

Social Accountability, A Primary Driver for Impactful Health Professions Education and Universal Health Coverage: A Policy Brief

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Abstract

Discrepancies between the needs of communities and the competencies of health professionals are hurdles to achieving universal health coverage. An effective mechanism, *social accountability*, has been recognized to maximize positive impact, increase health systems, and improve health outcomes of the population to address this discrepancy. According to the World Health Organization, *Social Accountability* in health professions education refers to “the obligation to direct education, research, and service towards addressing priority health concerns of the community, region, and/or nation that they have a mandate to serve.” These priority health concerns are to be identified jointly by governments, healthcare organizations, health professionals, and communities. In the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), terms such as “*community engagement*,” “*patient-centered care*,” and “*social responsibility*” are often used to describe its mission. However, there is a lack of consensus within the faculty regarding the primary driver that ensures students graduate as health professionals who are both prepared and motivated to work with communities to address their health needs. *Social Accountability* not only increases equity but also the relevance, cost-effectiveness, and, ultimately, the quality of education at the institution, resulting in better healthcare service delivery for all. While impactful work incorporating social accountability is already being done in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS), it is crucial to showcase and model this approach in all faculty activities. This policy brief aims to facilitate the full integration of social accountability principles into the curricula of all programs offered by the FCHS at the University of the Western Cape, encompassing teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. It highlights the need to develop health professionals who understand social determinants of health, promote community well-being and health equity, and advocate for systemic change to achieve universal health coverage.

Introduction

Social accountability in health professions education is a universally recognized (but not necessarily universally adopted) concept, calling higher education institutions to be accountable and prioritize community health concerns through their learning and teaching, research, and service efforts (Boelen and Woollard 2011; Boelen 1995). Current health sciences curricula and research agendas frequently fail to adequately prioritize addressing the health concerns of local communities, creating a gap between academic goals and the health challenges faced by communities (Kuper and D'Eon 2020). Furthermore, community engagement initiatives often fail to cultivate sustainable partnerships that result in measurable improvements in community

health outcomes. There is a critical need to realign educational strategies to prioritize social accountability, ensuring that graduates are not only proficient in their disciplines but also committed to serving the health needs of underserved communities.

Despite the growing recognition of social accountability in health professions education (Larkins et al., 2020), the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) faces challenges in fully integrating this concept across its four core functions: learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. Without dedicated efforts to embed social accountability into all aspects of the faculty's operations, there is a risk of perpetuating health inequities and missing opportunities to utilize academic resources for significant community impact. By embedding social accountability as a foundational principle, the faculty can enhance the relevance and impact of its academic programs. As this policy document shows, this will ensure that graduates are well-equipped and motivated to address health disparities and advocate for health equity in their professional practices.

Theoretical Basis

Two fundamental theoretical bases support the notion of integrating *social accountability* into the curricula of health professions at UWC. The *Ubuntu* paradigm originates from the South African philosophy and ethic of Ubuntu, which can be roughly translated to “I am because we are.” Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of community, cooperation, and compassion (Gade 2012). Underpinned in the Ubuntu paradigm is the concept of social justice, focusing on the importance of solidarity and collective action in addressing systemic inequalities and injustices. Paulo Freire's (2000) *Critical Consciousness* theory purports the ability to recognize oppressive social forces influencing society and to act against these injustices. Jacobs et al. (2020) state that in the context of health professions education, critical consciousness refers to a state where health professionals (including those in training) question the causes of health inequity and intervene in healthcare contexts and systems to transform them into more socially just spaces. These two theories complement each other, and it is becoming evident in the literature that there is growing support for these approaches to form the basis of the health professions education pedagogy (Hansen et al., 2023; Mokhachane et al., 2023; Nicolaides, 2023). The FCHS locates itself in these paradigms where it recognizes that its education can be a powerful tool for social accountability and aims to address systemic inequalities that exist in health and educational systems, more so due to the UWC's strong oppressed history.

