

NWU COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

ANNUAL REPORT 2025



Sustainability and Community Impact

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Table 1: Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
APP	Annual Performance Plan
CE	Community Engagement
DBO	Discipline-Based Outreach
ERI	Engaged Research and Innovation
ETL	Engaged Teaching and Learning
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
SCI	Sustainability and Community Impact
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SL	Service Learning
WIL	Work-Integrated Learning
WISL	Work-Integrated and Service-Learning



Reflection from Retired Director: Sustainability and Community Impact (SCI) - Mrs. Beatrix Bouwman



Mrs. Beatrix Bouwman

The 2025 Community Engagement Annual Report reflects a critical point in the maturation of Community Engagement (CE) at North-West University. When considered against the longer institutional trajectory—where CE was initially under-resourced, fragmented, and largely driven by philanthropy and volunteerism—it is evident that the university has made meaningful progress in positioning CE as part of its core academic mandate.

This report should be read as a management instrument. It does not aim to showcase individual projects or provide descriptive accounts of activities in communities. Rather, it offers a strategic, high-level view of how the institution is responding to national and global developmental imperatives through its CE portfolio, and how CE is being integrated into teaching and learning, research and innovation, and broader institutional systems.

The focus is therefore on the effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability of the system, rather than on the volume or visibility of activities.

A key advancement in the 2025 cycle is the university's improved ability to interpret its CE portfolio analytically. Strengthened data systems, more structured monitoring and evaluation practices, and the integration of SenseMaker as an interpretive tool now allow the institution to move beyond fragmented reporting towards a more coherent understanding of participation, quality, partnership depth, and emerging impact. This represents an important step in linking institutional effort with measurable value.

At the same time, the report highlights persistent structural constraints that require attention. These include uneven institutionalisation across faculties, inconsistent monitoring practices, under-reported activity, and ongoing perceptions of CE as optional or only part of 'sharing of expertise' rather than integral to impactful academic work. These challenges are not new, but they remain significant barriers to achieving a fully integrated and impact-driven model of engaged scholarship.

Of particular concern is the continued underfunding of the CE portfolio. Resourcing patterns remain misaligned with institutional expectations. While CE is increasingly positioned as a contributor to societal impact, graduate attributes, and institutional reputation, this has not been supported by adequate or ring-fenced funding. This creates a systemic risk: without appropriate investment, the university risks undermining the quality, sustainability, and credibility of its engagement efforts. It also signals a potential



gap in institutional commitment or in the strategic understanding of what constitutes effective, reciprocal, and impactful CE.

The findings from the SenseMaker analysis further reinforce that the next phase of development will depend not only on systems and policies, but on institutional culture, clarity of expectations, and appropriate support mechanisms. Significant engagement is already taking place, often informally and without recognition; however, without enabling conditions, this cannot be scaled or sustained.

In this context, the report points towards several strategic priorities for managers to note:

- Strengthening the integration of CE into core academic functions and performance frameworks
- Ensuring adequate and aligned resourcing of the CE portfolio
- Improving the quality and consistency of monitoring, evaluation, and reporting

- Supporting the development of long-term, reciprocal partnerships
- Reducing systemic barriers that position CE as an additional burden rather than a core academic responsibility

The 2025 report should therefore be read not only as an account of progress, but as an indication of the decisions required to advance CE from a developing system to a fully institutionalised, high-impact function with auditable quality and accountability processes.

While I have concluded my sixteen-year tenure at the end of 2025, I remain confident in the foundation that has been established, but equally clear that the next phase will require deliberate strategic alignment, strengthened accountability, and sustained investment if the university is to realise its full potential in contributing to societal and environmental stewardship.



Foreword: Incoming Director: Sustainability and Community Impact (SCI) - Mr. Lester Mpolokeng



Mr. Lester Mpolokeng

As incoming Director from 1 January 2026, I wish first to acknowledge the work of Mrs Beatrix Bouwman in shaping and advancing the Community Engagement (CE) landscape at the NWU. Over many years, and particularly through a period of institutional transition, she helped move CE from a fragmented and often under-recognised space towards a more visible, better organised and more analytically grounded institutional function. The foundation reflected in this report, including stronger registration, more structured monitoring and evaluation, and the integration of SenseMaker as an interpretive tool, rests in no small measure on the system she helped to build and sustain.

The timing of this report is important. It closes one phase of institutional development and opens another, shaped by the NWU realignment and the need for closer integration across the university's core

functions. In this context, CE must continue to develop not as an isolated portfolio, but as a connected and enabling function that strengthens teaching-learning, research and innovation, postgraduate development, student formation, and the university's relationship with society. The next phase therefore calls for continuity in what has already been established, but also for sharper alignment, wider visibility and more deliberate institutional collaboration.

My vision for this next phase rests on three priorities. The first is to continue increasing the overall visibility of CE across the NWU, so that the work already being done, including work that remains informal or under-recognised, becomes more visible, better supported and more strategically used. The second is to deepen the contribution of Postgraduate Studies to the CE portfolio, particularly in expanding Engaged Scholarship. This is closely aligned with the DVC portfolio and presents an important opportunity to strengthen socially grounded research, postgraduate inquiry and academically integrated knowledge production. The third is to improve the quality of relationships with all stakeholders, both internal and external, in order to strengthen trust, collaboration and, in particular, the funding base required for sustainable and high-impact CE.

This means building a CE environment in which faculties, units, postgraduate students, community partners, funders and support divisions see themselves as part of one broader institutional ecosystem. It also means ensuring that visibility is matched by quality, that strategic partnership is matched by reciprocity, and that institutional ambition is matched by practical support. The report shows clearly that the NWU has moved beyond the baseline



stage. The task now is to consolidate what works, address the barriers that remain, and position CE as an even stronger contributor to academic relevance, social responsiveness and institutional impact. I therefore receive this portfolio with appreciation for what has already been achieved and with confidence

in what can still be built. The 2025 Annual Report provides a strong evidence base for that next phase. It should be read not only as a record of work completed, but as a platform for widening the reach, depth and sustainability of CE across the NWU.

Department: Sustainability and Community Impact



Left to right: Juanita Schoeman, Beatrix Bouwman, Lester Mpolokeng and Maribe Mamabolo

Reflection from Retired DVC: Community Engagement and Mahikeng Operations - Prof. Sonia Swanepoel

As I reflect on the journey of Community Engagement (CE) at the North-West University (NWU), I do so with deep gratitude and a strong sense of collective achievement. After nearly sixteen years in senior leadership at the University and having served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Community Engagement and Mahikeng Operations from 2021 to June 2025, it is especially meaningful to look back on the growth of a portfolio that has steadily strengthened its institutional presence, systems and strategic value.

From a base of approximately 10 reported projects in 2021, the portfolio progressed to 406 CE projects in 2022, 500 in 2023, 442 in 2024 and 605 in 2025. This growth reflects more than increased activity. It reflects stronger institutional organisation, improved project registration, monitoring and evaluation, and greater visibility of CE across the University. The establishment of a central database, regular engagement with faculties and support departments, and the submission of mid-year and annual reports to management and Council all contributed to this strengthening.

