sole purpose of all research engagements.

The policies also do not clearly state what counts as community services. For example, participants highlighted that in some colleges, participation in departmental or college-level committee memberships and co-curricular activities is also considered a form of community service. In contrast, in most other colleges, these activities are viewed as participation in university affairs rather than community service. As a result, some participants perceive community service as engagements that require their professional experience and expertise. In contrast, others consider all the services they provide to their community, regardless of the expertise required for each

engagement. Such inconsistencies also influenced the faculty’s perception of community service and engagement. Such lack of awareness could significantly hinder the success of a university's community service efforts and thus a well-developed community engagement policy—coupled with a university population that is both aware of and supportive of these efforts—is crucial to ensuring the successful implementation and sustainability of community service initiatives (Hall, 2022).

A respondent acknowledged these challenges and indicated efforts to address them and noted, “The community service office is organizing awareness sessions for the university community and has also prepared documents such as community service frameworks and factsheets on community service.” (R13). This aligns with the approach taken by other universities in addressing the mixed sentiments surrounding the concept of community service. Mohale (2023) observed that universities are developing policy frameworks to enhance the understanding of internal stakeholders regarding the concept and to establish procedures for managing community engagement activities.

Emphasis on Community Service

Community service is often underprioritized in higher education because it is not seen as equally valuable as teaching and research (O’Meara, 2002), which is why it is sometimes referred to as the third mission of universities. Nevertheless, institutional support and prioritization are crucial in shaping faculty perceptions of community service. When management prioritizes other activities over community service, faculty tend to interpret this as a signal that community service is less important within the institution, potentially impacting their engagement and participation.

At the university level, community service is structured and guided by the Community Service Directorate under the auspices of the Vice President for Research and Technology Transfer. A community service office also coordinates all community service activities within the university. At the college level, the associate deans are responsible for research and technology transfer but not community service per se. No budget is allocated for community service at the college level and the associate deans are unable to guide community service activities. No unit or focal person exists for community service at the department level. A participant indicated, “Community service is not structured at the college and lower levels like other functions such as teaching and research.” (R18). Emphasizing this, another participant remarked that:

The organizational structure looks good at the top management level but narrows at the lower levels, where more community service engagement is expected. This inappropriate imbalance affects staff perception and hinders their participation in community service activities. (R13)

The absence of a dedicated unit or focal person responsible for community service-related activities implies less emphasis on community service, potentially influencing faculty perception and engagement.

As participants noted, community service initiatives lack the necessary management attention, resources, or encouragement. This impacts the allocation of resources, the level of institutional support, and the overall culture surrounding community service within the university. One participant noted:

Lack of resources is a major challenge; even the per diem allocated for community service activities is insufficient. Even if you are interested as a staff member, a lack of resources limits your interest in community service activities. (R18)

AAU allocates less than five percent of its budget to community service and participants indicated that it is insufficient for many impactful community service projects. Participants advised to focus on and fund only a limited number of highly impactful projects, rather than distributing the budget to less impactful but comparatively more community service-oriented projects. As one participant observed:

Some [community service] projects require substantial budgets to be effectively implemented. Instead of allocating minimal funds annually to numerous small projects, allocating larger budgets to selected important activities that provide long-term benefits to the community would be more beneficial. (R26)

Participants indicated that an institutional culture common to all public universities tends to understate community service compared to teaching and research missions, as Weerts and Sandmann (2008, p.82) observed: “institutional cultures may either promote or stand in the way of implementing community engagement”. In the case of AAU, the institutional culture remains unfavourable to promoting community service.

Practices Related to Academic Promotion

The AAU Senate Legislation describes community engagement as

“mutually beneficial scholarly collaborations and partnerships of the university community with local, regional and international communities to address their specific needs centred on social, economic and cultural developments and challenges” (AAU, 2023, p.14). Community engagement accounts for 15% of the total points in the academic promotion criteria.

Yet, participants admitted a lack of consensus, within the same department, on what qualifies as community service in relation to academic promotion criteria. Some faculty members considered activities such as giving public lectures, volunteering, or mentoring outside the university as valid forms of community service (R3). Conversely, others thought that only structured, institutionally approved initiatives by the community service office of the university should be recognized (R7).

