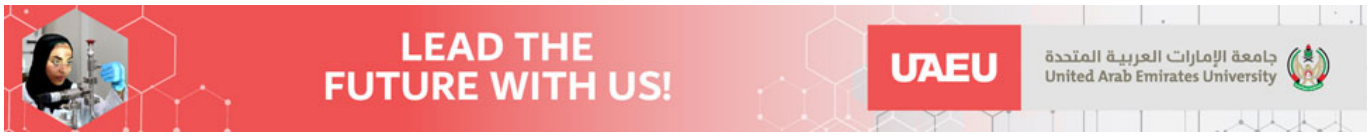

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Professor Paul Zeleza, Image provided

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Find a balance between indigenisation, internationalisation

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 21 April 2022

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If they are not to be condemned to irrelevance, universities in Africa must strengthen their research and teaching and adopt a proactive stance in responding to the institutional and developmental demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

This is according to Paul Zeleza, the former the vice-chancellor of the United States International University-Africa, and at present the North Star distinguished professor and associate provost at Case Western Reserve University, a private institution in Cleveland, Ohio, in the United States.

"Universities have a crucial role to play in pushing governments and the private sector to ensure that Africa has agency in the 4IR [Fourth Industrial Revolution] and, accordingly, derives significant benefits," says Zeleza, giving warning that the continent may otherwise be "left behind or unduly exploited, as was the experience during the previous three industrial revolutions".

"Instead of being what Kenyan pan-Africanist thinker Ali Mazrui used to describe as 'pawns' in the global system, Africans must become 4IR players," he urges, citing the need for the continent to acquire sufficient high-performance computing capacity to undertake the complex data analytics and processing of big data sets that are required as part of the 4IR.

In the absence of such high-performance computing, Zeleza says, the continent will be indebted to external data processing and storage firms and "will not even receive the trinkets it was once paid [under colonialism] for its raw materials".

In a parallel move, African universities should also make every effort to improve their research and pedagogic functions, seeking to support domestic development while also boosting their standing and the quality of their contributions at international level, he advises.

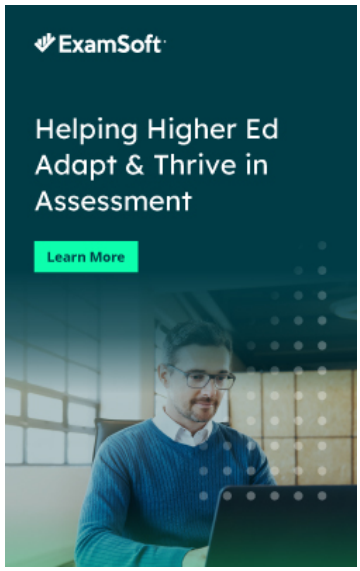
"The issue of relevance is a complex one," Zeleza says. "It comes from the university's anchoring in its society but that should not exclude being global ... because, whether we like it or not, higher education is global."

Indeed, he urges, "it is important that African universities do not surrender the global to others".

Indigenisation vs internationalisation

"We also have to be global," he says. "An appropriate balance has to be struck between indigenisation and internationalisation."

However, Zeleza notes, higher education institutions on the continent are, at present, generally failing to make their mark globally, which is



creating institutional harm in terms of their access to resources, students and staff.

For example, he says, Africa has yet to acknowledge the importance of research, including on critical issues such as climate change and health, in its funding priorities.

"A report produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in June 2021 indicated that the continent's expenditure on research and development, which includes the universities, was very low at about 0.5% of GDP, compared with a global average of about 1.9%.

"Meanwhile, its share of total global research and development expenditure was about 1%, with most of this taking place in South Africa and North Africa, indicating the dire conditions for research elsewhere on the continent."

Pedagogy at global standard

Zeleza also notes that, while African universities should be providing pedagogy at a global standard, "this is not [their] current reputation in general, as is illustrated by the relatively low number of international students at higher education institutions on the continent".

"In addition, and notwithstanding the justified criticism of the international university rankings, African universities fare poorly on these tables," Zeleza says. "In the *Times Higher Education* rankings for 2021, only 60 of the 1,500 ranked institutions were from Africa.

"Whatever the misgivings about the rankings, they are used as a marketing tool and, in this way, influence the flows of students, faculty staff and resources."

In this regard, Zeleza cites a preference among the Kenyan elite for sending their children to universities abroad as an example of the depths to which the reputations of many African universities have sunk.

It is a dynamic that he is keen to see reversed, particularly given what he describes as the inappropriate and often damaging nature of the education offered to African students at universities in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia.

"I used to see a lot of young students from Africa undertaking undergraduate studies in the United States and it was clear these kids were lost at a personal level and intellectually," he says.

"They were not being developed in ways that were good for them. They were forced to deal with being treated as second- or third-class because of race issues; and they were not being equipped with any knowledge about their own countries, their own societies."

However, African universities can reverse what Zeleza describes as their decline and reclaim their relevance by adopting greater agency and a more strategic approach in relation to their key functions, including their pedagogy and research, and their public-service and technological innovation roles.

The importance of research

In relation to their knowledge production, African universities should acknowledge the importance of producing research in support of development, while retaining their liberal education focus, he advises.

"Whatever particular questions the research is trying to answer, it should broadly seek to address fundamental social and community issues, as these are articulated in national, regional and global plans.

"The generation of knowledge for social impact is something that I think our universities should always have in front of them."

