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Duality of knowledge paradigms requires institutional agility

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 29 September 2022

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African universities should equip their students with a "duality" of knowledges in order to produce a cadre of graduates capable of navigating and transforming the socio-economic systems within which they operate, according to Doyin Atewologun, dean of the Rhodes Scholarships at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

"It is important to value the different forms of knowledge, including the particular kinds of knowledge that are produced where people are and where they come from," she says.

"In the context of the dominance of a particular form of knowledge – that is, the knowledge being produced in Europe, North America and Australia – the challenge is to construct a duality of knowledges; and to equip students with the skills to navigate the dominant model, as well as an understanding of the value that may be provided by indigenous models and the alternative views that they present.

"That is the duality that African students and the African university should address."

In relation to her own field of management research and organisational behaviour, she advises that students may be taught using the Harvard approach to teaching management theory "which would enable them to navigate that knowledge space with confidence", at the same time as they are inducted in "another parallel approach to understanding business, society, the economy, finance and strategy which considers them from the perspective of the local context and, thus, equips students to navigate this knowledge space as well".

Atewologun proposes that the goal should be to train students so that they can engage with dominant forms of socio-economic organisation and enjoy career success while also seeking to transform their national societies and economies more broadly.

"I am often asked whether people should be equipped with the skills required to navigate the system or those required to beat the system. And I think the answer is: 'Both'."

A space for creativity

"Beating the system, disrupting the system, up-ending the system – this all takes time. Meanwhile, there is the drive to, say, become a senior manager within the same system in the next three years," she says.

In this context, Atewologun advocates embracing forms of indigenous production and indigenous knowledge alongside the deployment of Western forms of understanding in an effort to produce new, creative ways of addressing contemporary challenges.

"For example, in my work in the area of leadership, up until very recently, about 90% of the knowledge produced on the topic was based on English texts written by white, predominantly American, men," she says.

"However, their ideas can be challenged, particularly through reference to more indigenous forms and ideas of leadership as developed in local communities."

In this regard, she notes that "the shape of indigenous infrastructures and the less hierarchal and more circular ways in which people would organise themselves physically at gatherings may usefully inform the ways in which modern team meetings could be held".

Similarly, she advises that "the technologies and tools at the centre of the enactment of traditional leadership may have contemporary applications".

"So, there is a lot of space for creativity and innovation; and although it is harder work to mix paradigms, there should be an intentional drive to promote such efforts."

Universities in Africa may lack 'agility'

However, Atewologun, who is an expert on leadership, diversity, intersectionality and organisational culture, is sceptical whether established African universities are agile enough to respond effectively to the demands of duality and the myriad of other challenges facing them.

"I think agility is a challenge for universities everywhere, regardless of their geographical location, because they can be such complex structures," she says.

"I am not sure that agility is a quality that I readily associate with universities. However, agility may, perhaps, be fostered through a

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form of devolution – something that departments or faculties, rather than whole universities, may achieve.”

Atewologun also gives warning that the establishment of a new kind of university embracing duality may be seen as a challenge to the position of those universities that have modelled themselves as Western higher education institutions, including in relation to their curricula and faculty design.

Such universities, she says, have achieved some success in selling a non-local experience locally to African students who lack the money and-or time to go elsewhere.

So, higher education institutions seeking to move beyond the present conservative model for knowledge production and training would be seen as a threat to these universities, given that their appeal “is in their capacity to duplicate existing educational models”.

#### Disruption is inevitable

In this context, Atewologun views disruption of the present higher education system, under which non-traditional forms of learning are recognised and harnessed, as both necessary and inevitable.

“In this regard, there is a need to look beyond the traditional university system because it may well be that the future of the African university is not on campus, or at least not on the campus as this has been traditionally conceived,” she says.

“It may be that the future of the African university is not focused only on 17- and 18-year-olds; and it may be that the future of the African university is on YouTube or is expressed through other technologies.

“In other words, there is always a need to return to the foundational questions, such as: ‘What is the educational objective?’ and ‘What is the best way of achieving this?’ which may entail a radical break with the way things are being done at present.”

In seeking to address these “foundational questions”, Atewologun emphasises the importance of ensuring access to higher education for everyone who may be able to contribute to national development.

“In relation to the African university, it will be critical to ensure that there are funding opportunities to enable access to higher education for the widest possible pool of talent and to ensure that people who are born into particular social economic circumstances are not prevented from contributing to knowledge and society,” she says.

In this regard, Atewologun advises that greater efforts should be made to tap relatively wealthy alumni as one way of funding the expansion of the beneficiaries of higher education across Africa, which she views as crucial.

“At present, so much talent is being wasted,” she says.

“For example, there are over 200 million people in Nigeria and every generation will have a number of very talented people and geniuses, not just in the field of commerce and entrepreneurship, but across the board. So, the numbers are in Nigeria’s favour.

“However, the systems and structures are not in place to identify, attract and nurture this talent, which means the country is losing out.”

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor David Everatt for ‘The Imprint of Education’ project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for focus and length. Features already published in the series can be downloaded from the HSRC’s website.*

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