

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD  
*FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT*

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Eco-systems theory highlights the interconnectedness and interrelatedness between systems and sub-systems. This theory together with theories of social justice and epistemic justice are key frameworks that underpin community engagement as a core function at Rhodes University. From a national perspective, community engagement is mandated to promote the social responsibility role of universities and inculcate social and civic responsibilities in students. Universities are required to form relationships with local communities that are both developmental and transformative in nature. What this means for Rhodes University is purposeful engagement not only with the people of the Eastern Cape Province generally and Makhanda in particular, but also with the natural environment which gives effect to the essence of the eco-systems theory: the interconnectedness between human beings and nature.

Dr Jessica Coburn earnestly believes in and enthusiastically contributes to the idea that we are caretakers and not conquerors of the natural world. She embodies this both in her personal life, and as an academic through her community engagement activities. Dr Cockburn embodies the ethos of community engagement through her wide and deep ranging efforts to bring together a multitude of stakeholders in the service of both social and environmental sustainability and justice. Through various integrated engaged teaching and research activities, Dr Cockburn has pioneered a transdisciplinary and holistic approach to community engagement which is rich and inspiring.

Dr Cockburn's various projects also provide a testimony to how community engagement has evolved at Rhodes University. She has applied teaching, learning and research resources to meet community needs to specifically confront the pressing social-ecological sustainability crises the community faces. These initiatives have thus promoted university social responsibility. Her transdisciplinary and integrated methodologies, what she describes as organic processes of "weaving engagement into teaching and research", have been developmental and participatory, and the partnerships built with River Rescue, the community around the Tsitsa River catchment and more recently the team at Assegai Trails are reciprocal

and collaborative. Implementation of the projects has entailed joint planning, innovative monitoring and evaluation, and efficient utilisation of resources. As a result, the local natural environment, community partners, as well as students and staff have benefited. Balancing the advancement of teaching and research with community development with remarkable synergy, Dr Cockburn is recognised by her students, colleagues and community partners as deeply aware of the importance of context, connections and care, and these ideas are core to her personal philosophy as an academic.

Dr Cockburn was initially ‘just a volunteer’ at River Rescue, a small, local volunteer-based organisation which started in Makhanda in early 2020 to clean the rivers in the city of Makhanda. The aim of River Rescue is to restore the link between our rivers and our people. Dr Cockburn’s role is now facilitator of a learning partnership between River Rescue and the Department of Environmental Science. Environmental Science Honours students participate as volunteers in clean ups, they bring their knowledge of environmental science into discussion and planning of River Rescue activities, students develop their own specific projects to benefit River Rescue, such as social media campaigns, mapping activities, and educational outreach activities. In this way students share their knowledge and enthusiasm with the River Rescue community, and they are in turn enriched by gaining knowledge from the community partners of the local context and challenges related to water and waste management.

This service learning project involves staff members from the Department of Environmental Science, and all the Honours students. This project contributes to the transformation of the way in which local rivers are managed and cared for; the way in which residents interact with and relate to the river; the relationships between the university and the local community and physical environment; students at a personal level in terms of personal growth, skills and knowledge beyond what they get in a formal classroom setting. Reflective practice is embedded as a key aspect of the course. Students reflect with facilitators in regular meetings, and in regular reflection reports which they submit for assessment. The project includes reflective meetings with River Rescue team members, and rich collaborative discussions with community members. In these discussions and reflections, community partners showcase the value of other forms of knowledge, beyond the academic, in addressing sustainability issues, something which is core to the Environmental Science curriculum, but can be difficult for students to grasp in a world where science is still treated as a far superior form of knowledge.

In the words of one of her community partners, Helen Holleman:

*“The hands-on exposure of Honours students to the realities of the local watercourses and the lives of the people who live along them makes real the theory of systems thinking and often compels re-assessment of one’s understanding and assumptions. Working side by side with members of the community, listening to their problems, seeing the daily reality of the difficulties they contend with provides life-lessons that no theory can provide.... Jess’ involvement with the River Rescue programme has been profoundly beneficial in strengthening links between the University and community and in transforming the direction of the programme; it has brought direct educational (and practical) benefits to both the community and the Honours students, and has introduced new, reflective ways of thinking about the links between people and their environment.”*

