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'Africa needs digitised open universities and dual education'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 03 November 2022

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Ivory-tower African universities are alienating the populations and students they are meant to serve when they should be leading development efforts, creating relevant knowledge and meeting local employment needs, according to Ngunu Kahihu, the head of a Kenyan training programme that seeks to empower youth and match them to jobs.

In Kenya, popular dissatisfaction with the apparent failure of universities to provide appropriate training has led to thousands of pupils, despite their parents' wishes, to rather opt for a place at one of the country's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges instead of at university, according to Kahihu.

"This indicates that universities are failing to meet society's expectations of them," he says.

Indeed, Kahihu views the very existence of the CAP – Youth Empowerment Institute, which he runs, as testimony to the failure of African universities to meet what he describes as "the existential problem of youth unemployment".

He is also deeply critical of what he views as universities' isolation from the development needs of their surrounding societies and national development needs.

"If I had my way, I would force all universities in Africa to spend 50% of their time on research and implementation of research that involves community members, and helps them to solve their problems or helps them to harness their own knowledge to solve those problems," Kahihu says.

"In this respect, universities should not operate as ivory towers isolated from society, but should act as leaders in their local communities."

Engagement as public obligation

Indeed, Kahihu views such engagement as a public obligation: "It is time that people demand some return on the value and esteem attributed to universities, which enjoy a privileged position in their societies."

He argues that universities should reform themselves by collaborating with "those for whom they are supposed to be working, which should include employers; development planners; communities and young people, themselves, across society".

In this regard, he proposes that a first step would be to break down the walls, both physical and imagined, that separate these institutions from local communities – for example, the idea that common villagers should not dare to approach highly educated people at university. Adopting an engaged approach, universities also need to be less monolithic, says Kahihu.

"There are universities in Kenya that boast of enrolling 75,000 students on one campus, as if that were a source of pride," he says. "Better that they were to take pride, say, in creating institutionally linked colleges or schools that were able to enrol 75,000 right across the country."

Why are universities not mentoring?

However, in their quest for relevance, a key priority for universities should be to try and produce employable graduates – which, Kahihu says, entails engaging employers directly, focussing on the needs of industry and the labour market.

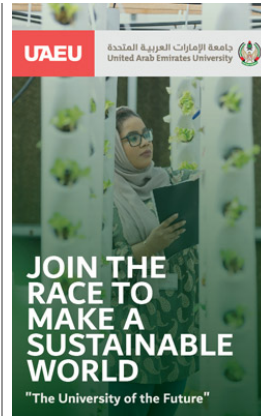
To this end, Kahihu notes that there are only a few universities in Africa that are doing this with good results, and that most such universities are in Europe or North America.

"For example, the needs of industry are prioritised in Germany where many universities offer dual studies which combine practical work placements with academic training. This is an approach that could easily be adopted in Africa," he notes.

Kahihu's own organisation has sought to engage employers in the training environment itself, including by involving them in determining learning needs and outcomes; designing and delivering the curriculum; and in evaluating the learning on offer.

The dual education methodology which the institute is using "has enabled the institute to achieve a high rate of transition from learning to earning of almost 80% among its students," says Kahihu.

It is a recipe for employability which the institute is seeking to



disseminate more widely, including to TVETs in Kenya, with which it has now established a programme of collaboration.

In addition, there are aspects of the programme, such as its emphasis on mentorship, under which every trainee is allocated somebody who will hold their hand until they can work on their own, that may be readily adopted in the university environment.

Indeed, Kahihu says that he is perplexed as to universities' present failure to provide such hand-holding: "Why do the universities, which produced the theory on which this mentorship model is based, fail to offer such support themselves?"

Digital technology

He further notes how the production of employable graduates could provide an important funding stream for higher education institutions, referencing the institute's own experience.

"Over the past 10 years, employers have expressed their appreciation of the value of these services, saying: 'We hire people from universities and colleges who are half-baked and we have to train them, which costs a lot of money. If the university assured us that their students would be trained to our requirements, we would pay.'"

In promoting the importance of more open and democratic access to higher education, Kahihu also places great emphasis on the crucial role that digital technology may play in this.

In this respect, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic should be used for innovating in the higher education system, he argues.

"The shift to online learning which was accelerated by the pandemic offers a once-in-a-generation, or even a once-in-a-millennium, opportunity to improve access to education," he says.

"I wish Africa were in the forefront of the changes that will take place, since the continent needs this disruption more than anywhere else, given its relative lack of resources to train and teach everyone.

"In this regard, satellite connectivity offers the possibility of leap-frogging the infrastructure-construction phase of internet development (and thus providing universal education), just as cellular technology allowed Africa to leap-frog the construction of telephone lines and wires for communication."

However, Kahihu notes that the widespread establishment of an online, open-university concept may be hampered by a combination of political inertia and resistance from vested interests.

"Radical change to the system would be resisted by educators who envisage higher education institutions as places remote from society where students come to sit quietly in front of a teacher or lecturer and passively acquire knowledge; and also, by trade unions representing education professionals who have been well-served by the current structure," he says.

Overcoming the fear of risk

In addition, timid policymakers would need to overcome their fear of the risks of taking radical action "which could lead to all the money and effort invested in the present system being lost".

In response, Kahihu argues, the pressure for, and process of, change "has to be led from within society" with the universities carrying the standard, notwithstanding the resistance of some within these institutions.

"I think that universities should be leading the way, given the longer-term benefits that may accrue, both to themselves and national populations, from the rise of digital education," he says.

"There must be an imagination of how society could be transformed if there were widespread connectivity and lecturers and trainers had been trained to digitise and deliver the content that they presently offer only on a face-to-face basis.

"There must be an imagination of how the playing field could be levelled, if access to the best education possible were delivered to everyone via the internet – without the need, for example, to leave the village and travel to a remote city or town."

Once this view has been promoted and adopted, and given the current infrastructural impediments to providing universal tertiary education on a face-to-face basis, the political will to equip higher education institutions with the appropriate electronic technology, media and resources in support of the open-university concept may be mustered, says Kahihu.

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Dr Alude Mahalt 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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