In this respect, Zeleza is encouraged by the production of a new table for assessing the performance of higher education institutions

according to their social impact – that is, in relation to the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which is now being produced as part of the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings.

"This produces quite different results from those produced by the traditional ranking methodology," he says. "So, for example, these new rankings have recently listed Australasian universities at the top rather than your Oxfords or Harvards."

In fulfilling their public service and engagement function, Zeleza stresses the importance of African universities trying to be intentional in building critical strategic and transformational relationships with multiple stakeholders, including the government; the private sector; intergovernmental institutions; community bodies; and philanthropic organisations.

"Universities have to engage their governments, partly in their role as major funders but also in order to provide the kind of research that can be translated into policy," he says.

While advocating the establishment of mutually beneficial triple-helix arrangements among public- and private-sector partners and universities, he also urges higher education institutions to insist on a greater role in shaping international and continental initiatives.

For example, citing an ambitious African Development Bank programme to provide up to 50 million young Africans with digital skills that can make them employable, he notes the disproportionate influence of external consultants, who can typically hail from the Global North.

The problem, he says, is that African universities are then asked to bid to participate in the implementation of these schemes "but without having been involved in crafting the vision or the agenda for the initiative in the first place".

Funding of universities

This also brings into sharp focus the ever-pressing matter of university funding. Zeleza advises university leaders to place a greater focus on seeking funding from African philanthropic organisations and high net-worth individuals.

"The data indicates that higher education is not a priority for giving among this group," he says. This is quite contrary to experience in other parts of the world and among leading universities, such as Harvard and Princeton.

"So, the challenge for African universities as part of their mission of engaging society is to approach and cultivate these individuals in a strategic way."

Zeleza also embraces the benefits that technology may bring to higher education, although, he says, "universities should avoid adopting a technologist kind of viewpoint in which technology is viewed as a thing and an end in itself".

"The issue has to be the extent to which universities are enhancing their value proposition in terms of deploying and developing new technologies in support of digital learning, research and scholarship, and public service and engagement."

In this regard, he advises that "universities must ensure that students are equipped with the appropriate digital skills, [which are] essential to employability".

"There is also a need to equip students with information literacy so that they can navigate the huge and ever-increasing amount of information that is available, mostly online."

The new technologies can further be deployed to facilitate competency-based educational practices, personalising learning, and allowing individual students to move at their own pace, Zeleza says.

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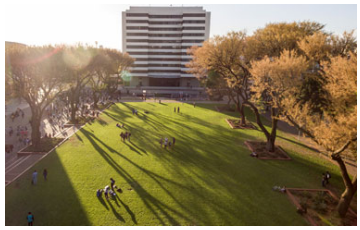

SDG progress report launches university into new territory

University of Pretoria staff

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Meanwhile, the more democratic access to knowledge facilitated by online technology is leading to new pedagogic approaches, he argues, and a change in the role of teaching professionals. “Teachers, lecturers and professors are no longer the fount of all knowledge.

“Increasingly, the teacher’s role is to equip the students with the ability to engage in critical enquiry and critical discourse. Thus, the lecturing method is giving way to a more interactive co-learning process – a kind of coaching relationship.”

Alongside this, Zeleza says, a new curriculum must be developed that can take account of technological development, including through the continuing establishment of new science degree courses but also through promoting a complementary role for some of the arts and humanities.

“The 4IR is not simply about technology in isolation, but also about how it is integrated with, contributes to, and is transformed by creativity,” he says.

“In this regard, I prefer the acronym STEAM, which includes an “A” for arts, to the acronym STEM, which refers only to science, technology, engineering and mathematics.”

Creating a new African ‘library’

On the question of the role of indigenous knowledge in the African university, Zeleza envisages an increasingly sophisticated approach to indigenous and other systems of knowledge or ‘libraries’ as Congolese French philosopher and historian Valentin-Yves Mudimbe termed them.

“The tendency is to freeze the notion of indigenous knowledge to an imaginary point in our collective history … and, typically, this reference point is that of pre-contact knowledge, meaning before contact with Europe and colonialism,” he says.

However, he explains, this gives rise to a “banal” definition of African knowledge as an oral formation that stands in opposition to written European or colonial knowledge.

There are at least three streams in Africa’s ancient knowledges, which include the Christian library, the Islamic library, and the oral one, “for lack of a better term”. Zeleza argues that African academics and intellectuals need to claim these libraries which have co-existed for more than a millennium on the continent.

The real problem, however, is “the overwhelming nature of the colonial library in terms of its impacts on our political and intellectual economies”, he says.

“We have become so consumed – and rightly so, to some extent – by the colonial library that we have forgotten these other libraries.”

In response, a key mission for the African academy is to create “a new library out of the constellation of the continent’s diverse libraries,” he says, “so that we can provincialise, deconstruct and decolonise formerly centric knowledges and in their place create empowering knowledges that do not limit us to a formulation of our identities that, itself, is part of the Eurocentric episteme”.

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Crain Soudien 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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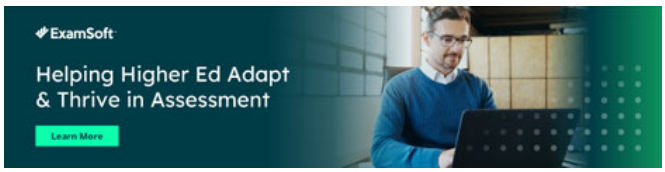

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