This progress was made possible through the commitment of many colleagues. I wish to acknowledge the Sustainability and Community Impact team under the leadership of Ms Bibi Bouwman, together with Mr Maribe Mamabolo, Ms Juanita Schoeman and Mr Tumelo Legae, as well as the dedicated team in the Office of the DVC, namely Mr Lester Mpolokeng, Ms Mariki Stauss and Mr Thabiso Masoko. Through their competence, loyalty and sustained effort, important structures were put in place to support the portfolio, including four annual CE engagement meetings with faculties



Prof. Sonia Swanepoel

and support departments, strengthened reporting processes, and a more coherent system for portfolio oversight and growth.

Over the past three years, the CE portfolio also showed important strategic refinement. As reflected in the 2024 CE Annual Report, the University strengthened its registration, monitoring and evaluation processes, while the proportion of structured and sustainable CE initiatives continued to grow. In 2024, nearly 60% of registered projects reflected this stronger level of structure and sustainability. The approval of the third revised CE Policy by Council in November 2024 provided further clarity for implementation, while the portfolio deepened its focus in the North West Province, where 49% (grew to 65% in 2025) of CE activities were located, even as national and international engagement expanded. Throughout this growth, the



strong alignment of CE initiatives with the Sustainable Development Goals remained a notable feature of the NWU portfolio.

To all colleagues involved in Community Engagement, I extend my sincere appreciation.

Your friendship, support, cooperation and loyalty made it possible to build this portfolio to its current level of maturity, visibility and strategic relevance. I wish you well as you continue to advance Community Engagement at the NWU.



Foreword: DVC: Research, Innovation, Community Engagement and Postgraduate Studies - Prof. Jeffrey Mphahlele

It is a privilege to introduce the North-West University (NWU) Community Engagement (CE) Annual Report for 2025, a year that marks both continuity and transition in the institutional journey of CE at the NWU.

Before reflecting on the significance of this report, it is important to acknowledge and convey gratitude to Prof Sonia Swanepoel for her leadership of the CE portfolio up to the completion of the NWU realignment process in June 2025. Her stewardship consolidated CE as a recognised and increasingly visible institutional function, while her commitment to the portfolio extended beyond the formal transition period to the end of 2025 in order to ensure a smooth, stable and responsible handover. That continuity of leadership has been invaluable. It allowed the work already underway to continue with purpose, protected institutional memory, and created the conditions for this next phase to begin on firm ground. On behalf of the portfolio, I extend sincere appreciation to Prof Swanepoel for her dedication, strategic guidance and service to the University and its communities.

The 2025 reporting cycle is significant because it is the first year in which CE is located within the portfolio of Research, Innovation, Community Engagement, and Postgraduate Studies. This is more than an administrative change. It presents an important opportunity to deepen the integration of the University's core functions and to strengthen the value that each brings to the other. CE should not be understood as separate from the academic project of the University. Rather, it is through meaningful engagement with communities that teaching and learning are enriched, research



Prof. Jeffrey Mphahlele

becomes more responsive and relevant, and postgraduate study is strengthened through socially grounded inquiry, innovation and impact.

This direction is fully consistent with the institutional intent expressed in the NWU Strategy 2024 and beyond, which positions CE as a core university function, and calls for the integration and alignment of CE with teaching-learning and research in order to develop a culture of active citizenship. It is equally aligned with the Annual Performance Plan (APP), which emphasises mutual benefit with communities, the development of graduate attributes, the empowerment of staff, improved monitoring and reporting, and stronger sustainability awareness across CE activities. The strategic implication is clear: the University is called not only to do more, but to do better and to move from



fragmented and compliance-driven activity toward a more coherent, evidence-based and impact-oriented model of engagement.

This report shows that the NWU is steadily moving in that direction. It reflects an institution that is building stronger systems for registration, monitoring and evaluation, improving the visibility of CE across campuses and faculties, and strengthening its ability to tell a more analytical story about contribution, quality and emerging impact. It also reflects a portfolio that is maturing conceptually, one in which engaged teaching and learning, engaged research and innovation, outreach, student development and partnership-building are increasingly understood as connected dimensions of one broader institutional responsibility.

For the newly aligned portfolio, this creates a powerful basis for collaboration. Research and Innovation can deepen the quality, reciprocity and relevance of community-based knowledge production. Postgraduate Studies can extend this by supporting the development of scholars whose work is not only academically rigorous, but also socially responsive and contextually engaged. The CE, in turn, gives practical expression to the University's broader mission by ensuring that knowledge is not confined within institutional boundaries, but directed toward

societal benefit. The closer collaboration of these areas is therefore not incidental; it is central to the future positioning of the NWU as a university that seeks excellence with relevance.

At the same time, this report is appropriately honest about the work that remains. It points to the ongoing need for stronger support systems, improved data quality, more consistent monitoring and evaluation, deeper partnership formalisation, and clearer pathways for staff and students to participate meaningfully in CE. These are not signs of weakness, they are signs of a system that is developing the maturity to ask harder and more necessary questions about quality, sustainability and impact.

I therefore commend the Sustainability and Community Impact team, faculties and campus representatives, Student Life structures, project leaders, community partners and all colleagues who contributed to the work captured in this report. The 2025 Annual Report reflects not only activity, but commitment to building an institution in which research, innovation, teaching, postgraduate development and community engagement work together for the greater good of NWU and the society it serves.



Executive Summary

The 2025 Community Engagement Annual Report presents the clearest institutional picture to date of how CE is being designed, registered, implemented, monitored and experienced at the NWU. Read as a whole, the report shows a university whose CE system has moved beyond its earlier baseline stage. The visible portfolio is larger than in earlier years, the registration culture is stronger, and the evidence base is now sufficiently developed to support more analytical reporting. Most importantly, CE is becoming more clearly integrated into the academic and developmental life of the institution rather than appearing only as a set of isolated outreach activities. This shift matters because it changes the central question of the annual report from “How much CE is happening?” to “What kind of CE is taking shape, under what conditions, and with what potential for sustained impact?”

Part 1 of the report demonstrates that the 2025 registration cycle is the strongest yet in terms of visibility, ownership and analytical value. A total of 605 projects and activities were registered, confirming continued growth from the 2023 benchmark and a far more robust registration culture than was possible in the earlier system-building years. The data show that the portfolio is now led more clearly by engaged teaching and learning, with discipline-based outreach and engaged research and innovation forming significant but smaller segments. The near parity between Potchefstroom and Mahikeng is one of the most important structural developments in the 2025 dataset, while Vanderbijlpark remains a strategic site for more deliberate growth. Faculty patterns show both concentration and diversification: some faculties still anchor the largest shares of visible work, but the portfolio is now more broadly distributed across the institution than before. The registration data also show

that CE remains strongly rooted in the North-West Province, closely aligned to SDG 4, and still financially fragile, with many projects operating with limited or no dedicated funding.