Policies that Support Social Accountability

Several national policies and frameworks have significantly influenced the trajectory of higher education in South Africa, and represent distinct phases in the country's efforts to address historical injustices, promote inclusivity, and enhance responsiveness to societal needs: (i) *The Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997)* emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to contribute to the social and economic development of the country; (ii) *The National Plan for Higher Education (2001)* stresses the importance of addressing the development needs of society and emphasizes the role of higher education in promoting social equity and justice; (iii) *The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (2013)* highlights the need for higher education institutions to be responsive to the social and economic needs of the country; (iv) *Council on Higher Education (CHE) Quality Assurance Framework* provides guidelines for the

integration of community engagement and social accountability as key components of institutional quality reviews; (v) *South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)* emphasizes the importance of qualifications that not only meet academic standards but also address the needs of society, promoting social and economic development.

At UWC, two institutional frameworks support social accountability principles – the *Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) 2021-2025* and the *Scholarship for Engagement for Societal Impact (SoE-SI)*. The IOP 2021-2025 does emphasize social accountability as it highlights the university's commitment to addressing the needs of its community through its core functions of learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. This aligns with the institution's broader vision and mission to foster inclusive, sustainable, and impactful education and research that benefit the local community and beyond. The SOE-SI framework provides a strategic approach to achieving societal impact that emphasizes the integration of the university's core functions.

The SoE-SI relates to the wide range of “work” that universities do in partnership with different “communities” (i.e., scholarly community, student community, business/industry/public sector, civil society, and international community resulting in Community Engagement (CE). CE has become institutionally operationalized as it is the pivotal point that feeds into and from teaching/learning/research, indicating that none of the three legislated responsibilities of universities are more important than another, nor can it be left out. Despite these efforts, higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to struggle with integrating community engagement (CE) as a core function. This is primarily because they often view CE as a separate activity that demands additional resources. Furthermore, there is a common misconception that outreach and service-learning are synonymous with CE, which reduces it to “philanthropic niceties” rather than recognizing it as a fundamental aspect of the institution's mission.

The SoE-SI has been vigorously operationalized in alignment with the Institutional Operational Plan (IOP). Driven by a dedicated team led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic, this initiative is being implemented across executive, middle, and foundational levels to ensure comprehensive integration and engagement. Commitment and motivation from executive leadership are crucial to its sustainability, requiring the allocation of human resources, funding, and infrastructure to support the SoE-SI's successful implementation within the institution. Aligned with the institution's IOP, the Faculty of Community & Health Sciences (FCHS) developed a 2021-2025 strategic plan. In this plan, the principles of social accountability are illustrated in a priority goal that focuses on addressing the health and wellness priorities in the immediate surroundings of UWC as well as partner community sites (rural and urban). Actions to achieve this have included the development of infrastructure that serves as learning and teaching hubs that facilitate the placement of students in these communities, progress toward the establishment of interprofessional health and wellness centers, regular outreach programs throughout the year at multiple community sites including the services of the faculty-run mobile clinic as well as active collaborations with neighboring universities and organizations who provide health and wellness services beyond the disciplines present in FCHS. Further goals include societal impact and interprofessional education. By fostering shared learning and collaboration among students, the faculty has been able to address the needs of communities more effectively, thus increasing societal impact and the development of future health professionals who are socially accountable.

By aligning the faculty's initiatives with the principles of the SoE-SI, the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences can enhance the relevance and impact of its academic programs, ensuring that graduates are equipped and motivated to address health disparities and advocate for health equity in their professional practices.