The River Rescue team were honoured for their critical role in this co-learning partnership through receiving the Rhodes University Community Engagement Partner of the Year Award in 2023. When she reflects on the partnership and how it has shaped her work as an engaged teacher in the university, Dr. Cockburn puts the warm, respectful, open relationship she has with the River Rescue team at the centre of the story, and she expresses deep appreciation for the work that Helen Hollemann, Elizabeth Davies, Ntombomzi Monakali, Margaret Wolff, Preven Chetty, Nosi Mtati and many others, including her students, have done to enable these meaningful outcomes for so many people. “A community engagement award should really not be won by an individual” says Dr. Cockburn, “when I stand on that stage to receive the award I want the audience to know that I am standing there not as an individual winner... that is a false reflection of what this is about: I will be standing there as someone briefly helping to shine the spotlight on the important, heartfelt and difficult work we have done in collaboration – we have been together in the filth and unknowing of our broken rivers and communities, and will continue showing up for one another, and for our rivers, for it is only in this togetherness that we will find solace and energy to continue this relentless work”.

Complementing this teaching initiative is Dr Cockburn’s engaged research, which focuses on landscapes, linkages, and learning, and which ultimately aims to conserve the watercourses of Makhanda and the broader landscapes of the Eastern Cape Dr Cockburn’s endeavours as an engaged researcher are best described through an account of the Tsitsa Project, in which she worked alongside a large collaborative team of researchers, practitioners and community partners. Importantly, in reflecting on the work of the Tsitsa Project in shaping her engaged research,

Dr. Cockburn highlights that it is only through truly collaborative teamwork that one can do respectful, engaged, and impactful research of this nature. She acknowledges and celebrates the work and commitment of her colleagues Nosiseko Mtati, Margaret Wolff, Tally Palmer, Eureka Rosenberg, Harry Biggs, Monde Ntshudu, and many, many others who made this project the success that it was. The Tsitsa Project was a large collaborative project started in 2014 involving numerous stakeholders including researchers, local community members, natural resource managers, policymakers, local NGOs, and others. The project goal was to bring together a range of stakeholders to collectively work towards more sustainable landscape management and rural livelihoods development in the Tsitsa River catchment.

Key benefits of the Tsitsa Project to local partners have been capacity development, job creation, knowledge-sharing and creating opportunities for collaboration among diverse participants. Crucial skills development benefits have been derived through many of the project partners participating in a short course facilitated on social learning and stakeholder engagement. Importantly, knowledge benefits were not only focused on disseminating academic knowledge to other stakeholders, but on co-producing new knowledge together in reflective social learning workshop spaces. Worthy of mention here is Dr Cockburn's role as co-leader of this project's innovative approach to monitoring and evaluating its engaged research. This collaborative, pioneering approach, Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMERL), provided an important platform for the wide range of stakeholders in the project to monitor project progress, and to regularly reflect on successes and challenges and lessons learnt, as reflected in an article which Dr Cockburn and her collaborators published on the project in 2018. PMERL is a means of using on-going knowledge production to inform management and decision-making for improved landscape function. In other words, it brings knowledge to life to support practice.

Dr Cockburn continues to expand and evolve her community engagement activities. Currently, she is re-working, together with her colleagues, a practical component of the Environmental Science 3<sup>rd</sup> year Course on Environmental Management Concepts and Methods, where students are introduced to basic research tools to inform and support environmental management, in response to the needs of their community partner, Assegai Trails. By incorporating community engagement principles of 'community learning', the course will now involve "authentic assessment" where students are taught and assessed through tasks which have real-life relevance and application, rather than just learning ecological tools for the sake of their degrees

only. The relationship with Assegai Trails farm is a long-standing one as it has been a site for field trips and practicals, but now the relationship is developing into a more collaborative and reciprocal one as the landowners and their staff are co-designing the research and collecting and analysing data on specific environmental management issues they have identified. This practical will therefore form part of a long-term research project and partnership with Assegai Trails and will be an opportunity for students to be introduced to the principles of community-engaged research and learning.

Dr Cockburn's conceptualisation of transdisciplinarity as a personal and professional practice situated at the nexus of science, society, and self, has informed her engaged research, as well as engaged teaching in the form of service learning. Indeed, one community partner describes Dr Cockburn as having a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of people, animals, flora and fauna of the riverine environment. It is this crossing of disciplinary, methodological, social and physical borders, and the concomitant appreciation of interconnections and the foregrounding of relationships that makes Dr Cockburn a worthy recipient of the 2023 Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Award for Community Engagement.



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