Part 2 of the report shows that the monitoring and evaluation system is beginning to shift the NWU from a culture of activity reporting toward a culture of evidence and impact. While M&E coverage still does not extend across the full registered portfolio, the current dataset is strong enough to identify recurring patterns. Projects are using a wide range of monitoring tools, including registers, assessments, reflections, surveys, interviews, focus groups, structured observation and project-specific indicators. The strongest outcomes are visible in education, health, skills development, science exposure, and locally embedded partnership work. At the same time, the M&E evidence reveals the unevenness of the current system: some projects are already demonstrating meaningful outcome logic and stronger impact evidence, while others remain largely descriptive. The 2025 report therefore makes clear that the NWU is no longer at the point of asking whether impact can be discussed at all; the challenge now is to standardise and deepen the quality of the impact evidence being produced.

Part 3 adds a critical dimension by consolidating the SenseMaker findings into the annual report itself. This is an important institutional step. The registration and M&E datasets tell the university what is being done, by whom, and with what emerging outcomes. SenseMaker tells the university how CE is understood, felt, enabled, or obstructed inside the organisation. The findings show that many staff members already experience CE as meaningful, community-facing and intellectually valuable

work, often rooted in teaching, knowledge sharing, public-facing expertise, service, and long-term developmental aspirations. Yet the findings also show persistent friction: confusion about what counts as CE, uneven communication, heavy workloads, administrative burden, weak project visibility, and inconsistent institutional support. One of the strongest SenseMaker conclusions is that the university's participation challenge is not mainly a lack of goodwill. It is a system-design challenge. Staff are asking for clearer pathways, better collaboration, stronger recognition, more practical support, and a more coherent environment in which participation becomes easier and more sustainable.

Taken together, the three parts of the report point to a common institutional conclusion. The NWU has built enough capability to move beyond a descriptive annual report model. The next stage is to deepen the quality of CE as a strategic academic function. That means supporting fewer unnecessary administrative burdens, strengthening community-centred and long-term partnerships, aligning CE more explicitly with teaching, research and innovation, recognising engagement in institutional reward and workload systems, and improving the evidence base for outcomes and impact. The 2025 annual report should therefore be read not only as a record of activity, but as a strategic platform for a higher standard of CE at the NWU.



PART 1: PROJECT REGISTRATION

The 2025 registration dataset shows the scale, distribution and design profile of Community Engagement (CE) at the NWU. The central shift in 2025 is that CE is now more clearly visible as academically integrated work rather than only outreach activity.

1.1 Registration in context

The registration process itself is therefore a substantive part of the institutional story. It reveals where ownership sits, how well categories are understood, which kinds of work are easiest to register, and which remain structurally under-captured. In 2025, the data suggest a real shift from proxy reporting to project-level ownership. This is more than administrative improvement. When project leaders themselves increasingly register activities, the dataset becomes a more credible reflection of how staff understand their own work and how they position it within the broader CE framework.

Equally important, the registration system is now capable of doing more than aggregating counts. It can begin to show design intent: whether a project is primarily pedagogical, research-led, service-oriented, geographically localised, multi-campus, continuing, or newly established; whether it is linked to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) or Service Learning (SL); whether it is aligned to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and whether it has any funding base at all. This means registration has become an institutional intelligence tool rather than only a reporting requirement.

The 2025 registration cycle should be read as the strongest registration year to date. Compared with the earlier system-building years, the 2025 dataset offers more than a count of projects. It shows who is registering, where activity is concentrated, what kinds of CE dominate the portfolio, and how closely projects are aligned with teaching, research, partnerships and societal priorities.

Across the 2022 to 2025 period, the NWU has moved from visibility-building to system maturation. The institution is now in a position to use registration not only as a compliance mechanism, but as a strategic lens on the shape and quality of the CE portfolio.

1.2 Registration growth and headline profile

This pattern reflects institutional maturation as much as portfolio growth. While 2022 exposed under-reporting as a strategic challenge and 2023 showed improved capture through stronger alignment, the lower 2024 total is best understood as the outcome of better terminology, tighter reporting processes, and more accurate project/activity classification. The 2025 increase therefore signals more than volume growth: it reflects a stronger institutional capacity to define, record and see CE more clearly. That visibility is essential for supporting CE as a strategic function rather than leaving it as scattered goodwill.

The 2025 profile also suggests that registration quality is improving, not only registration volume. Project descriptions are richer, classification is more useful, and project-leader participation is stronger. This matters because a higher-quality registration base allows for better planning, stronger comparative reading across campuses and faculties, and more meaningful connection between the registration system and subsequent M&E evidence.

Table 2: Registration at a glance

Measure	2025 value	Interpretation
Registered projects and activities	605	The largest visible CE portfolio to date.
Midyear registrations	510	Strong early-year uptake and reporting responsiveness.
Project-leader ownership	86%	A stronger culture of ownership and accountability
Cross-campus projects at midyear	62	Evidence of a less siloed institutional CE ecosystem.

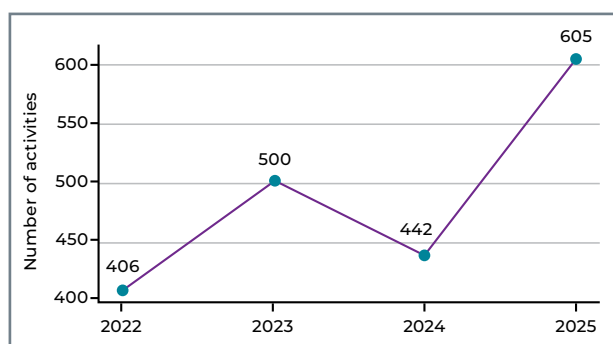


Figure 1: Year-on-year CE activities recorded

A total of 605 CE projects and activities were registered in 2025, up from 442 in 2024. This confirms continued growth in the visible portfolio and signals that the central registration system is now capturing a broader share of institutional activity. Just as important, midyear reporting showed 86% project-leader ownership, indicating that registration is increasingly driven by those closest to the work itself rather than by proxy reporting.

1.3 Campus and faculty footprint

The campus picture deserves careful interpretation. The near parity between Potchefstroom and Mahikeng is one of the strongest institutional developments in the 2025 cycle because it signals that CE visibility is no longer overwhelmingly concentrated in one location. This does not mean the campuses are identical in profile or function. Rather, it suggests that the institutional ecosystem is broadening, with Mahikeng clearly visible as a major contributor to the NWU's public-facing work.

The faculty picture tells a similarly important story. While some faculties continue to account for the largest shares of visible CE, the 2025 distribution also shows a maturing portfolio in which smaller or more specialised faculties are increasingly visible. This broadening is strategically significant because it suggests that CE is not only being carried out by historically prominent areas but is becoming more widely distributed across disciplinary cultures.

