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## Perspectives on advancing emerging research universities

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 02 June 2022

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Universities in Africa will benefit from ongoing support to boost their knowledge resources, academic cohorts and finances so that they can meet the massification and differentiation challenges that they face, according to a programme officer at one of the largest philanthropic donors to higher education on the African continent.

In particular, emerging research universities that are focusing on their knowledge-production functions need to ensure that the appropriate resources and infrastructure are available to be able to conduct research, says Claudia Frittelli, the programme officer for higher education and research in Africa at the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

"Otherwise, the continent is only going to have teaching colleges," she said, noting that many academics from the diaspora in North America who engage with African universities find innovative ways of improvising to compensate for a lack of resources among the students and staff.

Frittelli describes how most of the available knowledge resources are produced outside rather than on the continent, which generates only 2.6% of the world's research; and notes that the problem is compounded by the unaffordability of the externally published resources, even when the actual research was produced by African scholars.

**New opportunities**

"This issue of access to African and worldwide knowledge resources ... is an area in which digital technologies may present significant new opportunities, although access to e-published material can be subject to tricky negotiations with powerful academic publishers," she said.

Frittelli also emphasises the importance of developing African academic cohorts in response to the pressure on national higher education systems being exerted by massification of undergraduate education across the continent.

In this regard, she cites the Ghanaian government's response to the increasing number of students entering tertiary education.

The Ghanaian government, she says, aims to increase tertiary education from 18.8% to 40% by 2030 with a 60% STEM (science, technology, education and mathematics), 40% humanities breakdown. In a move that she commends, it has budgeted to spend a considerable sum on additional infrastructure at secondary schools with the aim of improving the quality of the pipeline of graduates.

"However, there seems to be less government concern or support for growing and developing the cadres of academic faculty at the universities who are going to take on the additional 100,000 annual new students," she said.

"The reality is that increased access brings with it a lot of issues, which it may only be possible to address through a combination of financial aid, loan schemes and scholarships; public and private funds and philanthropic support.

"Africa has to figure this out."

**Funding partnerships**

In this regard, Frittelli notes that many governments faced with stagnant economies can struggle to fund a massified higher education sector on their own. "So, there is a responsibility on the part of the private sector to contribute if it wants the universities to produce the kind of human capacity on which a strong society depends and a thriving economy requires."

At the same time, she stresses the importance of universities "striking a balance", which should entail "accessing useful industry funding in support of academic goals, such as the development of scarce skills like data sciences, while also placing limits on the proximity of the industry involvement so that it does not infringe on academic freedom".

She further notes that African universities should make greater efforts to source additional funding by tapping into their alumni networks, which may also be exploited to help graduates find jobs; and the intellectual diaspora, which may also be leveraged to provide mentorship and opportunities for joint research.

**Monitoring and data collection**

Meanwhile, in relation to the development of their academic cohorts, universities on the continent may learn from the Carnegie

Corporation's experience, says Frittelli.

Some university partners found that it was more productive to fund research teams rather than to provide seed grants for individual post-doctorate work.

"Rather than leaving post-doctorate students to struggle in isolation with their new supervisory and teaching workload, which can often lead to planned research projects being abandoned," she said, "the goal is to ensure that there is greater support in the form of mentorship and-or collaboration among a team of researchers."

Citing other lessons learned from Carnegie's experience, Frittelli also identifies the deployment of new platforms in support of performance monitoring as a means by which African universities can improve their knowledge production and access additional funding.

Building on work undertaken by the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) project and, more recently, the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), universities may deploy the new platforms to enable them to monitor a range of performance indicators, such as their staff credentials, staff-student ratios and the amount of research they are producing, more effectively, she says.

"The aim should not be to foster bureaucracy for its own sake but rather to promote greater accountability and advocacy among universities, most of which are, after all, largely publicly funded; and to produce a means of incentivising improvements in their performance.

"For example, the publication of firm data on the production of PhDs and publications leads to additional funding at some universities."

#### Differentiation

Pragmatism further informs Frittelli's promotion of the importance of differentiation in African higher education as a means of producing employable graduates.

"Different types of institutions are required – and this is already evident with the establishment of private universities which are teaching professional skills," she said.

"At the same time, such universities, while excellent at producing high-level management consultants and professional leaders, do not necessarily generate original research or even the cadre of less-skilled technicians who are the bedrock of a developing economy."

She cites recent research on the future of employability in Africa which has indicated the importance of training people in the key sectors of tourism, agriculture and food security, although this need not take place at universities.

"There could be specialised schools established for this – for example, to produce the required hospitality workers," she said.

"At the same time, there is a need to address the big issues, such as climate change and sustainability, in these sectors, which requires the production of relevant research and thought leaders – which is a function of universities."

Frittelli notes the contribution that regional networks on the continent have made in support of this high-level graduate- and research-production function.

"There are a number of regional networks [such as the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (Ruforum), Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA) in public health, the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) and ARUA] which have played an important role, sharing resources for postgraduate training and supervision, and seeking to capacitate institutions over the past decade or so across the continent," she said.

"The innovative approaches adopted by such regional networks and their potential as models for change could usefully be studied."

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Thierry M Luescher for the '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. The full interview has been edited by Luescher and Mark Paterson for focus and length. The transcript can be downloaded from the HSRC's website.*

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