Policy Solution

<p>To advocate for the integration of social accountability into the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS) programs and activities, a comprehensive policy solution is essential. Here is a detailed multifaceted approach:</p>			
Focus Area	Objective	Action	Supporting evidence and potential impact
<p><i>Curriculum Integration</i></p>	<p>Ensure that students are taught to understand the broader societal factors influencing health in local and national contexts.</p>	<p>Incorporate community health, health disparities, health equity, social justice, and the diverse healthcare needs and systems in South Africa into the curriculum. It is of utmost importance that FCHS students are academically shaped to understand the broader societal factors influencing health across the local and national context. Concepts such as community health, health disparities, health equity, social justice, and the diverse healthcare needs and systems across the varying landscapes in South Africa are taught in a shared interprofessional module at the first and second-year level for all the health sciences students at UWC, theories that underscore social accountability needs to be applied during the senior years of study.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boelen et al., 2012, Noya et al., 2024, Prihatiningsih et al., 2020 emphasized the importance of aligning medical education with societal needs to foster social accountability. • Examples of successful integration and impact are located in the following: Karunathilake and Kristiana 2022, Robinson and Adams 2022, Guignona et al., 2021, Wooley et al., 2018, Reeve et al., 2017, Hogenbirk et al., 2016. • UWC IOP 2021-2025 FCHS Strategic Plan 2021-2025 highlights the university and faculty’s commitment to addressing the needs of communities through its core functions of learning and teaching, research,

			and community engagement.
<i>Research-Driven Approach</i>	Promote interdisciplinary research focused on social accountability involving faculty at all levels.	Encourage research initiatives that explore the impact of social determinants of health and develop solutions tailored to community needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Lancet 2010 Commission on Health Professionals for a New Century highlights the need for research that addresses health system challenges and improves community health outcomes. • UWC IOP 2021-2025.
<i>Community Voice and Partnerships</i>	Ensure community involvement in decision-making processes.	<p>Establish committees such as clinical coordinators and outreach committees to facilitate community input and maintain the community's voice at the forefront of faculty activities.</p> <p>Establish Advisory boards, which consist of stakeholders such as community leaders, health and wellness service providers, and government officials who could provide input into the curriculum, research projects, and community engagement activities, ensuring that these activities are aligned with addressing the needs of the communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nelson et al., 2024 discuss the importance of community advisory boards in integrating community perspectives into research and decision-making.

<p><i>Critical Conscious Clinical Practice and Community Engagement</i></p>	<p>Foster critical consciousness in clinical practice and community engagement to address health disparities and engage meaningfully with communities.</p>	<p>Train students and faculty in culturally sensitive and community-oriented clinical practices that prioritize social justice and health equity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frenk et al., 2010 argue for the transformation of health professional education to better address community health needs and improve health systems. • Arruzza and Chau 2021 reported that including culturally competent interventions as part of health sciences students' training was effective in facilitating confidence among students in engaging in culturally competent practices. • UWC IOP 2021-2025.
<p><i>Staff and Student Advocacy</i></p>	<p>Empower staff and students to advocate for social accountability in their professional and personal capacities.</p>	<p>Create platforms for advocacy, provide training in leadership and advocacy skills, and support initiatives led by staff and students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thistlewaite and Jackson 2014 highlight the role of interprofessional education in promoting social accountability and empowering health professionals to advocate for societal needs. • UWC IOP 2021-2025.

<i>Faculty Culture and Ethos:</i>	Cultivate a faculty culture that embodies the principles of social accountability.	Develop policies and practices that reinforce the faculty’s commitment to social accountability, encourage reflective practice, and recognize contributions to community health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The University of the Western Cape’s Institutional Operational Plan 2021-2025 underscores the importance of embedding social accountability into the institutional ethos to achieve impactful and sustainable health outcomes.
<p>By implementing this comprehensive approach, the FCHS can effectively integrate social accountability into its core functions, aligning academic objectives with the health needs of the surrounding communities and fostering sustainable improvements in community health outcomes.</p>			

Conclusion

Transformation policies and practices addressing past inequalities remain a top priority for South African higher education institutions, which play a crucial role in societal transformation through the graduates, knowledge, and services they produce. There is an urgent need to reorient educational strategies to prioritize social accountability, ensuring that graduates are not only proficient in their disciplines but also dedicated to serving the health needs of underserved communities. Without a concerted effort to embed social accountability into all aspects of the faculty's operations, there is a risk of perpetuating health inequities and missing opportunities to leverage academic resources for meaningful community impact. By embedding social accountability as a foundational principle, the faculty can enhance the relevance and impact of its academic programs, ensuring graduates are equipped and motivated to address health disparities, advocate for health equity in their professional practices, and ultimately contribute to achieving universal health coverage for the South African population.

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