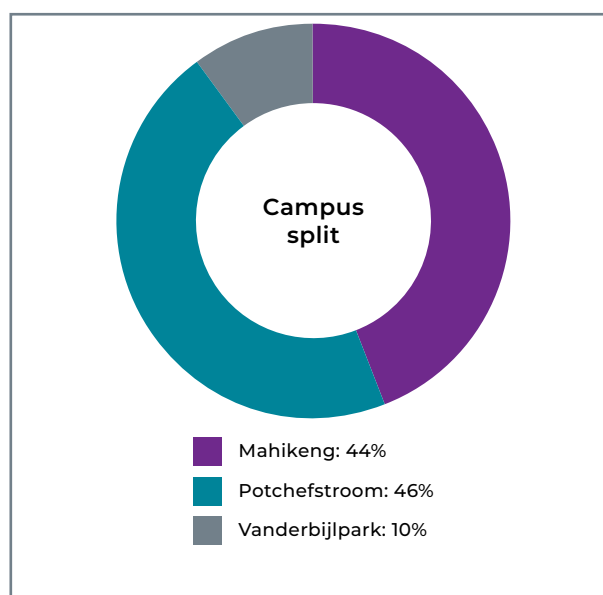


Figure 2: 2025 campus distribution of registered activities

The 2025 campus footprint is more balanced than in earlier reporting cycles. Potchefstroom accounts for 46% of campus-coded registrations and Mahikeng for 44%, while Vanderbijlpark contributes 10%. The near parity between Potchefstroom and Mahikeng is one of the most important

structural shifts in the 2025 portfolio because it shows that visible CE is no longer overwhelmingly concentrated in one institutional location.

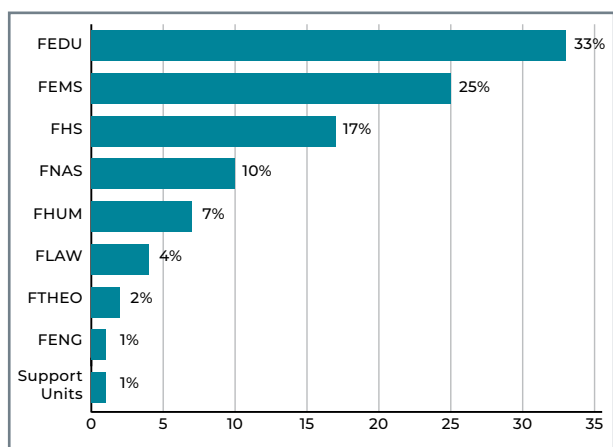


Figure 3: Faculty share of 2025 registered CE activities

The 2025 distribution shows both concentration and institutional broadening across faculties, units and support divisions. Across the 647 faculty-, unit- and department-linked registrations associated with the 605-project portfolio, the largest share came from the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (26%), followed by the Faculty of Education (18%) and the Faculty of Health Sciences (18%). The Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (11%) and the Faculty of Humanities (7%) form a visible second tier, while Law (2%), Theology (2%) and Engineering (1%) reflect smaller but still important levels of participation. Student Life also contributes meaningfully, particularly in Potchefstroom (9%) and Mahikeng (4%), with additional visibility from Library Information Services, Sustainability and Community Impact, the DVC Office and other support divisions. The 2025 picture therefore shows that CE remains led by a few high-volume academic areas, but is increasingly distributed across the wider institutional landscape.

1.4 What kinds of CE dominate the 2025 portfolio?

The increased prominence of engaged teaching and learning is one of the most significant findings of the report. It indicates that CE is increasingly embedded where student learning, applied practice, and community-facing work intersect. This is a stronger institutional position than a portfolio dominated only by once-off outreach, because ETL builds CE into the formative experience of students and directly connects the third mission to the academic project.

The same section also points to an important development challenge. Although WIL and SL are clearly present, their formal visibility in systems such as WISL database remains incomplete. SL as a primary form of ETL is also not reflected in the current CE database. This suggests that the NWU may already be doing more academically embedded CE than is fully reflected in its formal academic-support systems. Closing that gap would strengthen student employability, recognition and institutional learning.

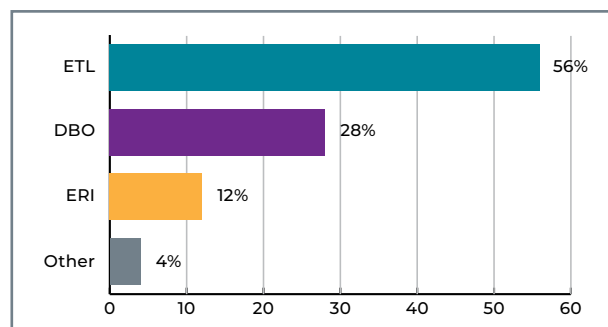


Figure 4: Composition of CE types in 2025

The strongest signal in the 2025 registration data is the dominance of engaged teaching and learning. ETL accounts for 56% of classified registrations, followed by discipline-based outreach at 28%, engaged research and innovation at 12%, and other forms of CE at 4%. This marks a decisive shift away from a portfolio seen mainly through outreach and volunteerism toward one more clearly

embedded in the academic project and student experiential learning.

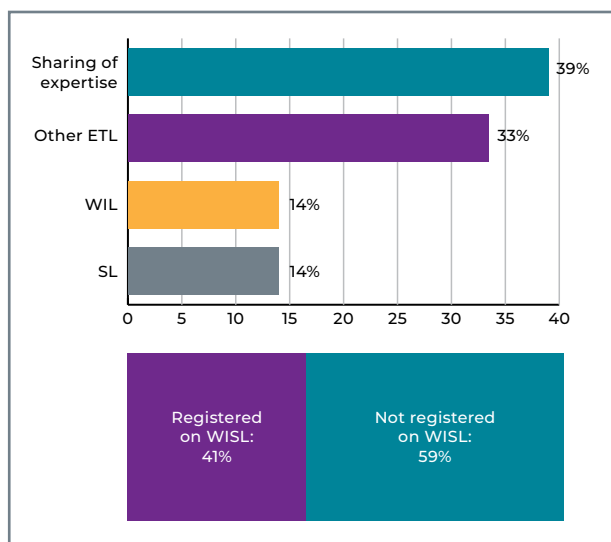


Figure 5: ETL sub-types and WISL status

Within ETL, recurring sharing of expertise and other hybrid ETL forms dominate, while WIL and SL each account for 14% of ETL responses. WISL registration remains an important gap: 41% of SL/WIL responses indicate that the module is registered on WISL, while 59% indicate that it is not. This is a high-value improvement area because WISL visibility is central to demonstrating how CE contributes to teaching and learning quality.

1.5 Geography, SDGs and funding

The geographic footprint shows a portfolio rooted in the provincial context while still extending beyond it. This demonstrates that the NWU's CE work remains tied to the social and developmental realities of the North-West rather than being abstractly dispersed. At the same time, the presence of activity across other provinces, national spaces and selected international contexts shows that CE is not confined to a narrow localism but can connect local engagement to broader systems and networks.

The funding picture, however, remains one of the most important structural cautions in the report. Many projects still rely on internal goodwill, in-kind support, fundraising or staff effort rather than stable dedicated resources. This limits continuity and makes the system vulnerable. It also means that the most visible part of the portfolio may understate the effort required to keep many projects alive.

