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Professor Adam Habib, Image provided.

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'Are we prepared to think beyond national boundaries?'

Mark Paterson and Thierry Luescher   07 April 2022

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A new model for transnational partnerships that acknowledges and strengthens the contribution made by public higher education institutions in the Global South is required to produce the kind of knowledge that the world needs, according to Professor Adam Habib, the former vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa, and now director of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

In the absence of such a model, universities in the south have been weakened at a crucial moment by a brain drain to their northern peers; and the search for the kinds of global solutions that can address transnational challenges including in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change will remain fruitless, Habib said.

"The quest for a global solution to this pandemic is not about charity from the rich countries, it is about their own safety; and this is also true for climate change, inequality and social and political polarisation," he said.

"In this historical moment, it has become imperative to find global solutions; but finding global solutions requires institutional capacity and human capabilities across the world, including in Africa."

Citing the work of the late South African biomedical researcher Tania Douglas, Habib described the continent as a "graveyard of biomedical technologies" developed for the rich north but incapable of being implemented in the south.

Nature of funding, knowledge production skewed

"If you are serious about deploying technologies in the developing world that have been produced by global science, local knowledge is crucial because technologies do not get deployed in the abstract. They are deployed in actual contexts and these contexts are defined by local culture; by local understanding; by, for example, the way power is constructed; the way water is provided; or the way spatial location is organised."

However, Habib noted, there is a widespread failure to acknowledge the "skewed" nature of higher education funding and knowledge production which handicaps universities in the south and prevents the creation of transnational solutions.

"The need to reimagine higher education and produce institutional capacity that is globally constructed is insufficiently understood by the [large philanthropic] foundations, the sector's leaders, and the politicians at this historical moment."

In relation to Africa, Habib described the key challenge as one of "a shortfall of resources" which, during his seven years leading Wits, "prevented the university from competing effectively with the leading higher education institutions globally".

He cited research showing that most students who received scholarships in other parts of the world were not returning to their home countries after receiving such academic opportunities.

"... This was weakening the human capacity at public institutions in the developing world at a critical historical juncture when they needed to start thinking through how to address development challenges which have become increasing transnational in character."

In response to the present challenge, Habib advocates reimagining higher education as a "network of institutions, as a network of capabilities" – and creating "models for a new form of networked university institution that crosses national boundaries".

Co-curriculate, co-teach, co-credential, co-fund

The establishment of such models would entail the establishment of a more complex higher education that could start to co-curriculate and, as part of this, co-teach "to incorporate the perspectives of multiple experiences"; co-credential, that is, issue degrees offered by a combination of universities, and co-finance.

Habib envisages "split-site scholarships offering pedagogic relationships at a number of institutions, with some modules acquired in person and others remotely or via blended learning". He also said that "such a system should foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinarity in a far more significant way".

"Imagine a student who is offered a course, for example, on climate change at the University College London, and then picks up at least 50% of their modules from the University of Cape Town, which has a good climate change programme, and studies in Singapore and, perhaps, Buenos Aires.

"They would, thus, acquire a series of contextual experiences; and their educational identity and experience would be constructed in a transnational sense, grounded in multiple localities around the world and drawing on global knowledge sources."

Habib also emphasised that the kind of collaboration required to produce such training would facilitate institutional development by "accessing the capabilities that exist in multiple institutions" and "enabling resources to transcend institutional and national boundaries".

However, the establishment of such a model for higher education is impeded by a number of key factors, including a lack of political will and what Habib terms "the current dominant business model for higher education".

Citing the recent rise of populism and nationalism around the world, Habib noted that the key question is: "Are we prepared to think beyond national boundaries?"

Meanwhile, in relation to the business model for public higher education institutions, he says that the constraint is the corporate approach which requires vice-chancellors to constantly watch the balance sheet and ensure they break even. This, he said, limits their scope for adopting new approaches, even as they see the need for them.

African institutions in survival mode

"The emphasis in the governance is always on finding the funding and achieving sustainability first – which can impede efforts to reimagine the whole higher education project in a fundamentally new way," Habib said.

The challenge for African universities seeking to engage in international collaboration is particularly acute and there is resistance to this approach among some of them on chauvinistic grounds, he said. "Most of these institutions are beleaguered. They are so immersed in day-to-day survival mode, and some are constrained by their political systems and by structural inequalities which limit their capacity."

Meanwhile, at the transnational level, the drive to produce a more global education system faces two other main challenges, according to Habib. The first is a tendency among the large philanthropic foundations to focus on promoting collaboration among private higher education institutions.

"The problem with this is that development depends on scale, and, regardless of the problems of public universities, they enable scale, whereas a private university, however progressive and liberal it may be, cannot."

The second challenge is the belief that all universities are the same, that they must all have a similar mandate; that they all need to transform – "when, actually, any successful higher education enterprise requires differentiated mandates".

He says that, in part, this problem arises as a function of vice-chancellors' ambitions for their institutions, balancing the pedagogic and research functions: "We all always want to move somewhere in the middle – but there is a danger in that."

Habib said the answer to this conundrum is to "confront the historically derived notion that research-intensive universities have a higher status than others". "In a differentiated system, the legitimacy of a variety of university mandates must be recognised, as must the virtue of offering a choice of higher education institutions."

Three-step process might accelerate the model

He advises that global collaboration should take place in the context of such differentiation and proposes a three-step programme to foster the establishment of transnational educational platforms.

First, he said, donors must be found to pioneer a set of academic experiences at multiple levels that can create a repertoire of examples of institutional collaboration which, in turn, may prompt the global system to move in this direction.

Second, a set of political resources must be brokered to support such movement. "This may not entail accessing new money but, rather, ensuring that collective resources which may be ensconced in transnational or global institutions, such as the European Union, may be redirected in support of the global education project."

Third, the task of implementing the new approach to global education may, once it has received the appropriate political support, be seconded to a private-sector entity which is not constrained by the politics and economics of dependence on student fees, and which has the flexibility and financial resources to help produce a global platform.

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 reimagining of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. A full transcript of the interview will be downloadable from the HSRC's website in due course. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity by Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher.

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