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'There is no such thing as an African university'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher   17 November 2022

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The idea of universities in Africa as places for the pursuit of knowledge has been denigrated by influential voices promoting the view that they should rather operate as instruments to fix the continent's maladies, says Patrício Langa, an associate professor of higher education at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

Meanwhile, without clarity on the differentiation in the system to promote different purposes and types of higher education institutions, massification will continue to turn universities into diploma mills that promote rote learning and reproduce mediocrity, rather than fostering the pursuit of new knowledge.

To address this malaise, the first thing to clarify is the purpose of the university, *per se*, as a special type of higher education institution, says Langa, who is also a distinguished professor at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique.

"Currently, there are two main competing visions of the university in Africa," he explains. "One is that universities should engage in the pursuit of knowledge through formulating conceptual and methodological problems which contribute to the global theory of knowledge."

"Second, there is this prevalent, dominant idea that universities should seek to find technical solutions for perceived socio-economic problems and should have an instrumental role in improving governance on the continent.

"Under this view, the possibility of universities as places for the pursuit of knowledge is denigrated and placed under threat, with the institutions that adopt this agenda being labelled 'ivory towers'."

'Developmental universities'

Langa traces the problem back to the establishment of "so-called developmental universities" in the 1980s, at time when the viability of the universities as functioning institutions increasingly came to depend on accessing external support. At which point, he says, the sector was forced to neo-liberalise and open itself to the forces of the free market.

"The state was [then] no longer able to exert sole control over the terms of access to higher education ... and new forces, including local actors in the private sector, were able to pursue new agendas, some of which were inimical to the very idea of the university," he says.

Subsequently, Langa notes, the idea of the university as a toolkit of sorts for addressing all the maladies of Africa prevailed.

"In my view," he says, "this is the main challenge that is preventing the establishment of a vision of the African university that is actually appropriate to conceptualising the problems faced by the continent in African terms so that they may be solved."

Placing the problem in the global geopolitical and economic context, he says: "Until the shape of the university is determined by Africans on their own terms, which is not the case at present, then the definition of who should participate in the university also is being shaped by external forces."

Universities remain relevant

Nevertheless, Langa says: "One thing that would seem to be certain is that universities are relevant, otherwise societies would have done away with them."

Meanwhile, in the context of negotiating the nature of an African university within a globally interconnected world, there has been, Langa contends, a broad failure to produce more differentiated provision of higher education structured to meet the wide-ranging needs of the various African societies across the continent; and a concomitant failure to promote differentiated access to the tertiary sector.

"I think it is important to differentiate between universities and other kinds of higher education institutions on the basis of the needs of the particular society," he notes.

"Accordingly, only those who pursue knowledge should attend universities. Other students with different agendas, such as to apply knowledge, or to fix problems – whatever those might be – should find their place elsewhere within the higher education system.

"The point being that, in a differentiated system, it is not desirable that everyone should be flocking to universities."

In this regard, Langa advises, appropriate policies should be produced to screen applicants, identifying who should go where, while also ensuring that inequalities are not reproduced, such as through exclusive access to a university education for economically advantaged students.

At the same time, Langa notes, one of the key challenges that should be addressed in establishing a differentiated system is the issue of status – and the hierarchy of status that currently exists in relation to higher education on the continent, which prizes a university education over a technical education.

For example, he says: "In some African systems, this obsession with status was made manifest when technikons [polytechnics] were renamed 'universities of technology', not because their function had changed, but in the name of prestige."

Massification vs differentiation

He further notes the challenge posed by the political support for massification at the expense of differentiation.

"Many African countries have failed to establish a framework for differentiating the provision of higher education; and, instead, continue to pursue the idea of universal access as a political priority," he says.

"This, despite the evidence of experience, which shows that the quest for the massification in an undifferentiated system eradicates the space for knowledge and leads to the production of graduates who have serious problems integrating into and contributing to their societies, or transitioning into livelihoods, employment or entrepreneurship."

Langa contrasts Africa's predicament in this respect with efforts that have been taken elsewhere to promote differentiation and how these have produced significant benefits.

"For example, in Europe, there seems to be some clarity about the purposes of the various institutions in the higher education system, with the various bodies labelled according to their function, which also has the effect of facilitating articulation within the system under which students may transition from one institution to another as appropriate," he says.

On the topic of the kinds of knowledge that may be learned and produced at higher education institutions, Langa expresses reservations about attempts to decolonise the university in Africa from the perspective of southern epistemologies and indigenous knowledges.

He notes the value and political impact of such efforts in addressing and overturning "a structure that has prevented acknowledgment of the contributions of Africans and other groups to science and knowledge as a global public good".

At the same time, he says that there is "profound intellectual concern that this decolonial project, insofar as it valorises indigenous knowledges, is anti-universal – and is thus inimical to the idea of the university".

As much as indigenous knowledge should be promoted, "this should not come at the expense of the university and the kind of knowledge that is supposed to be produced in a university context both in terms of its diversity and the quality of its theoretical content", he says.

"This is the main difficulty with decoloniality studies, notwithstanding the justice of their cause in seeking to abolish ideological bias."

Langa also finds cause for scepticism in the lessons that may be learned from universities in Africa's efforts to remain operational under lockdown restrictions as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the continent from 2020.

Instead of viewing the shift to online teaching and learning during this period as heralding a new dawn of expanded access to higher education, Langa notes how the limitations on in-person access under the pandemic revealed the limited nature of African higher education institutions' *raison d'être*, while depriving them of it.

Reproduction of mediocrity

"The COVID-19 disruption exposed as an illusion the idea that African universities are places of learning; revealing them for what they actually are, which is sites of rote learning, the reproduction of mediocrity, and the distribution of credentials, rather than places for pursuing new knowledge," he says.

"As teaching, rather than learning institutions, most African universities were completely unable to undertake their core activities under the COVID-19 restrictions – and, since these institutions could no longer teach, the students were left to idle away the time at home.

"By contrast, if these universities were, in fact, universities, the students would have continued learning with the support of the academic staff and with the help of digital technology, without having to be on campus, notwithstanding these widely expressed concerns about the digital divide," he says.

"The issue here is not so much about increasing accessibility through the deployment of digital technologies, but rather about how this moment of realisation may be used to recalibrate the system and liberate the students from the present, rotten kind of university, which doesn't even teach that well and, instead, promotes pedagogies that are not conducive to learning."

Langa is, therefore, also sceptical about the prospect of the notion of the university as a site for contributing to the global theory of

knowledge being realised any time soon in Africa.

Indeed, he argues that "it is important to acknowledge that the reality is that there is no such thing as an African university"; and that the idea of an African university, *per se* should not even be pursued at present, because "it is [not] ontologically possible".

Rather, Langa asserts, the university in Africa remains "an ambivalent experiment reflecting the very existential condition of the continent".

Hence, his focus is on the role of the scholar: "What I aspire to as an African scholar [is] to contribute to the general theory of knowledge about higher education.

"In this regard, African scholars like myself are often expected only to perform science and research in Africa with the intention of contributing to understanding Africa.

"But I think the most important contribution that we can make as scholars is, not only to focus on Africa, but to contribute to science in general, and thus contribute to Africa."

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Ibrahim Oanda 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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