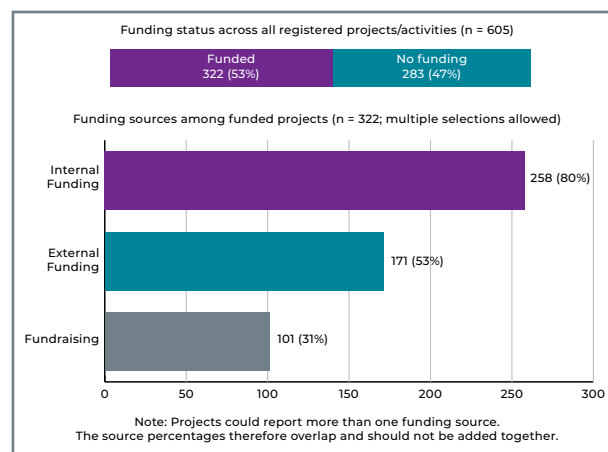


Figure 6: Funding profile of 2025 CE projects

The 2025 funding profile reflects both institutional commitment and ongoing vulnerability. Of the 605 registered projects/activities, 322 (53%) reported at least one source of funding, while 283 (47%) reported no funding. Among the funded projects, internal funding was the most frequently reported source, appearing in 258 projects (80%), followed by external funding in 171 (53%) and fundraising in 101 (31%). Because projects could report more than one source, these source percentages overlap and should not be added together. The key point is that nearly half of the 2025 portfolio remained unfunded, while even funded projects often depended on a mixed and uneven funding base.

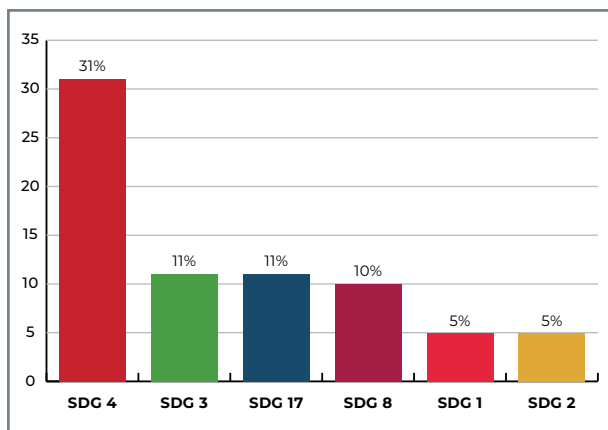


Figure 7: Top SDG alignments in the 2025 CE portfolio

The SDG pattern confirms the thematic centre of the portfolio. SDG 4: Quality Education remains dominant at 31%, well ahead of SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals at 11% each, followed by SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth at 10%. This means that the NWU's most visible CE work continues to sit at the intersection of education, health, employment-related capability development and partnership building.

1.6 Registration implications

The main implication of the 2025 registration picture is that the NWU is now ready for a more distinguishing conversation about portfolio quality. The institution no longer needs to ask only whether there is enough activity to justify attention to CE. There is ample visible activity. The more important question is which kinds of activity the university wants to strengthen, how to improve data completeness without increasing unnecessary burden, and how to build stronger links between registration, support, monitoring and strategic planning.

Three implications emerge from the registration data. First, the visible CE portfolio is larger and more academically integrated than in previous cycles. Second, the registration system itself is maturing

while project-leader ownership is increasing, and WISL visibility, typology clarity and cross-campus patterning all show a stronger institutional base. Third, the registration data reveals where the next stage of strengthening lies. This will come from faculty verification, smoother connection between registration and M&E, better capture of once-off and student-led activity, and more sustainable funding arrangements.

A second implication is that the registration system should continue evolving toward integration rather than duplication. Staff will remain more willing to participate if registration processes are meaningful, clear, and linked to later reporting rather than requiring repetitive recapture. In this sense, the future of registration quality is inseparable from the future of institutional support.

In summary, Part 1 shows that the NWU has moved beyond the baseline stage. Registration now makes it possible to talk about the quality and direction of the portfolio, not only its size.



PART 2: MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The 2025 Monitoring and Evaluation dataset shows the quality, progress and emerging impact profile of CE at the NWU. The central shift in 2025 is that CE is now more clearly visible not only as registered activity, but as work that is increasingly being tracked for outcomes, reflection, partnership processes and institutional learning. In this sense, the 2025 M&E tool marks a significant step forward in institutional CE reporting: although the dataset is not yet comprehensive across the full registration portfolio, it is now strong enough to reveal clear patterns in how projects are being monitored, what kinds of progress are being recorded, and what forms of change and emerging impact are beginning to surface.

2.1 Coverage and partnership formalisation

The relatively modest coverage rate should not be read only as a weakness. It also reflects that the university is in a transitional moment: the M&E tool is new enough to require ongoing normalisation, but established enough to reveal system patterns. In that sense, the coverage gap is itself useful evidence. It shows where stronger follow-through, training and incentives will still be necessary if M&E is to become an ordinary part of CE practice.

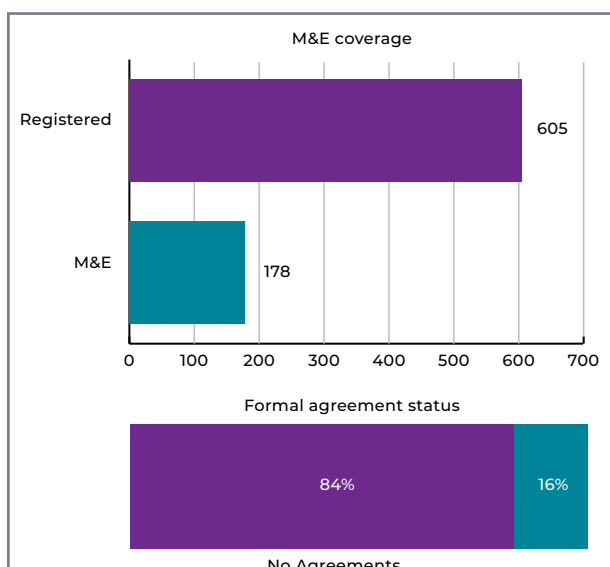


Figure 8: M&E coverage and partnership formalisation

The weakness of formal partnership instruments in the dataset is equally important. The evidence suggests that many projects are clearly collaborative, but that these collaborations remain under-formalised. This creates risk for continuity, accountability and institutional memory. It also means that the quality of partnership is often stronger in practice than in the formal documents surrounding it.

The 2025 M&E dataset includes 178 completed responses. Relative to the 605 registered projects and activities, this represents about 29% coverage of the visible portfolio. That is enough to support some institutional learning, even though it does not yet constitute full-system evidence.

The partnership picture is more cautionary. In M&E responses, 84% of projects reported no formal agreement with external or community collaborators. This does not mean that collaboration is absent. Rather, it suggests that many partnerships remain informal and therefore potentially vulnerable and a risk in terms of continuity, accountability and mutual expectation-setting.

Table 3: M&E headline indicators

Indicator	2025 position	Reading
M&E responses	178	Coverage is meaningful, but still below total registration volume.
Portfolio coverage	29%	M&E evidence is emerging rather than universal.
No formal agreement	84%	Partnership formalisation remains weak.
Formal agreement(s)	16%	A minority of projects use MOUs, MOAs, SLAs or contracts.

