

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD  
*FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT*

**2021**

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Since university spaces are still among the most privileged spaces in our society, Education White Paper No. 3 (1997) urges higher education institutions to fulfil both a moral and political imperative to contribute to social and epistemic justice and equality through forming partnerships with communities outside of the university in order to restructure their teaching, learning and research practices. Community engagement, one of the core functions of higher education institutions, plays a critical role in promoting this change. In fulfilling this imperative to promote and practice community engagement, universities move away from what has been their traditional role as disengaged 'ivory tower' institutions and become more socially-responsive institutions, championing the struggle against race, gender and class oppression by challenging, problematising, and hopefully changing (where appropriate) individual and collective attitudes through epistemic, pedagogical, psychosocial, and economic endeavours.

While certain disciplines are thought to lend themselves more readily to incorporating community engagement into their teaching, learning and research practices, other disciplines with reputations for blue-sky research, theoretical knowledge production and limited field-work or practical activities often struggle to articulate their position within the community engagement landscape.

Prof. Rod Walker has, over the past two years, displayed initiative, determination, and creativity in his response to an unprecedented global health crisis, as well as commitment to developing Rhodes University as a socially-responsive institution through his leadership of the '*COVID-19 Response: Hand Sanitiser Manufacturing Project*'. The project has since evolved and now encompasses a service-learning course and a research project, two out of the three community engagement streams.

In 2020 Prof. Walker, a registered pharmacist and researcher with a long career in pharmaceutical product development, responded to an urgent need in the community for hand

sanitiser, and thereafter oversaw the development and sustainment of this project. Hand sanitiser is an essential intervention to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 and it was the local and provincial shortage of this product that sparked this project. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the use of hand sanitiser in healthcare settings and by individuals, businesses, transport services and various other sectors. Seeing an opportunity to use his knowledge, skills and resources available at the university, Prof. Walker partnered with the Department of Health, local community partners, students and other role players to set up a small-scale hand sanitiser manufacturing plant in the Pharmacy Faculty. As the pandemic continued, the project grew to include elements of knowledge transfer, service- learning, and a wide reach to diverse communities.

When the Pharmacy Faculty was approached by the university, local hospitals and clinics, medical practices and even NGOs, with queries about the supply of hand sanitiser, Prof. Walker set up a manufacturing plant to produce hand sanitizer which complied with the standards suggested by the WHO. To date, 14 562 litres of hand sanitizer have been produced in the facility. With the collaboration of community partners - the Department of Health; the Department Rural Development and Agrarian Reform; SAIAB; the Ubunye Foundation; the Dohne Agricultural Research Institute; and the Departments of Pharmacy, Physics and Chemistry – and based on reciprocity, this project has resulted in more than 14 million hands being sanitised. The distribution of this hand sanitiser has reached far beyond the boundaries of the university, Makhanda or even Makana District. Healthcare workers in busy hospitals to rural communities and about 3000 farmers have all benefited.

In addition, Prof. Walker has shared knowledge and tools so that others can set up their own facilities. Scientists from the Dohne Institute have already done so and students in the Pharmacy Faculty who have been involved will take their knowledge and experience forward with them as they enter their internship and community service. Students were also given the opportunity to communicate science in the media, demonstrating how science can be put into practice. Based on this project, a new Service Learning course, an Industrial Pharmacy elective, has been developed by Prof. Walker's colleagues, and a research project straddling a number of departments has been initiated, promoting the nexus of community engagement, teaching, learning and research at our institution.

Prof . Walker is commended for his ability to harness years of academic knowledge to pivot quickly to provide an appropriate and effective response to a global and local crisis. The rigor of the process of setting up the project and sustaining it through reciprocal partnerships and teaching and learning and research endeavours are acknowledged. Moreover, the emotional weight that this project carried at a time of great fear, anxiety and tragedy, is greatly appreciated.