In some colleges, only community services provided by faculty related to their expertise count as community engagement. In contrast, in other colleges, faculty community service is counted as qualified community engagement, regardless of whether the service requires faculty expertise or not. As pointed out by participants, some faculty provide letters or certificates from different organizations, associations, or government offices to provide proof of their community service engagement. As one participant noted: “any staff member can obtain a certificate from anywhere showing their participation in community service and be promoted based on that” (R27). Participants argued that this is neither a good practice nor does it relate to an academic promotion that the faculty is seeking.

Moreover, this view meant that faculty counted any service they provide outside the university as community service and this to interpret any external service activity as community service broadly. However, such inconsistent understandings create evaluative challenges, particularly in promotion considerations as disparity emerges when comparable faculty contributions receive markedly different recognition—some formally valued as community service, while others disregarded due to subjective interpretations.

These inconsistencies fundamentally stem from inadequate institutional guidance, necessitating a critical need for universities to establish and disseminate clear operational definitions of community service. The current ambiguity not only creates confusion but may actively deter faculty participation in community service, as many reasonably question whether their efforts will receive proper acknowledgment in career advancement decisions.

Accountability

The AAU Senate Legislation states that, unless otherwise specified in an employment contract, the workload for faculty shall be divided into 62.5% for teaching, 25% for research, and 12.5% for community engagement (AAU, 2023; AAU, 2024). This affirms that community service is a duty of the faculty—and not a voluntary engagement. However, as some participants pointed out, accountability measures for staff members not engaged in community services do not exist. They noted that while faculty cannot disregard their teaching role, they could do so with community service, without consequence.

Participants indicated that, in most cases, faculty members seeking academic promotion often engage in community services for the sake of simply meeting the criteria for promotion. A participant observed:

The university does not enforce engagement in community service, and faculty are not actively participating. It is not considered mandatory work by the faculty and gets attention when it is needed for promotion. During promotions, everyone looks for opportunities to obtain a certificate to be counted as community service. (R30)

The above discussion implies that lack of accountability is attributed to regarding community service as a voluntary activity. Although a study indicated that faculty perceptions of how community service is valued in promotion significantly affect their motivation (O'Meara, 2008), this was not found to be the case in this study.

Conclusion

This study delves into faculty perceptions of community service and factors influencing them at AAU. The importance of community service at national, institutional, and individual levels is collectively acknowledged. The study identified that these perceptions can be understood in terms of varying categories: community service as independent versus integrated activities, compulsory versus voluntary participation, professional versus non-professional roles, and university versus individual-staff initiated activities. The study also reveals a significant gap between the perceived importance of community service and the faculty's perception regarding its implementation. The findings reveal that an institutional policy that recognizes community service as one of the core missions of the university is a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving the university's overall objectives. This implies the need for a formal institutional policy, such as an operational guideline or framework, to define and standardize

community service implementations explicitly. Such a structured document would enhance clarity and provide actionable direction for effectively implementing community service across the university. The findings of this study show that numerous factors influence faculty perceptions of community service implementation. These include institutional and national policies, diminished emphasis on community service within the university, inconsistent academic promotion practices, and a lack of accountability among faculty. While multiple factors result in diverse conceptualization of community service and shape faculty perceptions, accountability is the most addressable barrier. Contextually addressing these factors should be a priority for the university to ensure harmonized and concerted efforts in meeting the intended objectives of community service.

AAU should consider making community service a more central component of faculty roles, potentially integrating it into research and teaching responsibilities. This shift could enhance engagement by normalizing community service as part of the professional identity of faculty rather than treating it as an optional or secondary task. National and institutional policies related to academic promotion and resource allocation should explicitly value and reward community service to encourage the faculty. AAU must also implement more explicit accountability measures to ensure faculty participation in community service activities. Without ensuring accountability, community service is likely to remain underprioritized and insufficiently integrated into the academic culture.

Built upon preliminary document analysis and contextual understanding, the findings draw attention to an important direction for future research: examining whether the factors influencing faculty perception of community service implementation are influential in other Ethiopian universities and beyond.

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