Dr Birgit Schreiber, Image provided

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Solution to Africa's HE problem lies beyond campus gates

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 04 August 2022

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The responsibility for producing an effective higher education system that can support Africa's development should rest primarily with national governments and societies rather than the universities themselves, according to Dr Birgit Schreiber, the senior associate for Universities South Africa's Higher Education Leadership and Management, or HELM, South Africa, and a member of the Africa Centre for Transregional Research, University of Freiburg, Germany.

In the absence of such contextual support and if they are left to their own institutional devices and resources, universities on the continent will likely fail to meet the great expectations set for them, she says.

Citing India's Kerala State as an example to be followed, Schreiber advises that "a larger vision is required" under which governments prioritise education "as the most reliable way of making a better life for everyone".

"We have sufficient evidence to know that education is a sure way to improve the lives of people, so that must be our focus."

In particular, the issue of expanded access to universities, which Schreiber views as crucial to the production of the human resources needed for development, can only be addressed effectively "as a national and regional question".

"Around 50% to 60% of school leavers should be joining the higher education system. Otherwise, it is difficult to turn a country around," she says.

She notes that there has been a steady increase of Gross Enrolment Ratios across the globe, and Sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest, below 20%, following Central, South and West Asia which is at about 35%, and Latin America at more than 50%.

"We need to get more students into the tertiary education sector, that is essential for building South Africa and Sub-Saharan [Africa] into a socially just, safe and sustainably prosperous region."

Education should come first

Such access should be accompanied by more flexible provision under which students can receive partial qualifications and credits that may be deployed in an articulated system of technical, vocational and higher education, she says. The achievement of "such expanded access depends on the establishment of a better-performing primary and high schools sector".

"The issue of access is a macro level and social-cultural one, rather than just an institutional funding concern."

In addition to emphasising the importance of a collective commitment to the cause of higher education on the part of society, Schreiber stresses the need for government to put education first. Global data shows a positive correlation between government spending on tertiary education and participation ratios.

Campus is a safer place

Referencing the case of Kerala State in India, she advocates an explicitly comprehensive approach under which each ministry is required to align its efforts with education.

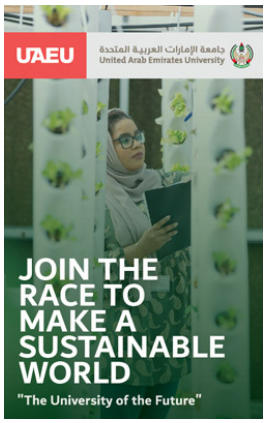
"So, for example, in relation to transport policy, we should have safe, reliable and affordable transport to and from schools and institutions of learning; for infrastructure, we should have electricity and water secured at schools and institutions of learning; for policing, our schools and institutions of learning should be the safest in the country, and so on.

"Governments need to provide greater support for the socio-economic context within which schools and universities are embedded," says Schreiber.

Research, teaching, learning, community engagement, student development and support are contextualised, and we need to embed these processes into a wider social-cultural community that is safe and viable, she notes.

"Currently, our communities are often fractured and violent and it is hard to build a functional education system in contexts that are not conducive to education."

She says that research has found that many students who were forced back home under COVID-19 lockdown restrictions asked to return to campus because it is a safer place "where they can feel safe, express themselves and are accommodated".



In this regard, Schreiber makes particular mention of minority and vulnerable students, including those with health challenges and disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ students.

“In fact, often, universities offer spaces where students find mentoring, psychologists and support, including for disability. And this space, while imperfect, is often preferred to the communities pupils and students come from.”

Institutions are challenged to meet concrete needs

However, and notwithstanding some success in supporting students, universities face an impossible task in satisfying all the demands placed on them, according to Schreiber. “In contexts that are fragile, violent and depleted, those institutions which are functional are left to bear the burden of addressing the problems,” she says.

“So, there is this expectation, for instance, that universities must transform society; secure employment; provide accommodation, food and transport; supply vaccinations; and protection against HIV; undertake scientific research; produce leaders; and so on. From a purely practical point of view, an institution that is designed to fulfil such a wide array of functions is unlikely to work.”

None of which, Schreiber notes, excuses universities from meeting their “responsibility to do what they can in meeting real-world, concrete needs”.

SDGs a ‘valuable framework for change’

“I think the [instrumentalist and transformative] aspects can work hand-in-hand, as has been shown by the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. The SDGs seek to transform the world into a better place for everyone, while acting as a tool for implementing the required changes that this entails.”

Beyond their value as an example of good practice, Schreiber views the SDGs as providing a usable framework for change that universities in Africa should be engaging in to greater effect, including in relation to the kinds of graduates they are facilitating, the sort of cultures they are perpetuating, and the values they are promoting.

“One way of addressing the challenge of social change would be for the universities to embrace the SDG framework, thus producing graduates who would not just be equipped to be a nurse or a scientist or whatever, but who would also be equipped to pursue their career as agents of sustainable social justice in the world,” she says.

“In this way, we would have generations or cohorts of students who were not only capable of undertaking particular work but also of addressing the ills that they meet in the world.”

Promote values that matter

Similarly, Schreiber expresses the hope that new imaginations of the African university should be constructed on the basis of “tangible values around which there is a consensus and which are concerned with making a better life for everyone”.

“The approach should be to promote the few values that really matter, which are well defined, such as social justice, gender equality and human rights,” she says.

Schreiber argues that universal knowledge and the need for African universities to be locally relevant and engage with indigenous contexts are complementary. She asserts that knowledge is situated and contextualised and we need to teach and learn in contexts and realise knowledge needs to be meaningful and engaging.

In this context, Schreiber places great emphasis on the importance of the university’s mission to meet locally defined needs, in addition to those which she describes as “linked to the global conscience”.

“The goal must be to find ways of addressing both,” she says, advocating the idea of “a dual lens connecting the global and the local”.

In this respect, Schreiber argues: “This idea of unique indigenous knowledge should not be viewed as misplaced nationalism. For example, ‘because my language is Mexican, I have Mexican knowledge’ … I think such views are parochial and racist and nationalist in tone. It’s more about acknowledging pluralism where a number of knowledge systems are acknowledged and explored.”

Radical overhaul not required

For a decolonised reimagined African university, Schreiber suggests, “The aims should be to bring students into [the higher education] endeavour and to ensure that what is taught and learned is relevant and the process includes students’ agency,” she says.

In this regard, Schreiber notes that projects that reimagine the African university, like the project reported on in this article, should recognise that there are several examples of well-functioning African universities. Thus, it does not seem that a radical overhaul of the higher education system as a whole or the institutional nature of universities is required.

Part of the problem faced by higher education institutions on the continent may be linked to ways of understanding excellence. “For example, the Times Higher Education rankings only recently incorporated the SDGs as an indicator – at which point, the universities in Africa suddenly appeared to be performing quite well,” she says. “So, there is a need to view the ranking systems with caution.”

Schreiber also supports improved regional articulation among higher

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UAE University staff

Water scarcity has long been an issue in countries such as the United Arab Emirates. But the country’s National Water and Energy Center, based at

education institutions on the continent, including in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). "A total of 70% of all students in the European Union have travelled to at least two other universities," she says. "On the Indian subcontinent, there is [also] great collaboration among the states."

"Africa can learn much from these models, particularly given its present plight, under which geographical movement is greatly restricted – for example, in the SADC region between Zimbabwe and Botswana. We need to articulate much better across our region, not only in terms of physical mobility, but in terms of academic credits."

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 (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. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for focus and length.*

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