2.2 Monitoring approaches used by projects

The diversity of methods used across projects is both a strength and a challenge. It is a strength because CE work spans many disciplines, partners and modes of engagement, making a single monitoring method neither realistic nor desirable. It is a challenge because diversity without a common minimum standard can produce evidence that is difficult to compare, aggregate or translate into institution-wide learning.

What the 2025 data suggest is that the NWU does not need a rigid uniform monitoring model. It needs a proportionate one: a small set of common expectations around objectives, evidence of progress, partnership process, and outcome indicators, within which projects can still choose discipline-appropriate tools.

Projects report a wide range of monitoring tools, including attendance registers, diagnostic and post-assessments, learner reflections, focus groups, surveys, observation checklists, assignment briefs, interviews, workshops and statistical analysis. This diversity reflects the breadth of the portfolio: education, health, science, social support, entrepreneurship, food security and community advisory work all require different kinds of evidence.

The strength of the 2025 dataset lies not in uniformity, but in the fact that the NWU now has enough evidence to identify a set of recurring impact markers. The next stage is to

standardise a minimum evidence framework without flattening disciplinary difference.

2.3 Emerging outputs, outcomes and impact

The examples surfacing in the 2025 dataset show why it is now possible to talk more seriously about impact. In the strongest cases, projects are not only counting participation but also showing changes in literacy support, learner performance, health knowledge, screening uptake, practical competence, or community-level capability. These are still uneven and often localised outcomes, but they demonstrate that impact is no longer invisible in the system.

The data reflects multiple intended as well as unintended impacts on several stakeholders which is an indication of the complexity of CE and impact measurement as a science.

A single project may simultaneously benefit a school, develop students, enrich teaching, produce research questions, and build institutional relationships. The annual report should therefore avoid reducing impact to a single dimension when the evidence often shows multi-layered value.

Across the dataset, several project-level examples illustrate the system's potential. Literacy and curriculum-support projects report gains in learner performance and teacher development. Health-focused projects report increased screening, risk awareness, registration of households and training of community health workers. Science outreach projects show stronger

Table 4: What the 2025 M&E evidence most consistently shows

Theme	What the evidence points to
Education and learner support	Improved reading, writing, grammar, curriculum support, teacher development and learner confidence.
Health and wellbeing	Screening, awareness, referral, household registration, community health training and better risk understanding.
Student formation	Stronger professional confidence, teamwork, reflection, applied learning and technical competence.
Research translation	Community-informed data, co-designed instruments, ethics-grounded partnerships and practical use of findings.
Community capacity	Skills transfer, information literacy, entrepreneurship support and local problem-solving.

learner curiosity, practical understanding and career awareness. Although these remain project-level findings rather than a single portfolio-wide metric, they are enough to begin defining recurring the NWU CE impact indicators for future annual reports.

2.4 What M&E now tells NWU about system maturity

The clearest system message from the 2025 M&E section is that the NWU is no longer at the starting line. The institution has enough evidence to identify stronger and weaker patterns. Some projects are already working with a recognisable outcome logic and can articulate how monitoring feeds into decision-making and partner relationships. Others remain descriptive and event-centred. That unevenness is exactly what a maturing system should now begin to address.

In other words, the M&E section should be read less as a final answer to the impact question and more as proof that the institution is now in a position to ask the impact question more rigorously than before. The next phase should focus on deepening consistency without suppressing disciplinary variety.

The 2025 M&E evidence points to a system in transition from descriptive reporting to evidence-led reflection. Projects are increasingly able to describe what changed, not only what was done. However, the quality

of evidence still varies sharply. Some projects use structured tools and show a credible chain from need to activity to outcome; others rely mainly on participation or narrative reflection.

The practical implication is clear: the NWU does not need to reinvent M&E from scratch. It needs to strengthen coverage, formalise partnership arrangements, and agree on a light but consistent institutional standard for outcome and impact evidence. If achieved, this would elevate the annual report from a portfolio narrative to a stronger institutional performance document.



PART 3: SENSEMAKER STUDY

SenseMaker adds the human and organisational layer behind the registration and M&E data. It shows who is participating, how staff interpret CE, what makes participation possible, and where the strongest barriers still lie.

3.1 Why SenseMaker matters in the 2025 report

The SenseMaker study is important because it addresses a blind spot left by registration and M&E data alone. SenseMaker® software (by The Cynefin Company) is a research tool that gathers stories and turns them into quantitative data through self-interpretation, enabling organisations to identify patterns and better understand real experiences in complex systems. At the NWU, it was used to deepen insight into staff experiences and perceptions of CE beyond what registration and monitoring data alone could show.

Formal systems can show what is visible and what is reported, but they cannot by themselves reveal how people experience participation, why they hesitate, what frustrates them, or what kinds of organisational conditions encourage engagement. The SenseMaker study was therefore an investment in understanding the participation climate around CE, not only the portfolio itself.

It is also strategically useful because it treats attitudes, perceptions and organisational experience as leading indicators. If the university wants to know what kind of CE system it is building, it needs to know not only how many activities are registered, but what staff believe, what they experience, and what they think would make participation easier or more worthwhile.

SenseMaker complements the registration and M&E datasets by showing the participation culture behind the formal numbers. Where registration maps the

visible portfolio and M&E begins to evidence outcomes, SenseMaker reveals how staff understand CE, how they feel about it, what keeps them involved, and what still prevents broader participation. This makes SenseMaker especially valuable in a year when the annual report is expected to move beyond activity counts toward institutional learning.

Table 5: SenseMaker response base used in this section

Prompt block	Responses
Demographic and participation profile	149
Story audience / shared experience	127–134
Triads and dyads	116–129
Open-ended narrative prompts	Qualitative analysis applied

Note: Variations in response totals reflect the design of the SenseMaker instrument. Some items were optional, some allowed multiple responses, and not all respondents completed every prompt. The full respondent base for the survey was $n = 149$.

3.2 Respondent profile and participation baseline

The respondent base matters because it is not peripheral to the university's academic life. The largest visible groups come from established academic roles, and a substantial share of respondents have long institutional experience. This gives the SenseMaker findings particular weight. They are not simply a snapshot of casual observers; they reflect the views of staff who are close to

teaching, research, curriculum, supervision and organisational practice.

The participation baseline is one of the strongest findings in the whole SenseMaker section. A substantial group are already active and registered, but another significant group report doing CE without formal registration. This reinforces the annual report's broader conclusion that the challenge at the NWU is not simply to generate interest, but to improve visibility, pathways and support.

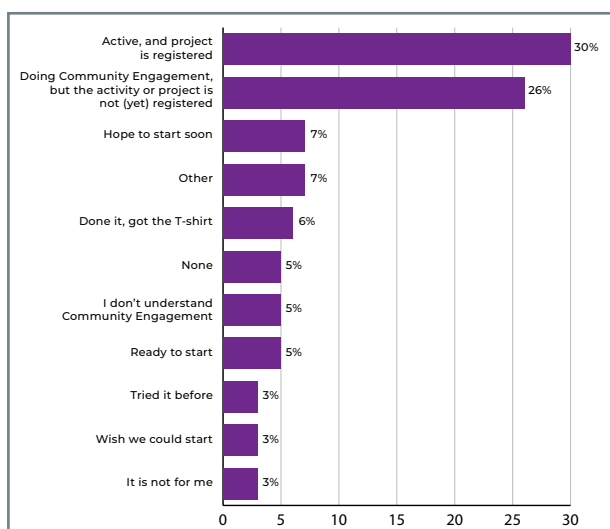


Figure 9: SenseMaker participation baseline

SenseMaker confirms that CE participation is broader than formal registration alone suggests. A combined 56% of respondents describe themselves as already active in CE, including 30% whose work is formally registered and 26% who report doing CE without formal registration. A further 14% are ready to start, hope to start soon, or wish they could start. This is one of the most important findings in the entire SenseMaker dataset: the main institutional issue is not lack of interest, but making existing and emerging participation more visible, supported and recognised.

