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'Divorced universities' could thrive through community bond

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 12 May 2022

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Unless African universities address community needs through the kinds of knowledge and graduates they are producing, their sustainability will come under threat as important local sources of funding and popular support are withdrawn, according to participatory research pioneer Rajesh Tandon.

The current disconnect is so severe that not only are the universities failing to consider and foster understanding of local development needs, they may even be increasing the gulf between the students and their communities and cultures, says Tandon, who has been a co-director of the Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education since the position was founded by UNESCO in 2012.

"There is an unfortunate divide between those who have gone to university and those who have not," says Tandon. "The universities, not the communities, have created walls and withdrawn behind them and called it a campus; and their curricula fail to study and address the problems faced by communities."

The result, he says, is students who have become divorced from their communities and unwilling to work there, even though the best efforts of university-produced professionals are required to address the development challenges posed in rural areas of India and Africa.

This reluctance, according to Tandon, stems not so much from the poor amenities in these places or low salaries, but rather from a breakdown in understanding.

Have graduates lost touch with local reality?

"These graduates no longer know that local reality," he says. "They have become arrogant in the belief that the Western model of thinking and Western customs and behaviours – these hamburger habits – are more modern and, therefore, better."

Meanwhile, in the absence of any drive to align the vision of the university with the local context, such institutions are "liable to float in an uprooted manner", he says.

They may be deprived of important local funding, as people in the area refuse to support a university that only produces graduates who move elsewhere – "at which point, he says, the broader public benefit of the institution also comes into question; and higher education, itself, becomes increasingly characterised as a private good".

In response, Tandon promotes the cause of producing knowledge through academic-community partnerships – a mission that underpinned his establishment of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in the 1980s and, more recently, the Knowledge for Change (K4C) consortium under the auspices of UNESCO.

"The aim should be to forge higher education institutions which promote and respect knowledge that is of use locally, including in the country and the region," he says. "Such locally produced knowledge would also be of value in a two-way exchange of knowledge between the developing world and the Global North."

However, as Tandon learned as a PhD scholar investigating access to government welfare among indigenous Indian farmers, the production of such knowledge entails challenging established power relations.

"The conclusion of my [doctoral] research was that empowerment from below is essential for any meaningful development model to take root," he says.

Are university rankings accurate?

In a similar vein, he argues that the curriculum at African universities must be localised if these institutions are to fulfil their potential to produce relevant knowledge – and that this process may entail "resisting the influence of the more powerful and better-resourced institutions and forces in international higher education in an effort to promote autonomous thought".

In this context, Tandon is particularly critical of what he views as the baleful influence of the international university rankings.

"Africa has some of the best universities anywhere in the world – which is an assessment made regardless of the international rankings which, in my view, are based on an institution's wealth, rather than an accurate measurement of the university's total contribution," he says.

"The rankings pay inordinate attention to the number of articles published in expensive journals that are read only by a dozen or so

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peers across the world; produce a picture of what a university looks like; and, also, implicitly negate the value and contribution of the knowledge and points of view produced in places such as India and Africa.”

Describing the rankings as an inaccurate assessment of institutional worth, Tandon advises that the rest of the world need not adopt the European and North American model of large, comprehensive, highly resourced universities.

Universities should be community-relevant

“Not every higher education body has to be a multi-faculty institution, offering all disciplines,” he says. “Smaller colleges which are more focused on the needs of the region may be created. Community colleges, agricultural colleges and nutritional or health colleges which are relevant to regional development needs may win significant local support.”

A key mission for African universities should be “to foster social responsibility and community relevance tied to a sense of place locally, nationally, and regionally”.

According to Tandon, “The ideal for an African university would be one that is rooted in African soil, including at a regional level, and which draws support from all members of African communities, including those who have not been to university.”

Taxpayers should fund the establishment of such institutions, he says: “I think public resources should be deployed for the initial investment in the land, faculty and technical facilities.

“International funding, including in the form of philanthropy, may also be available in support of research and professional development training, but the institution should not depend on such resources.”

Community’s understanding should be investigated

In seeking to promote locally responsive universities, Tandon advocates a participatory research approach that engages local people directly with the goal of systematising their understanding and practices in such a way that it can produce new knowledge and new experience.

A respect for culture – which he describes as “the place where knowledge is practised” – is integral to the approach.

“The knowledge that is sought from local communities is culturally embedded,” says Tandon. “Much of it derives from practice and has been passed down through the generations. In addition, it is never complete knowledge, nor is there any pretence that it is.

“The [research] task is to find elements in the local community’s understanding ... which are more generally useful.” This involves identifying and engaging indigenous knowledge-carriers and knowledge-keepers who may convey knowledge in various ways, including through the performance of rituals.

“It is the knowledge that is being conveyed, and not the dress that is worn or the ritual that is performed which is of primary interest to the researcher – which is an important distinction,” he says.

Will university structures be responsive?

In this context, the purpose of the K4C consortium, which has hubs in South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania, as well as across Latin America, Europe, North America and Asia, is to build capacity to conduct community-based research training and, in this way, produce the next generation of participatory research students and practitioners.

However, Tandon describes the attempt to promote the approach more widely as something of an uphill struggle due, in large part, to what he sees as the structurally conservative nature of universities.

“The university structure which was developed in Europe in the 13th century persists to this day across the world,” he says.

So, notwithstanding the establishment of semi-autonomous units within many universities to make them more responsive, “it remains difficult to promote change at higher education institutions”.

In this regard, he cites a years-long campaign to promote the inclusion of the UN’s sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the curriculum at Indian universities. “But the old curriculum persists, and I am told that it will take perhaps seven years to change it – by which point the time frame for the SDG targets will have expired,” he points out.

Meanwhile, in the absence of efforts to prioritise research for development, universities are fostering elitism in their production of graduates and knowledge, according to Tandon.

For example, he cites the damage wrought by a higher education “conducted in English and dominated by European books and theories [which] does not connect with many people’s reality”.

Institutions can alienate students

Tandon notes that, in India, this system has led to “high drop-out rates, particularly among students from poor communities, which, in turn, reinforces the view that higher education and more intellectual pursuits should only be the domain of upper castes, while the lower castes should acquire only skilled or lesser-skilled jobs”.

He further describes how alienating higher education institutions can be for first-generation students.

“Sometimes such students are the first ones from their village to go to college or university ... and they enter with great aspirations and high

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anxiety,” Tandon explains.

“In the absence of any understanding of where they are going, it is like going into a forest not knowing what to expect – and then a lion comes out and says ‘hello’ and the fear starts.”

The alienation produced by many modern higher education institutions extends into the kind of knowledge that they and their graduates produce – including in the field of new technologies, Tandon notes.

In this regard, while acknowledging the “enormous value” of digital technology, he stresses that it must be linked to the culture and society and its people – “otherwise it is senseless”.

“However, this understanding seems to elude the 20-somethings who are designing all the new apps as if their use were universally the same,” Tandon says. “For example, many technology platforms use English rather than the local language.”

In this regard, he says that the most useful technologies are those that are the most available to local people, “such as community radio in Africa, which discusses local issues in the local idiom or language, directly addressing the lives of the local audience”.

“The goal for those designing digital technology should be to produce equally powerful, relevant media.”

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Lebo Moletsane for the ‘The Imprint of Education’ project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 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. A full transcript of the interview can be downloaded from the HSRC’s website.

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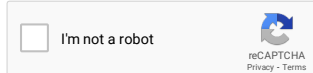
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