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## 'African universities should differentiate their missions clearly'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 28 April 2022

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The notion that there is a single ideal university must be resisted in favour of one that values a plurality of institutional types and promotes intentional differentiation in national higher education systems, according to Tade Aina, head of research, Mastercard Foundation.

In this regard, one of the biggest failures in the current discourse, he says, is the failure to see public universities "as existing on a kind of spectrum along which there are a wide range of different functions that may be performed".

Aina said that "the implementation of the notion of an ideal, fully functional post-modern university requires significant effort and resources such as are only available to a few higher education institutions on the continent, including the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), or the University of Pretoria (UP) or the University of Cape Town (UCT) [all in South Africa]". Historically, universities have never been required to fulfil such a complex mandate, he said.

In this context, he attributes the success of several private universities to their quite narrow missions as "intentional creations" serving particular socio-economic needs, such as Ashesi University in Ghana, which describes its mission as "educating leaders in Africa", and two Catholic Opus Dei institutions, Strathmore University in Nairobi, Kenya, and the Pan-Atlantic University in Lagos, Nigeria.

### Universities' functions should align with societal needs

According to Aina, once a higher education system was seen for its potential of diversity and plurality, reimagining a single ideal type of university is a philosophical exercise – "as my grandmother would say, 'the sky is big enough for all kinds of birds' ". Accordingly, he advises that universities should be developed "with a particular target market in mind in order to ensure their sustainability and viability".

Meanwhile, for those overseeing the higher education system, the main overall responsibility and challenge is to ensure that all the functions are managed, stewarded, and transformed so that they are aligned with what society needs to reproduce itself.

In this regard, Aina noted several key functions for universities in Africa: "It [the institution] should be relevant in relation to the local labour market and the powers that be. It should help to foster the collective self-confidence of the people; promote the realisation that there are national continental destinies; and support the pursuit of the highest values as these are defined within the traditions and civilisation of the people."

However, he said, the systemic priorities of the higher education

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system are currently skewed in favour of producing employees for the job market and promoting existing forms of knowledge production.

Aina argues that, at the political level, “it will take a bit of leadership and understanding – and less arrogance – to produce effective differentiation within the system, which should also address the increasingly dominant educational fallacy that, if the universities are not producing students for the job market, then they are not fit for purpose”.

While, in terms of the research mandate, he identifies a strong conservative tendency.

“There is a political economy of knowledge production at the global level which can be quite resistant to self-reflection and self-criticism and, hence, the kinds of ‘paradigm shift’ which American physicist and educator Thomas Kuhn identified as producing new ways of thinking,” Aina said.

### **Knowledge production is a complex challenge**

“So, the university as an institution for knowledge production has often tended to be more a space for reform than one of transformation.” Against this background it is up to each university intellectual or academic to define who they want to be within the higher education space – “and that is a political not an academic question”, he said.

Moreover, in the African context, the history and political economy of knowledge production on the continent pose a complex challenge to the epistemological status quo at universities – a challenge which cannot be addressed simply by denouncing outside forms of knowledge while valorising indigenous ones.

Aina said: “If you do not know yourself, you cannot transform yourself or your structure,” while also stressing that “the idea of indigeneity and indigenous knowledge as a fundamental epistemological form also is problematic because our ontology – our reality, our state of being – comprises both the indigenous and endogenous”.

He said that, at the same time, within the knowledge sub-system which is higher education, the component that is indigenous or popular knowledge has historically been subordinate to the component of knowledge that is the product of scientific or established research. “And, given that knowledge systems are integrally related to cultures, this has rendered the quest for knowledge radically incomplete in the African context.”

Aina described how the history of knowledge production on the continent distorted the nature of academic enquiry.

“For example, the day-to-day existence of the urban slum dweller did not constitute a legitimate field of study,” he said. “Meanwhile, the idea of indigeneity as a concept worthy of academic enquiry was promoted, but in a radically limited way, such as in the study of such esoteric phenomena as shamanism.”