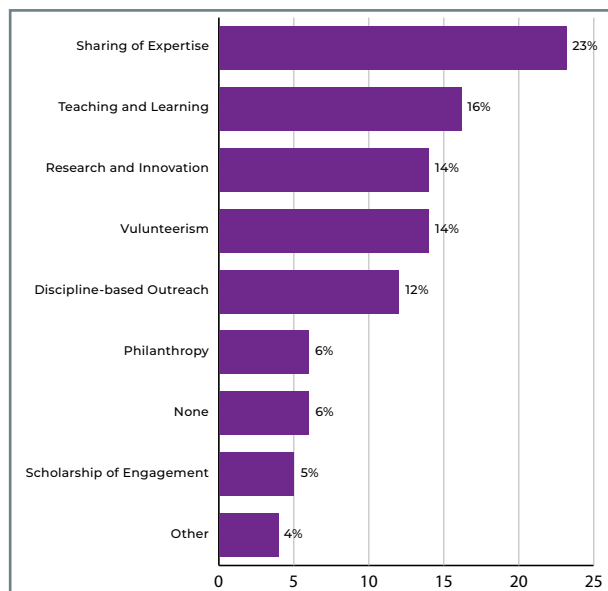


Figure 10: Dominant CE modes in the SenseMaker responses

Respondents also describe CE primarily through academically integrated modes. Sharing of expertise, teaching and learning, and research and innovation together account for the largest visible forms of participation. This strongly reinforces the 2025 registration narrative that CE at the NWU is increasingly linked to the academic project rather than being understood only as volunteer service.

3.3 Sentiment and organisational climate

The sentiment data are especially useful because they resist simplistic reading. The overall emotional climate is more positive than negative, which is encouraging. Many respondents speak about optimism, confidence, meaning and contribution. Yet the same section also reveals confusion, frustration, overload and uncertainty. This means the CE climate at the NWU cannot be described either as fully supportive or as fully resistant. It is better understood as unevenly supported or embraced. There is enough goodwill and purpose to build on, but not enough institutional ease to make

participation consistently straightforward or fully embraced.

This mixed climate is exactly why the SenseMaker study material adds value. It prevents the institution from over-reading the positive side of the portfolio while also preventing an overly pessimistic account. The more accurate conclusion is that many staff already see value in CE, but they do not all experience the organisational setting as enabling.

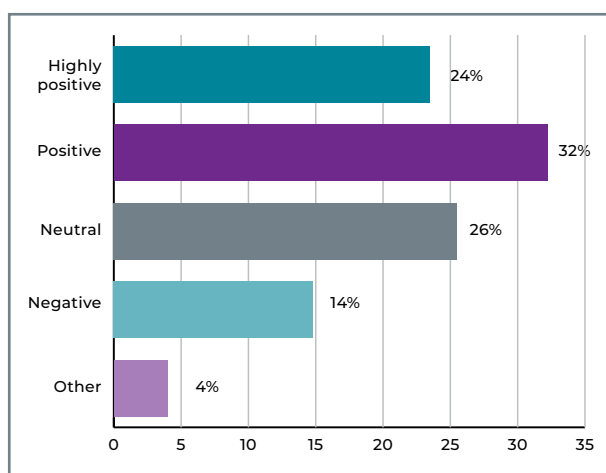


Figure 11: How respondents feel about the entry they shared

The emotional tone of the dataset is more positive than negative, but not uncritical. A combined 56% describe their entry as positive or highly positive, 26% are neutral, and 19% are negative or very negative. The broader relationship-to-CE responses show a similar pattern: respondents are more often optimistic or confident than confused or overwhelmed, but a substantial minority still experience friction, ambiguity or overload.

SenseMaker also shows that respondents do not see their experiences as isolated. More than seven in ten say that the experience they shared is also present among colleagues or teams at the NWU. This means the issues raised should be interpreted as systemic and cultural, not merely anecdotal.

Table 6: Campus comparison: SenseMaker sample versus the 2025 CE portfolio metrics

Campus	SenseMaker	2025 portfolio
Mahikeng	18.8%	44%
Potchefstroom	63.8%	46%
Vanderbijlpark	17.5%	10%

The campus comparison above is important. The SenseMaker sample over-represents Potchefstroom and under-represents Mahikeng relative to the actual 2025 CE portfolio metrics as discussed in Part 1. SenseMaker should therefore be used as a culture and participation diagnostic rather than as a perfectly balanced institutional sample.

3.4 What staff say should improve

What respondents say should improve aligns strongly with what the registration and M&E sections already imply. Communication, visibility, collaboration, funding, administrative ease, project-sharing and clearer recognition all occur across the SenseMaker dataset. This overlap between formal data and narrative perception is important because it strengthens the credibility of the annual report's conclusions. The same issues surface through different methods and different kinds of evidence.

It appears that the institution does not lack direction. The improvement agenda is already visible. What is required now is prioritization, such as deciding which changes would most reduce friction, strengthen trust, and enable more staff to move from interest or informal activity into visible and sustained participation.

The clearest improvement suggestions are stronger communication about CE, better identification of community needs, more responsiveness to community needs, and deeper community-centred partnerships. Longer-term projects and sustainable

partnerships also feature prominently. Taken together, these responses show that staff are not asking simply for more CE activity. They are asking for CE that is better explained, more responsive, more collaborative and more sustainable.

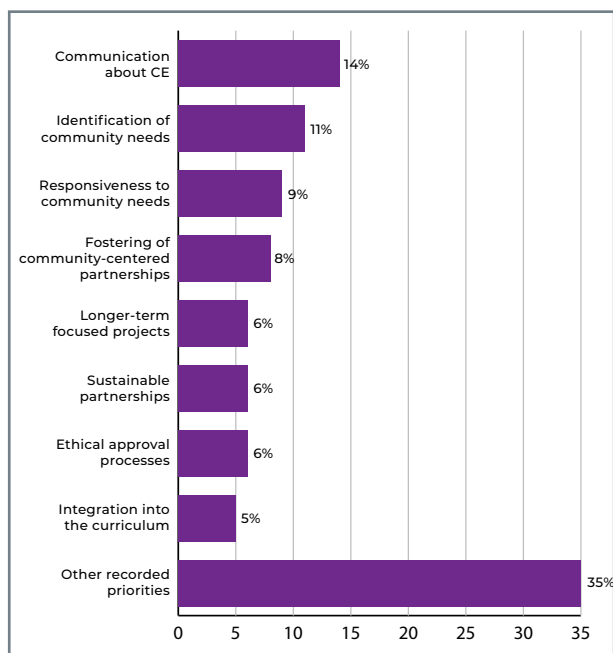


Figure 12: Top priorities respondents believe could improve CE at the NWU

3.5 What the narratives reveal about CE on the ground

The narrative material shows that CE at the NWU is already broader than a strict reading of registered project types might suggest. Staff describe work that spans school support, health promotion, industry-linked teaching, public education, expertise-sharing, justice, entrepreneurship, food security, arts and cultural work, faith-based engagement, environmental sustainability and more. This variety is a strength, because it shows that CE is not confined to one institutional identity or one set of disciplines.

