SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE (SII)
The SII's approach to interdisciplinarity, social responsiveness and partnerships

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SII's approach to interdisciplinarity

There has been increased pressure globally for research institutions to produce interdisciplinary knowledge that can be applied to contextual and social issues. This has resulted in a growing impetus to strengthen interdisciplinary collaborations from within HEI's due to the wide perception that universities are seen as "places where the complex problems of our society are studied intensely but from which solutions are rarely forthcoming" (Plank, Feldon, Sherman & Elliot 2011). Different perspectives are therefore needed from researchers across disciplines to generate new approaches to the existing problems (Harris 2010; Bossio, Loch, Schier & Mazzolini 2014) particularly in contexts such as South Africa in which a range of challenges face the schooling sector.

The SII's understands interdisciplinary collaboration as the active integration of two or more disciplinary perspectives of a group of engaged researchers from different fields or disciplines (Harris 2010; Bossio et al 2014; Holley 2009) with the intention of addressing some of the challenges facing our schools. This involves integrating insights and aspects from a range of disciplines to create new knowledges (Bossio et al 2014; Holley 2009; Harris 2010; Davis 2007) and to establish new relevance (Bezuidenhout, Van Schalkwyk, Van Heerden & De Villiers 2014). The SII recognises that the development of shared knowledges requires a collaborative approach to generate new areas of inquiry and, moreover that when institutions and individuals shift their approaches towards building interdisciplinary knowledge there is the potential for new practices at both an individual and institutional level (Holley 2009).

Interdisciplinary collaboration requires the interactive communication and conceptualisation of ideas (Bossio et al 2014; Harris 2010) and implies the sharing of mutual benefit of the different branches of knowledge. In the SII interdisciplinary collaboration occurs within the university between academics and students (Luke et al, 2009) from different departments and faculties as well as between internal and external stakeholders (Harris 2010).

Given the many different types of interdisciplinary research collaborations it is important to distinguish an interdisciplinary approach from *multidisciplinary* collaboration. A multidisciplinary engagement may be described as a more straightforward approach to addressing a particular problem by two or more disciplines, with the possibility of creating new perspectives beyond those disciplines (Bossio et al 2014). *Interdisciplinary* collaboration on the other hand involves a re-conceptualisation of the aims and purpose of the collaboration based on the contextual needs of the 'site' as well as critical engagement regarding the potential benefits for all who are involved.

SII's approach to Engaged Scholarship and Social Responsiveness
The shift at UCT toward promoting institutional practices that prioritise and deepen social engagement and transformation has significant implications for how we as university staff do our work, where we do our work, who we do our work with and how we think about scholarship (Cantor & Englot 2015). An active re-orientation towards community engagement, social responsiveness and engaged scholarship reflects UCT's increased social impact agenda, as reflected in its Strategic Plan 2016-2020, developed with a specific focus on redressing structural disadvantages and inequalities that characterise South African society. Underpinning the Strategic Plan is the imperative for UCT to forge a new, inclusive identity, as outlined in its first goal of the strategic plan:

> To forge a new inclusive identity that reflects a more representative profile of students and staff, and the cultures, values, heritage and epistemologies of the diversity of UCT's staff and students (UCT 2016, 1).

The university's strategic goal, above, acknowledges that our destinies are inextricably linked with the communities we serve (Harkavy & Hartley 2009). This requires a shift in the relationship between the university, the community and the school, from what might historically have been limited community involvement to deeply collaborative and engaged partnerships. Central to the notion of partnership is reciprocity and collaboration – and the development of mutually beneficial relationships (Nehring & O'Brien 2012) to strengthen capacity across both the university and the school. We are therefore called upon to reach beyond our traditional knowledge base into different, as yet untested areas of expertise to enable the development of innovative strategies and initiatives, that individuals or organisations could not have produced on their own (Corrigan 2000).