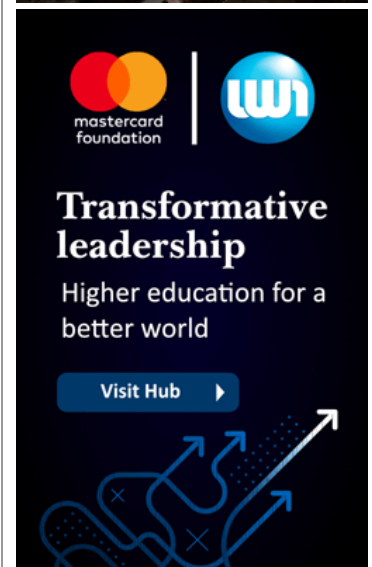
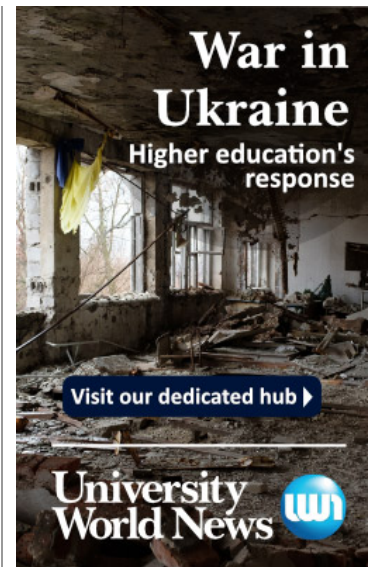
In seeking to adapt and meet their knowledge production and training mandates, higher education institutions on the continent should, Aina believes, place greater emphasis on mission, culture and community-building as crucial aspects of their institutional missions.

### **The state must be an enabler**

“Culture shapes the profile of students and determines whether an institution can produce Africans who are leaders, critical thinkers and are able to transform themselves to achieve what is required in their field of study and beyond,” he said.

Meanwhile, the state also must reconfigure itself in relation to the higher education space: “It must be an enabler, not an obstructer.”

In particular, the state must promote the implementation of universal access based on the volition of would-be pupils and students; and, in



recognition of the many forms of educational success, foster a plurality of higher education institutions that are fit for a multiplicity of purposes.

In relation to the issue of access, Aina compares education to “a train which you can board, alight [from] and re-join as you see fit depending on the nature of your journey.

“In this respect, an individual should not be prevented from proceeding to secondary or university education solely on the technical basis that they did not complete their primary education,” he said. “Rather, the assessment should be made on the basis of their life experiences, including how they may have trained themselves in various ways.”

In addition, Aina argues that “there should be greater creativity and innovation around the issue of resourcing higher education institutions” and that “the task of acquiring the accreditation required to establish an educational institution can be unnecessarily onerous”. The regulations need to be rethought in this regard, he said.

With respect to the South African system, he argues that “the blanket restriction of private universities is obstructive ... the state must let a hundred flowers bloom”.

In relation to the question of differentiation, he advises that a comprehensive tertiary sector should include polytechnics, technical institutes, nursing schools, laboratory technology schools, “and, of course, academic spaces that enable the study of, say, Shona pre-colonial proverbs or geology or astronomy, and so on”.

### Equity is not homogenisation

Aina said there should be a plurality of higher education institutions which are fit for a multiplicity of purposes. “If I want to be a dancer, I would want to receive a completely different education from that which would meet the needs of, say, an astrophysicist.”

In this vein, he supports the establishment of a range of institutional forms for higher education.

“There are universities without borders, that is, universities that are created and developed around distance education or the digital experience or e-learning or blended learning,” he said. “And there are universities which constitute physical spaces, that is, single campuses or interconnected campuses within which there are institutional departments, as well as autonomous, or semi-autonomous institutes of advanced studies, which may include, for example, centres of excellence.”

In this regard, Aina is a staunch supporter of digital e-learning, which, he said, builds on the way people actually live. “And that is the most transformative kind of pedagogy; a pedagogy that meets people where they are. The point is that you cannot have one notion of what constitutes a university; your notion of equity should not lead to homogenisation. You cannot say that, in the cause of equity, everybody must be 5ft 4in [1.6m],” he said.

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Dr Alude Mahali 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. The transcript has been edited for length and focus by Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher and the full interview will be available on the HSRC’s **website**.*

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