At the same time, the narratives repeatedly surface uncertainty about what counts. Many respondents clearly engage in forms of public-facing and socially relevant work, yet remain unsure whether these activities qualify as CE within institutional definitions. This definitional uncertainty is one of the most important hidden barriers in the system.

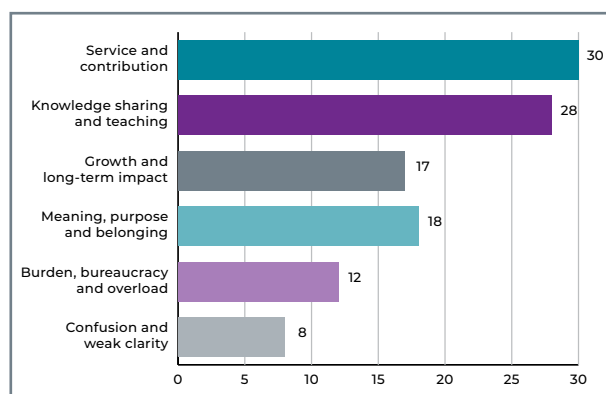


Figure 13: Dominant meaning clusters in the prompt 'Participating in Community Engagement is like ...'

The narrative prompts add the lived texture behind the quantitative patterns. Staff most often describe CE through the language of service, contribution, knowledge sharing, teaching, growth and long-term impact. Many see CE as a way of giving back, making academic work practical, and contributing to something larger than themselves.

At the same time, the narratives repeatedly surface institutional friction. Respondents refer to confusing definitions, weak communication, duplicated administration, approval delays, gatekeeping, lack of time, and uncertainty about whether work will be recognised. The narratives therefore confirm that the problem at the NWU is not a lack of belief in the value of CE. It is the need to make participation easier, clearer and better supported.

"Participating in community engagement is like planting a seed you may not see the results immediately, but with time and care, it grows into something meaningful."

“Participating in an NWU afterthought. CE does not enjoy the same support like teaching and research activities.”

3.6 What would make participation easier

The answers to this question are among the most actionable in the whole study. They show clearly that staff are not primarily asking to be inspired. They are asking for a more enabling system: more time, less duplication, more guidance, better communication, clearer project pathways, stronger recognition, lighter admin, and more practical support. This is why the report interprets participation not mainly as a motivation problem, but as a system-design problem.

That conclusion should not be read negatively. It is actually encouraging, because system problems can be addressed. If participation were absent because staff did not see value in CE, the institutional challenge would be much deeper. Instead, the evidence suggests that many staff already believe in the value of engagement and would do more under better conditions.

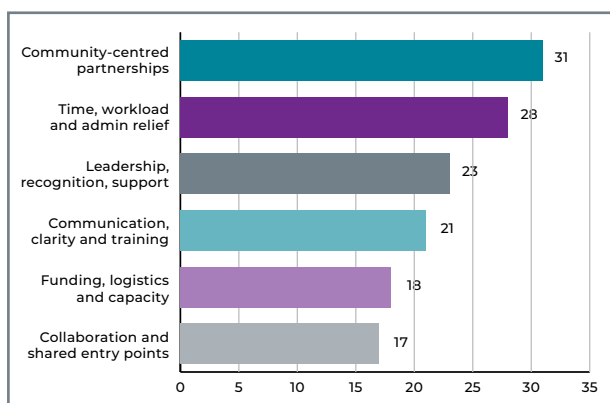


Figure 14: Main enablers respondents believe would increase CE participation

The strongest message from the action-oriented prompts is that participation is framed mainly as an institutional design challenge, not only a motivation problem. Staff repeatedly point to six levers: community-centred partnership and sustainability; time,

workload and administrative relief; leadership recognition and support; shared entry points and collaboration; clearer communication and training; and stronger funding, logistics and dedicated support capacity.

Table 7: What SenseMaker turns into strategy for NWU

Dominant ask	What it means for the annual report
Community-centred partnerships	Judge CE quality by reciprocity, ownership and sustained value, not only event counts.
Time and admin relief	Simplify processes, connect registration and M&E, and give practical support for delivery.
Recognition and workload alignment	Treat CE as real institutional work in promotion, workload and performance systems.
Communication and training	Improve examples, induction, contact pathways and visibility of opportunities to join.
Shared platforms and collaboration	Develop faculty or cross-faculty flagship projects that colleagues can join rather than build alone.

3.7 Consolidated reading for the 2025 annual report

The consolidated reading emerging from SenseMaker is that the NWU now has enough insight to treat CE as both a portfolio question and a culture question. The university needs strong project systems, but it also needs strong participation conditions. Registration and M&E will only continue to improve if staff experience the environment around CE as coherent, fair, worthwhile and practically navigable.

For that reason, the SenseMaker section should not be treated as an interesting appendix to the annual report. It is a central

strategic component. It explains the human and organisational conditions behind the formal data and therefore helps the

institution understand what kinds of support, recognition and simplification are most likely to strengthen the next cycle.



CONCLUSION

The 2025 Community Engagement Annual Report shows an institution that has moved decisively beyond foundational visibility-building. The registration system now provides a stronger picture of the scale and design profile of the CE portfolio; the Monitoring and Evaluation dataset makes it possible to speak more credibly about progress, outcomes and emerging impact; and the SenseMaker study reveals the organisational and cultural conditions that shape participation across the NWU. Taken together, these three layers of evidence show that CE is becoming more visible, more analytically understood and more firmly connected to the academic life of the university.

The report also makes clear that the next phase of development will depend less on proving that CE exists and more on strengthening its quality, sustainability and strategic value. This includes improving data completeness and consistency, simplifying systems that create unnecessary burden,

deepening reciprocal and community-centred partnerships, strengthening support and resourcing, and widening the role of engaged scholarship and postgraduate contribution within the overall CE portfolio. In this sense, the challenge ahead is not simply one of growth, but of consolidation, coherence and depth.

Most importantly, the 2025 report confirms that the future of CE at the NWU lies in integration. CE will have its greatest value when it is more deliberately connected to teaching-learning, research and innovation, postgraduate development, and stakeholder partnership, and when staff and students experience it not as an additional task but as a meaningful part of the academic project. The 2025 cycle should therefore be read as a threshold year: the point at which the university has enough visibility, evidence and institutional self-understanding to move from a growing CE system to a more fully institutionalised, high-impact model of engagement.

