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Universities in Africa 'don't understand what they are'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 15 September 2022

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African universities must resist the blandishments of short-sighted politicians, wealthy donors and the advocates of radical change in higher education if they are to deliver on their core mandate of supporting local and national development, according to Nelson Masanche Nkhoma, who is a researcher at the Institute for Post-School Studies at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

Rather, Nkhoma says, the universities should be proactive, practical and confident in their ability to solve the problems faced by African societies and economies, while also taking a long, hard look at the extent and kind of their current limitations.

Acknowledging that the relevance of the contribution made by universities has been "somewhat mixed", he, nevertheless, envisages a crucial role for them in training, knowledge production and "creating a particular vision of society".

"They are well-positioned compared with other external stakeholders or politicians whose efforts to shape the direction that African countries should take may be undermined by a relative lack of expertise and their own parochial interests, which may be corrupt," he says.

In this context, he argues that efforts to shift knowledge-production agendas so that they address national development concerns effectively should be grounded on a clear understanding of universities' current institutional reality.

"The challenge for universities in Africa is that they don't understand what they are," he says.

"The problem is exacerbated by the influence being wielded by people with money who have different agendas for what the university should try and achieve. Without a clear understanding of its own role and, thus, its future direction, the university is in danger of becoming just an instrument in other people's games."

'Don't sacrifice ... institutional strengths'

In this regard, Nkhoma gives warning, universities should be wary of sacrificing their present institutional strengths on the altar of purportedly radical transformation.

In particular, he advises South African universities to take careful stock of what is being proposed in the name of 'decolonisation' before taking action.

"The debate about decolonising the university which is taking place in South Africa is quite unclear about what the university is supposed to be decolonised from, although such clarity is necessary if the university is to move forward in relation to this idea," he says.

Nkhoma advises that, since higher education systems and institutions are generally slow to change, their transformation can only be implemented gradually and with due consideration.

"So, I am wary of people who use cheap rhetoric, which is quite common now," he says.

"For example, the debate around decolonisation taking place in South African universities feels somewhat detached from the discourse among other higher education institutions in Africa, perhaps because the country is in a relatively remote part of the continent."

Caution about 'indigenous knowledge'

Nkhoma also sounds a note of caution around how the concept of indigenous knowledge has been deployed as a cause for transformation.

"The question here concerns which knowledge is indigenous, and which is not, given that all knowledge has a genesis," he notes.

"In this regard, it can be quite unhelpful to categorise certain knowledge as indigenous or as externally produced, without paying attention to where and how it has come to be made. In fact, all knowledge is indigenous to a specific context and must be applied in relation to a particular context if it is to be meaningful.

"Accordingly, I become concerned when someone says: 'No. We should be bringing indigenous knowledge into the university'... Such a discourse can exacerbate divisions within knowledge that should not be there."

He describes how this kind of demarcation of knowledge has allowed academics in Europe to describe African knowledge or technologies as

“primitive” even though “these scholars, themselves, depend or have depended on this knowledge, expropriating it for themselves – and have then sought to export it back to where it originated as if it were not already there”.

In place of this perspective, Nkhoma says, there should be greater appreciation of Africa’s capacity for knowledge production – the fact that the continent’s education systems already hold the knowledge required to foster development.

A change in approach

“A change in approach is required,” he says.

“Many of those in influential positions adopt a deficit approach, perhaps as a means of raising money. When describing the character of the higher education system in Africa, they place the emphasis on what the universities lack, for example, in relation to their infrastructure. Then there is a call that help is needed to be able to achieve A, B or C.

“However, a more effective approach would be to frame the positive contributions that African institutions are making in various sectors of society; and to deploy that outlook as a platform for solving problems; creating new knowledge and developing innovations for dealing with different situations.”

Nkhoma sees such self-reliance as fundamental to Africa’s quest to forge a development path that is genuinely independent of external interference. “No one is going to beat the African drum if the Africans, themselves, can’t do it,” he says.

English as medium of instruction

In this context, he opposes the widely promoted decolonialist position that English is inadequate as a medium of instruction.

“I do not believe there is any need to replace English ... as a technology for communication, with isiZulu or Shona or Chichewa or Kiswahili. In my mind, English is an inductor language. It changes. It adopts. It is not a stagnant language,” he says.

He advises that English should not be abandoned on the basis of an “unfounded assumption that the English in Britain are the ones who own the language”.

“The reality is that English has been adopted by many systems and can be used as one’s own language on the basis that it is a joint creation.”

Nkhoma advises that, rather than seeking to promote alternative systems of teaching and research, universities should focus on their core mission of teaching advanced skills so that graduates can meet present economic needs and demands and produce relevant knowledge that has a practical application in the local and national context.

“All knowledge ... must be applied in relation to a particular context if it is to be meaningful,” he says.

Accordingly, he notes, the priority for universities should be the practical steps that may be taken in support of development, rather than the formulation of grand theories for change.

“There’s a saying that my grandfather taught me which I find valuable, which translates literally as: ‘Being smart doesn’t catch fish; what catches fish is the hook.’

“For me, the lesson of this is that there is little point in pretending to be smart about the pressing problems being faced; rather the focus should be on the materials and the methods that may be used to deal with these challenges.”

In this context, the key questions that should be addressed, according to Nkhoma are: “What hook do we have to create a university of the present that can spearhead development into the future? What hook do we have to create the knowledge that is necessary to change the systems in Africa so that the continent can move from dependency to actual independence?”

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers 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.

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