SII's approach to Partnership
Over the past two decades, models of university–school partnerships have bourgeoned in the international education landscape (Harkavy 2006; Harkavy, Hartley, Weeks and Bowman 2011; Pecheone, Tytler & Ross 2006; Thorkildsen & Scott Stein 1996). Despite the increased scope for university involvement in school improvement, when it comes to

the definition of partnership, there is an absence of consensus as to what this means (Islam 2011). The concept of the university-school partnership is complex and evolving, and its practice varies according to its purpose, the contexts and conditions of the partnership (2011). The proliferation of university-school partnerships reflects the growing trend at universities around the world for staff and students to participate more actively in community engaged initiatives (Bawa 2015). In some cases these collaborations have taken the form of service learning (either for credit or not credit purposes), while in others, community engagement is conducted for the purpose of students' professional practice, constituting a mandatory component of the course curriculum.

Typially, university-school/community engagements tend to be organised around a particular purpose for a defined period of time, such as pre-service teaching practice. The partnership model adopted by the SII represents deeper, longer-term engagements in which the university and the schools collaborate to create mutually beneficial projects that bring value to both.

The notion of 'partnership' within the SII refers to an ongoing generative, context driven, reciprocal and engaged collaboration between UCT and a targeted group of schools in a community with a low economic status. The purposes of the partnership at the school level is to strengthen capacity in leadership, management and teaching, and more specifically to improve the life chances of post-matriculants from unequal and disadvantaged communities. At the level of the university, the purpose of the partnership is to provide opportunities for university staff and students to actively participate in community engagement, social responsiveness and transformation.

We fully support Deppeler's (2006) assertion that the university–school partnership must be adapted to the needs of the particular institutions within their broader contexts and, more specifically, to the contexts of the individual schools. Positioning itself within the university–school partnership literature (Deppeler 2006; Groundwater-Smith and Dadds 2004; Nehring and O'Brien 2012; and others), the SII holds that through purposeful, context specific collaboration between the university, the education district, community organisations and the school, a deeper, more effective whole-school intervention can be implemented and sustained.

Within the post-1994 South African context there have been numerous partnership-based interventions both within and outside of the university that have sought to redress the inequalities inherent in disadvantaged schools as a consequence of apartheid-era education. While, increasingly, school improvement partnerships have been forged between the public and private sector, university–school partnerships that conceptualise interdisciplinary engagement as a strategy for school development and community engagement are new in the country. The challenge in establishing effective

university-school partnerships is to ensure that the partnerships aspire towards mutual benefit and relevance (Islam 2011) and, moreover that the university engages in research and practice that is conceptualised to provide new knowledges which address issues of inequality and disadvantage.

Partnerships for whole-school improvement

Through purposeful collaboration between the university, the education district, community organisations and the school, more effective support interventions can be implemented and sustained. The need for partnerships within the SII is based on the assumption that the school-based intervention strategies are constructed *in context*, in close collaboration with the principal; SMT; School Governing Body (SGB) and teachers. This whole-school development strategy implies a multi-level focus on the professional development of teachers as well as principals and school management, as a prerequisite for development.

Within the broader scholarship on school reform there is consensus that effective school change requires multi-level approaches, and that the development of reform strategies must impact simultaneously at whole-school, department and classroom level (Fullan 1992; Harris & Bennet 2001; Hopkins, Ainscow & West 1994; Hopkins & Harris 1997; Reynolds, Hopkins & Stoll 1993, amongst others). In adopting a whole-school approach, emphasis should be placed on developing the capacity of the school at an organisational and management level as well as at a classroom level (West & Hopkins 1996; Hopkins 2001). The SII therefore regards school improvement as a strategy for educational change that seeks to improve the organisational system of the school as well as the professional capacity of teachers, in order to impact positively on student outcomes. This approach involves the integration of a range of strategies coupled with the involvement of a range of partners to create a school environment that is more amenable to teaching and learning.

Capacity-building at the level of both the classroom and the School Management Team requires a multi-level interventional approach, in conjunction with the development of partnerships and networks outside of the immediate school context (West & Hopkins 1996) including provincial departmental structures (Earl, Watson & Torrance 2002). At a micro level, collaboration involves productive mentoring, building peer relationships, team building and creating communities of practice. At a macro level, it involves building capacity to create interdisciplinary collaboration as well as cross-institutional partnerships such as school district, university and school-community (Fullan 1993; Nehring & O'Brien's 2012).

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